

René Jean-Paul Dewil

Phantasmus
The Dream Master

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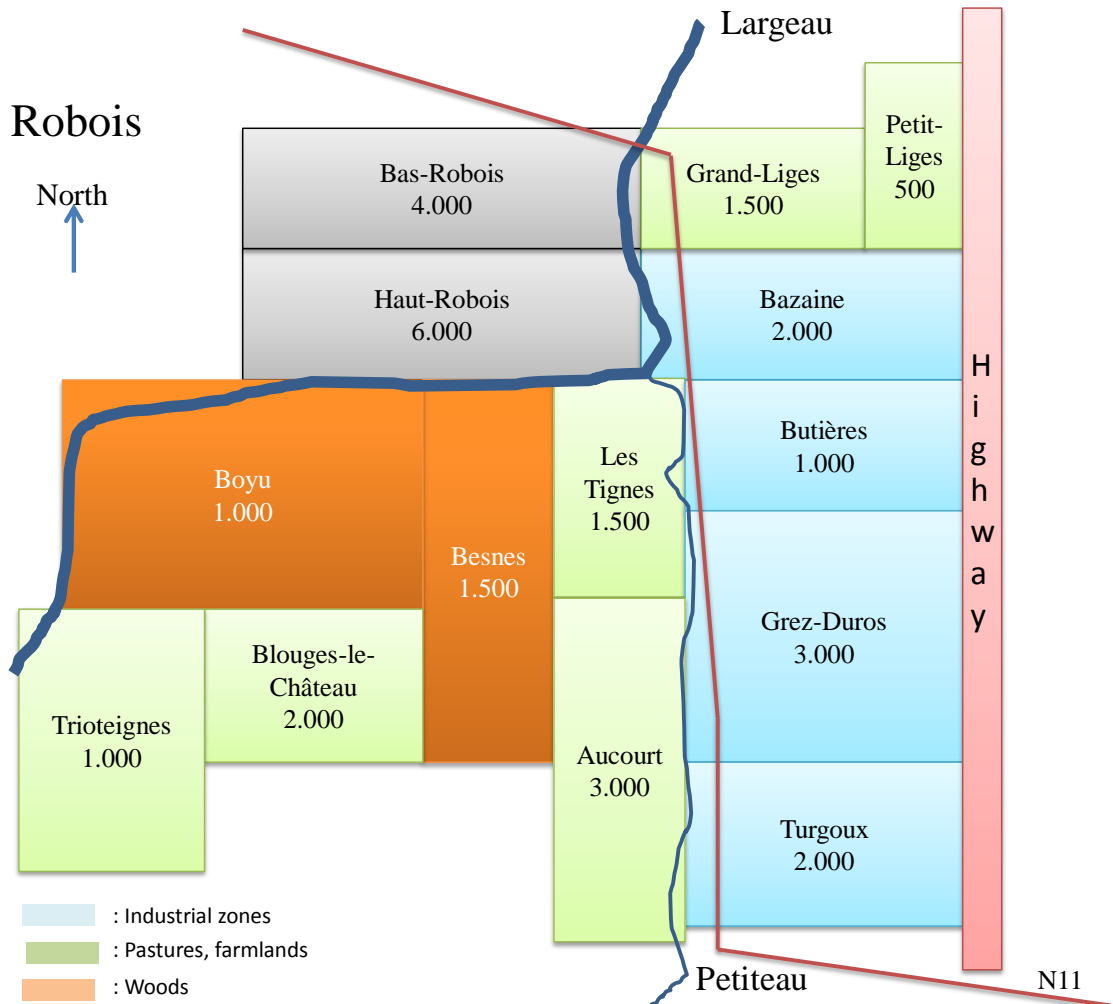
Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
The Characters	4
Map of Robois.....	5
Chapter 1. Basel, Switzerland.....	6
1.1. Laura de Trioteignes.....	6
1.2. Basel.....	17
1.3. Georg Stratten	26
Chapter 2. Namur.....	40
2.1. Véronique Dupas.....	40
2.2. Joseph Bikri.....	52
2.3. Bernard Gorelle	60
2.4. Decline	65
Chapter 3. First investigation.....	73
3.1. Oneiro.....	73
3.2. The new life.....	86
3.3. At Trioteignes.....	95
3.4. Phantásus.....	103
3.5. Gorelle returns.....	108
Chapter 4. Commissaire Bikri’s intervention	114
4.1. The Robois Police Force	114
4.2. At Pharmtelia in Basel.....	121
4.3. Laura and Georg.....	128
Chapter 5. Denouement	133
5.1. Véronique Dupas.....	133
5.2. The accident	137
5.3. The police interventions	147
Chapter 6. Epilogue	158
6.1. The interrogations	158
6.2. Véronique Dupas and Laura de Trioteignes.....	165

The Characters

Youssof/Joseph Bikri	41, <i>Commissaire</i> of the police of the town of Robois.
Samia Bennani	31, wife of Joseph Bikri.
Dominique Bussy	33, police inspector and assistant to <i>Commissaire</i> Bikri.
Paolo Timario	58. Head of the Police Zone of Namur. <i>Commissaire</i> de Division of the police zone.
Monsieur François	58, owner of the hotel ‘Le Cheval Bayard’, ‘The Horse Bayard’, his true name is Francesco Treviani.
Karim Khedis	68, former gardener of the hotel ‘The Horse Bayard’, friend of Joseph Bikri
Charles de Trioteignes	55, father of Laura and Diego de Trioteignes, owner of the Castle Trioteignes, financier.
Monique Ghijsen	53, wife of Charles de Trioteignes, mother of Laura and Diego Trioteignes.
Laura de Trioteignes	29, daughter of Charles and Monique de Trioteignes
Diego de Trioteignes	31, son of Charles and Monique de Trioteignes.
Deniz Sürkoglou	35, wife of Diego de Trioteignes; former member of the Turkish secret service agency MIT.
Andreas Stratten Graf von Schillersberg	58, friend and far family of Charles de Trioteignes, German financier.
Georg Stratten Graf von Schillersberg	29, son of Andreas Stratten, German financier.
Robert Jacquet	45, Mayor of Robois, partner of Charles de Trioteignes.
Simone Ash	38, wife of Robert Jacquet and doctor of medicine.
Gauthier de Buisseyre	51, Belgian financier and entrepreneur.
Johann Haller	55, CEO of Pharmtelia, a Swiss entrepreneur
Arnold Felsing	60, President of the Board of Pharmtelia, a Swiss banker
Véronique Dupas	17, girl living in Robois in a trailer park of Les Tignes.
Bernard Gorelle	46, General Manager of Oneiro SA and of Robchem SA
Philippe (Phil) Brelat	28, drugdealer of Namur
Teilo Merthyn	38, chemist at Oneiro SA
Andres López Parejo	42, South-American businessman
Mateo Dias Orosco	44, South-American businessman

Map of Robois



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

Chapter 1. Basel, Switzerland

1.1. Laura de Trioteignes

Laura de Trioteignes sped in her heavy luxury car on the highway from Paris to Robois. Soon, she would leave the highway and continue driving on the smaller N11, the Belgian national road to her home town, and then on to the much smaller roads still, to the village of Trioteignes.

‘Is Trioteignes really my home? Do I have a home?’ Laura mused, when she turned her steering wheel with two fingers, merely slackening her speed a little, risking a photograph by the newly installed radar controls, a ticket and a heavy fine.

It would not be her first. She forced herself to get her foot off the gas pedal to the maximum of seventy kilometres per hour allowed on the N11. She sighed at the effort. Speed was her lifeblood.

Trioteignes was her father’s home. It was his castle, his impregnable fortress, his stronghold, his realm. Laura had been born in the ancestral castle. She had lived there her entire life. She occupied her own set of rooms in Castle Trioteignes, now, but the building did not belong to her. At nearly thirty years of age, she still lived with her parents! Was she scared to live on her own? Why had she not moved a long time ago? When she would return, she would find her father and mother waiting for her, expecting her to arrive. The pressure, however loving, weighed on her. She felt constantly spied upon, watched, weighed, evaluated. If she had not yet left Trioteignes, was that because she feared the loneliness? Could she live on her own, and come home to a cold apartment or to a villa, probably furnished the contemporary business-like, functional, minimalist way in only black and white colours? Was that what she, Laura, was like? A top-notch businesswoman, a woman with a head composed of figures, of stock quotations, a hard and tough woman, cold and calculating, a woman lost on spreadsheets, laptop computers, fast cars, and at ease in the five-star hotel rooms that looked the same all over the world? Had her father forced her to this life of constant reflection on figures, CNBC always on her television screen, thinking at all times of financial strategies, share value graphs and luxury, which had made something of a pale robot of her?

Laura had been the assistant of her father for over five years. She did like her style of life, the thrill of battle, the speed, the feeling of power and yes, also the pleasure of luxury, the expectation of ever, in the far future, owning in her turn the ancestral castle.

And yet, lately, her loins and her dreams had led her to other longings.

Laura had begun to feel the loneliness of her kind of life more acutely on her travels. She longed for warm arms around her, for hugs, for caresses, for tenderness, for the slow movement of hands over her breasts and belly, over her spine and legs. She longed now for the pressing of a small child’s naked body against hers. All her female friends from school and university were married. She was not. Was she made of the steel of old spinsters? Maybe she was! Anyway, at this moment, leaving her parents’ home and forsaking the love of her father and mother, living on her own, would be a dreadful experience. No, Castle Trioteignes was indeed ghastly, a medieval fortress you only found the likes of in old novels and picture-

books of knights and noble ladies of centuries long past. But the castle was home! Warmth and cosiness and protection still lay within its many feet thick walls! It was her haven of peace. Where else could she go? But when would her womanly urges, her cravings for another kind of love, her doubts about the substance of her life outweigh all she had ever known?

Laura de Trioteignes was a tall woman, blond of hair and blue-eyed, with a fine complexion, though probably no great beauty. She could not well judge herself. She thought her figure too stout, for she liked to indulge in the best gastronomic food of the most chic restaurants. Eating the finest of dishes of the greater chefs came as a consolation. Laura did not feel elegant. She felt rather unattractive, gauche, not fine, no precious doll. She was rough-hewn, the daughter of a farmer-mother. She had remarked men watching her with hungry looks, but that was, she thought, only because her chest was so full, her waist still small, her hips so wide. Had she been a little less hard on herself, she might just have considered her curves harmonious, attractive and even sexy, beautiful, her legs long and slender and well-shaped, her waist small despite her appetite, her chest indeed generous and alluring, her walk slow and her sway slightly erotic.

Laura thought men only saw a huge golden dollar in her figure, the wealth of her father, the clumsiness of a farmer's daughter, and the power of a man. Combined with her strong character, her outspokenness, stubborn honesty and aversion of flattery, her distaste of sophisticated dishonesty, sycophancy and hypocrisy, she formed a daunting personality indeed. Laura was extremely intelligent. She was gifted with ruthless cunning. She thought men looked at her as if she were a second Statue of Liberty, or as a Lesbian woman, rather than as a vulnerable, sweet, loving, doll-like, Lolita young woman. Did most men not prefer the exquisite Coco Chanel types, the Nathalie Portman profiles, the Audrey Tautou fineness to the Mae Wests of lore? Only the perverts preferred the likes of Mae West or of Kim Novak these days! And yet, she placed herself in the category of these women.

Take her brother Diego. Had he not married a small, vulnerable, pretty, exquisite, exotic beauty? Deniz Sürkoglou was so very slender you might think she would bend in the slightest wind!

Laura laughed in her car, as she left the N11 and rode more cautiously on very small roads along the Largeau River in the woods of Boyu. Deniz was not a doll either! She looked like one, but she wasn't. Deniz had been a Turkish secret service agent, a killer woman maybe. Deniz was a tigress! Deniz could floor any hundred kilogram-plus guy with her little finger! Yet, her brother's wife looked like a Parisian movie-star. She had also made her brother a very happy man. They lived in her mother's farm. Who might have thought Diego would end as a farmer? Deniz and Diego already had three very young children, two boys and a girl. Laura smiled. These three children were part of her secret garden too! She adored them. They were the only three creatures on earth that seemed to really need her. When they were in the castle, they sought her up in the end, found rest and solace with her, and dozed in her arms. Laura craved for such moments.

Laura realised her work pushed her to ever more ruthlessness, heartlessness, and to the never-ending search for objectivity, logic, and the application of straightforward numbers in her decisions.

Was might truly right? Many of her colleagues, managers, pretended so much. Might, Laura could wield! Her father had appointed her as Head Financier of his holding company, a position that would be called Chief Executive Officer in any other enterprise. Charles de Trioteignes remained President of the Board, but for a company that amounted to a private investment fund, he was the closest thing to being God Almighty. Companies were no democracies. Charles was the only master and tyrant of his holding. The other Members of the Board served as advisors only! They might disagree with Charles's opinions, and even vote against him, he was and remained the only shareholder! Laura could manage, the ultimate decision remained with her father.

The fortune of Laura's father was vast, as Laura knew better than anybody else, and then dark spots remained even in her knowledge of the extent of her father's influence. These last years, Laura had frantically worked to modernise the fund. She had bought participations in other funds, brought holdings and industrial enterprises much farther into the world than her father. She had modernised its structure. She had invested in enterprises of other countries than the Emirates, increasingly in the lands around the Caspian Sea, and in South-American ventures. The companies of the United States and Canada, working mainly in energy and in the health business, had become other privileged partners. Laura had to fight for recognition there, as the American businessmen still remained suspicious of foreign investment and of female General Managers. She had imposed herself ruthlessly though, and ruthlessness was the main drive the Americans admired in anybody. Her father's name opened doors that would otherwise have stayed closed shut. Under Laura's eager influence, slowly, slowly, a new breeze refreshed the Trioteignes holding. It had become leaner, faster, and larger in scope. Its profits boomed.

Yes, Laura de Trioteignes was mighty. So far, her father had refused her no initiative. He had even stood by her when other men would have refused her reorganisations, even contested her modifications. He had shown no surprise at the tremendous pace of her work, and at the many initiatives she launched at the same time. So far also, she had made no mistakes. An irremediable mishap could occur at any moment, however, for her endeavours always bore a risk. She checked and re-checked on what she proposed. She sought advice of many other people, also of her father. A mishap might set her back at any moment! Mighty she was, but was she always right in her judgement of other people, mostly men? Had she destroyed families? Had she ruined good men? She hoped not. Still, the nagging doubt about these issues haunted her.

It would have been nice talking about such inner interrogations with somebody other than her father and mother. She loved her brother. But Diego de Trioteignes occupied her mother's farm, seemed happy and satisfied. He was his own boss, had nobody to blame but himself, and was criticised by nobody but by himself. Maybe Diego had been burnt out already by the world, and that too much, to still throw himself head-on in the tough environment of corporate Belgium.

Laura keenly and clearly understood she stood at a crossroads. She was seeking something else than her current life. She did not want and could not step on the alternative road alone! What did she expect of that other road? A home of her own. A loving, gentle husband, as strong and intelligent as she knew she was herself, a man of the world who would be at ease with the simple people as well as with the rich and mighty, a fine, powerful lover, a rock in the breakers of the sea, and, and ... And she desired to have children, to quench the dread of a useless life.

She wanted a demanding, challenging work, enough money to travel wide and to stay in five-star hotels, be able to dine in gastronomic restaurants, to shop on the fanciest miles of London, Frankfurt, Paris, Amsterdam and New York. She wanted always to be able to hear concerts of the classical music she loved. And she would spend time and money to charities, to charity initiatives that really made a difference. She sought happiness and a life devoid of illnesses. She would also take the time and the money to maintain Castle Trioteignes in its present state, or even ameliorate it in a few places. The roads of the domain were too wild and too dark at places. She wanted the jungle opened, more lawns created at chosen places, flower gardens introduced. Trioteignes should become more of an English park! These were the things she wanted to work and fight for. Was that asking too much? Anyway, the change had to come fast, now! Or she would crack.

These thoughts and many more whirled through Laura's mind while she drove on through the woods of Boyu, direction Trioteignes Castle. Laura was not in a fine mood. She drove on, at the brink of exhaustion and depression. She was tired. She drove her powerful car at a speed quite too high for the small roads near the castle. She had to vent off her anger in one way or another. She had been touring in one country of Europe after the other for too long, always driving alone. What again was the name of that funky business Scandinavian professor, who said that 'bowling alone' was a characteristic of modern managers? At a moment when she had hoped to stay a few days out of office, visiting one of her preferred cities, her father had called her urgently to him. He had to discuss something important with her, and she might have to drive on, very soon, to Switzerland.

Laura drove under a stone archway now, onto a gravel path in the wood. She had slowed down to a walking pace, here. It was dangerous to drive harder, on this path in the woods of Domain Trioteignes, where large tree roots emerged under her tyres.

Her father had asked when to expect her. She had given a day and an hour. Her father had grumbled. He had wanted her sooner near him, she had sensed.

Trioteignes was more than a castle. It was a huge, private domain, a vast park left more or less wild. Her father liked Trioteignes that way. The park was surrounded by a well maintained ten feet high brick wall. The Trioteignes park was two kilometres wide and three kilometres long. It consisted mainly of woodland, of some swampy terrains, and two small lakes. The domain was open only at three places to wild boars, deer, hares and rabbits, and to fowl. Laura's father was a hunter. He only hunted in his own domain, and here, he was the only hunter. Laura didn't handle guns, and Diego never hunted animals. Another feature that separated Charles de Trioteignes from his children!

The towers and walls of Trioteignes castle came into view. Laura rode past the stone bridge over the castle moat, to the building called the Orangery. Charles de Trioteignes had modified

the Orangery to also hold modern garages. While still driving on, Laura electronically opened the automatic door of her usual parking place in the garage, and rode inside. She stopped her car with another sigh. She stretched her limbs. She only took a small, grey oyster shell case with her, and left her portmanteaus in the car boot. Laura was a neat woman when she travelled. One of her trunks, one of her larger cases, held her clean and ironed clothes, the other her used ones, the ones that needed cleaning. She always transferred her worn clothes from one trunk to the other. She left the garage by a small side door, drawing her oyster case on wheels behind her. The air was fresh around the Orangery. A strong, biting wind blew. Laura's expensive coat was thin, a summer's coat. She struggled to the castle. The wind on the stone bridge blew harder than in the sheltered environs of the wood.

Castle Trioteignes was a ghastly, dark, massive swamp fortress built in medieval times. Most of its defence towers dated from the fifteenth century! The Trioteignes domain lay at the end of the vast woods of Boyu, huddled on one side against the forest, and on the other side facing the rich fields and pastures of the village of Trioteignes. The village existed only because of the castle. In old times, it housed the people who worked on the Trioteignes domain. The vast swamps around the castle, for kilometres around, had been dried out with time, many turned into rich agricultural fields. All this had formed the Trioteignes stronghold.

Laura stepped slowly on to the bridge. She looked down at the moat, at the bracken water deep under her. She saw the vast arch of the bridge, the plants in the ditch, and she said hello. She had arrived at familiar terrain. She went up to the gatehouse, where four massive drum towers welcomed her in their embrace. The grand oak gate between the towers was closed, as always. Laura walked through a small door in the thick gate of the guardhouse. Here, she felt protected from the wind by the four big towers. She opened the door, and continued to walk in the paved castle courtyard. Even inside, the castle looked sombre and grim!

The Trioteignes inner courtyard formed a pentagon, five corners and five sides. She emerged from the gatehouse in one of those sides, the southernmost one. Five more drum towers, higher than the gate towers, stood around her. Other massive buildings closed the courtyard, but for at one side. There, a high wall had once stood. At some time in the eighteenth century, however, a Trioteignes count and ancestor of Laura's father, had broken down that wall to the height of a man's breast. The courtyard thus opened to a wide, open view of the fields in the surrounding land, even though the parapet delimited the inner domain. Laura also lingered a while here. She loved this view of the flat, green-and-brown vastness in front of her. She also knew this view so well! She cherished it. She forced herself forward.

Three buildings closed the other sides of the castle. The farthest building and the one next to it, separated by a vast tower, formed a manor. This held the count's living quarters, also Laura's rooms. The tower in the middle of the two vast houses connected them both. This tower held the entry hall. A vast stone staircase led to the floors above the courtyard level. The third building contained rooms for guests. These had once held the stables. Count Charles de Trioteignes, Laura's father, still held a few horses, but those had been banned to a new building behind the Orangery. Much farther in the domain still stood a vast hunting lodge, a manor in its own right, currently hired out.

The impressive gate in the middle tower usually remained closed. It was a door with two large panels, finely carved with hunting scenes. Today, the door of the living quarters could be pushed open. Yes, her father expected her!

Laura stood panting in the entry hall of Castle Trioteignes. She dropped her oyster case and opened the first door on her left. She stepped into the living-room. The room was huge, the hall of medieval lords. It was long, but rather narrow. It had remained much in the style of the previous centuries. Bare stones formed the walls, and oak beams supported the wooden ceiling. Large paintings of landscapes covered the left wall. Couches and seats brought vivid colours of nice flower patterns in the stern lines of the rectangular windows and in the pale, uniform colours of the walls. Large slabs of black stone covered the floors, but tapestries broke the severe colour of black also here. The place looked bright, fresh, joyful at places, warm in atmosphere. Logs crackled in the open fireplace, and a faint, blue smoke rose in the huge chimney.

The living-room ended in the dining-room. Here stood a long, oak table, already set for supper with a colourful tablecloth, on which had been placed white porcelain dishes, coloured crystal glasses, and shining silver cutlery. On the table throned a huge blue vase with patterns of Venetian masks, bought recently by her mother at Longwy in France. In the vase stood long flowers, a thick bouquet of the most vivid colours too. If Charles de Trioteignes preferred Trioteignes white and black, her mother had forced bustling life into the old castle.

Laura's father was waiting for her, seated in a leather sofa, reading a book. He stood. He was dressed in a formal, dark blue, striped suit. Monique, no doubt, had chosen his orange tie to bring some colour also on him. Charles de Trioteignes was an elderly, greying gentleman. He always dressed up, even inside in his own rooms. He was not quite as tall as his daughter. He was a slender man, who now presented his dry cheek to his daughter's furtive kiss.

Charles merely gave Laura a short, 'how are you, my dear? Nice to have you back. Your mother will be so pleased!'

The door at the end was brusquely thrown open. Laura's mother stormed in.

Monique Ghijsen was almost a head taller than her husband, and twice as wide. She was a sturdy farmer's daughter, the girl of one of the farmers of the domain of Trioteignes. Charles and Monique had known each other all their lives. They had become lovers early on. Charles had asked Monique to marry him when they were still quite young, but Monique had refused for years, even to after her two children had been born. She had only accepted to marry Charles a few years ago. She had dreaded living in the dark castle. She preferred living and working in her farm, now the place where her son, Diego, lived.

Monique was a tall woman. Laura had inherited her mother's stature, the earthiness of her mother's brain, her fine common sense, the colour of her hair. She combined those with the subtleness of mind and the posture of her father. She thought of herself as of an ugly girl, but she could be quite elegant and chic when she applied herself to her figure. Laura was not the end-of-line product of an aristocratic family of ages. She formed rather the first new branch of an invigorated centuries-old oak tree. Laura embraced her mother. Mother and daughter were lost for long moments in a bear hug, which left Charles slightly embarrassed. External show of feelings was not what he preferred in company.

Monique Ghijssen had prepared a light supper, as the afternoon would transit rapidly into evening.

After a few words, Laura went out again, up the stairs in the entry hall, to her own rooms. She took a shower, changed all her clothes, and after some time went down the stairs again, to sit in the living-room. Charles had opened a bottle of Champagne to celebrate Laura's homecoming. They exchanged some words in the living-room. Then, Monique invited them to the dining-room. They ate. The only time Charles de Trioteignes talked business while they had their supper, was when he told Laura he would see her at nine o'clock the next morning in his office. After the light supper, they continued talking till late in the night. Charles and Monique sat together and close to each other in a sofa, a large glass of XO cognac on the low table in front. Their love and respect for each other was obvious. Laura sat opposite them in a large seat. So many things had happened to the people of Trioteignes! Laura's mother knew it all. And Laura had to tell about her travels made in commission of her father.

Charles de Trioteignes' office occupied the first, second and third floors of the leftmost and highest tower near the gatehouse. Charles's work desk with its array of computers, video-screens and laser printers had been arranged on the first floor. The floor higher up held his archives and library. The books and documents he needed less and less invariably moved from the second to the third floor.

When Laura entered the tower from the main manor halls, she went up a few turning, stone stairs, and found her father already sitting behind his table, clicking on his personal computer. Laura looked around. Charles had here also his office phone, Internet connections, telefax machine and various computer input and output devices. On a separate table stood a document scanner, a portable computer, a tablet computer, and two cell phones. A television screen connected to a digital video player stood on a separate table. Yet another table held external backup discs, a DVD copier, and numerous stacks of DVD discs, plus a number of small and larger devices of which Laura had no idea what they were used for. These perfected the electronic businessman. The most impressive item in this room was the zigzag of wires. Wires ran everywhere, from one wall to the other. They resembled the connections and intricacies of her father's brain!

Charles looked up, saying, 'how are you today, my dear? Thank you for having come so punctually. I have an urgent mission for you. I'm sorry to have called you back from Paris.' Charles didn't wait for answers. Laura's father was talking business now, fast, to the point, no lyrics lost between the head manager and his assistant-for-all-work.

Charles continued, looking straight at Laura. She sank in a deep chair in front of her father. 'An important meeting is coming up in Basel, Switzerland. I need you to be there. The meeting is due the day after tomorrow. I can arrange for an airplane flight from out of Brussels, but I suppose you will prefer to drive. If you choose the plane, please tell me before two o'clock. My secretary booked a room for you, for two nights as of tomorrow-afternoon, at the hotel where the meeting is to take place. She also reserved a parking place inside the hotel garages. The envelope here, contains the details of the reservations.'

Charles moved an A4-size envelope over the table to her side. Laura did not pick up the envelope immediately. More was to come. Charles reclined in his chair, as if the most

difficult point on the agenda had been solved. Maybe it had. Laura had not protested against the assignment.

Charles continued, ‘here is why I want you to be in Basel. We own thirty-eight percent of a modest biochemical company called Pharmtelia, based in Basel. Basel is a major centre of the pharmaceutical, biochemical and medical technology industry. A little less than a thousand such companies have their headquarters in Basel. More than fifty thousand people work in the industry in the region. Pharmtelia is not one of the bigger firms, but it has a fine research centre that creates interesting patents. It generates hefty profits, and has also a production unit, a manufactory unit, that seems to be of same fame. The Board meets only two, sometimes three times a year. I am a Board Member, of course. So is my friend, Andreas Stratten von Schillersberg, the count. We hold thirty-eight percent, Stratten owns twenty. Together, we control the company and own the majority of shares.

You know of the Stratten story. The Stratten are family of ours. When you were young, we visited the Stratten Castle several times a year. These last years, our relations have slackened. Andreas and I have aged. I meet Andreas often, mostly at such board meetings. Andreas called me by telephone a week ago.

He drew my attention to a scheme plotted out by the General Manager or CEO of the firm, Johann Haller, and by the President of the Board, Arnold Felsing. Haller holds a mere two percent of Pharmtelia shares, Felsing five. Felsing being a Swiss, we allowed him the presidency.

Haller and Felsing want to pump fresh capital into Pharmtelia. Why they want to do so is not clear to me, and also not to Andreas. No satisfactory reason has been given so far. I phoned Haller, and Andreas called Felsing. We got no further. We only received arguments stammered with uncertainty and fear. Haller and Felsing remain very vague about the reason for rising capital. I, nor Andreas, heard of any promising new, ambitious projects. No construction of new buildings seems to be scheduled. Haller and Felsing evaded our more pressing questions. That seemed odd!

Pharmtelia enjoys a fine reputation in Switzerland and in Basel. If they want more money, they could have asked Andreas and me to step up our participations. We could easily have done so. They could also have asked the cash-laden Swiss banks to augment their national touch. Nothing of the sort! They aim to get in more than ten percent of funds from a Colombian, South-American firm called Colombia Foods Emporium Inc., CFE, a name we have never heard of before.’

Charles paused, ticked with his pencil on the table, and then continued, ‘we tried to hear from that firm, but we only found out the company is indeed registered at Bogota, its funds and addresses disappearing in the Caribbean tax paradises. We don’t know who owns CFE, nor what its financial status is. We will find that out, of course, but it will take us a lot more time than these few days. The fact is, we, Andreas and I, risk being pushed into a minority shareholder position, and we don’t like that at all! We risk losing control! We wonder why it might help the company to have much more cash. We never said no to new projects. We let Haller lead the company pretty much as he pleased these last years, and he did well. We paid him nice bonuses. Neither Felsing nor Haller have any decent reason to push us out and down. Andreas and I could easily have offered Pharmtelia the means to restructure or redirect

their business, or to enter new ventures. So, we started wondering what was really cooking at Pharmtelia. To our distress, we didn't find out what!

'Father, do you feel tired? Do you prefer to stay home and rest in cosiness, in the arms of my mother, and send me to do the dirty work? I understand. But I am no Board Member of Pharmtelia. I cannot represent you in a vote.'

Charles de Trioteignes looked up, surprised at the sudden sarcasm and late protests of his daughter. He looked hurt.

He said, 'Andreas and I are a special kind of Board Members. As majority shareholders, we can designate somebody else as Board Members, as long as we appoint family members. That is determined by contract. You will not represent me, however. You will be the Member of the Board for the Trioteignes as of the date of the meeting. I have transferred all the Trioteignes shares in Pharmtelia to your name. You are now the sole owner of the Pharmtelia shares of our family. I have arranged so much via donations, registered at our bank. That has all been arranged between me and Felsing. It is quite legal!'

Laura sat very straight, now. 'To how much do these shares amount, father?'

Charles's eyebrows went up. 'We own about one hundred and forty million Swiss francs in Pharmtelia. The value has about doubled the last year in Euro, because the Swiss have let their franc float versus the Euro.'

Laura was dumbfounded. So much money! Moved around with a click of her father's fingers. 'What will Diego say to your transfer, father? He has about as many rights on that money as I!'

'I talked to Diego. Diego understands. The money is Trioteignes money. I expect you to consider it as such. I trust you will do the right thing. Don't tell me my daughter and son might be anything else but very honest people!'

Laura smiled wryly, 'of course!'

'Fine!' Charles added. 'This envelope contains all the necessary papers, appointing you as sole official shareholder. The papers appoint you to the Board in my place. Felsing knows about it. He didn't grumble. He might object, but he has no right to do so, and he knows that too. As from today, I am no longer a Board Member and shareholder of Pharmtelia. You are. And I want you to participate to your first Board meeting the day after tomorrow. I also want you to ask for the reasons of the capital rise. And I want you to refuse, to vote against the deal with the Colombian fund. Andreas will do the same. We are the majority shareholders. When we refuse, the deal is off. If Felsing obstructs, we throw him out at the next General Assembly, which we shall call together immediately. Andreas already told Felsing so. Felsing grumbled quite a lot. He knows what will be waiting for him if he double-crosses us. He simply can't.'

'What if I put my trust in Felsing, find his reasons plausible, and decide to vote for the capital rise?'

'You won't do that,' Charles suddenly laughed. 'You're my daughter, a Trioteignes, and a better woman than I ever was a man. I know you. There can be no decent reason why foreign capital should be injected in Pharmtelia, while passing by the two majority shareholders. Something is up in that company. Andreas and I don't know what. We don't even want to know. We don't want our shares be diluted. We want to hold control of that firm. As long as

Andreas and I, or Andreas and you, don't know very exactly, very clearly, what exactly is going on, I wouldn't sign, and I am sure you won't either, my dear girl, Laura.'

Laura smiled. Her father was right on that point. He knew her too well.

'How much resistance shall I have to face, how much protest is there to expect? Will the fight turn nasty? What about the other Board Members?'

'Oh, Haller and Felsing will be pissed off, of course,' Charles was quick to respond.

'Andreas and I have the support of a couple of the other Board Members. You will have Andreas's support, and I expect you to back him too.'

Again, Charles de Trioteignes held a pause.

'I never cared much for Pharmtelia,' he said. 'It was a sound investment, a stable and smooth one. I left the directors alone, doing what they did well. Haller and Felsing will be surprised by our firm position, dismayed maybe. There may be an uproar in the Board Meeting. Nothing you can't handle easily. You and Andreas have all the power to remain calm, and do with Pharmtelia whatever you desire. Felsing phoned me. He doesn't know how you will react. I put him to sleep, telling him not to worry. He may not expect an outright refusal of his scheme. You won't have much more to say than a simple no. Andreas will back you. You just say no, and then you return. Andreas and I will have gained some time to get to more information about the Colombians.'

Haller and Felsing will want to work on you, have you change your mind. They'll phone me. I'll tell them the same story as I told you. We don't want ownership of Pharmtelia to be diluted. They can do nothing against that argument. As I said, I will have the time to start asking more questions about who is behind the Colombian fund, and find out why exactly Haller and Felsing want them in. I think the foreign fund may allow them, Haller and Felsing, to grab power over Pharmtelia, change the Board Members, and take the reins in their own hands, so to say. Well, if they try such a thing, there is no good reason to get those Colombians in. Andreas and I will throw Haller and Felsing out.'

'You mean Andreas and I, father, will do that!' Laura remarked.

Charles remained surplussed for a few seconds. Laura noticed her father was ready to choke. He demurred, 'of course, of course,' he granted, 'Andreas and you. Just don't disappoint me.'

Laura nodded. Father and daughter burst out in laughter.

Charles de Trioteignes interlocked his fingers. He looked to right and left.

'Will you drive?' Charles asked after quite a while.

'I will, father. After this Basel thing, I want a vacation of at least a month!' Laura blurted out.

'I expected no less,' Charles nodded. 'But don't you come home with one of those French Côte d'Azur gigolos, who will eat up all your money for breakfast. Have a look at Castle Schillersberg, near Stuttgart. You haven't been there for ages. You might learn to know Andreas better.'

'I don't particularly appreciate gigolos, father. Did I ever bring one of those guys home?'

Charles de Trioteignes didn't answer. He chuckled. He pushed a folder to Laura.

'In there, you will find all the relevant information I have on Pharmtelia, information on the directors of the firm and on the Board Members. The men who are supportive of us I have indicated. I don't know about the others. I suppose you will drive off early tomorrow morning. I will be at your disposal for additional questions this afternoon and evening.'

'Father, why do you send me? If it is so easy, why don't you handle this yourself?'

‘I can’t, daughter. I have far more important meetings in Brussels the next days and even weeks.’

Laura nodded. She remained pensive. What important meetings could there be in Brussels she didn’t know of, although she was the Head Financier of her father’s holding? Her father was being mysterious, an attitude he cherished, even with her. He was playing at cat and mouse. He knew she would wonder what the Brussels meetings were about. She sighed. Her own father! She took the envelopes and the folder. In other times, this would have been called the handing over of arms. She was the *marshal*, sent out to battle for the king. Would she return unscathed? She had one more fight to win!

1.2. Basel

The next day, Laura Trioteignes grabbed a small breakfast of a cold sandwich with cheese and ham in the kitchen, remaining standing while she chewed. When her parents entered the kitchen, she gave them a quick goodbye and rode off to the highway in the direction of Namur.

Her GPS system told her she would have about five hours thirty of driving. She left at eight o'clock, expecting to arrive at her hotel around three o'clock in the afternoon, allowing for a short stop on the highway. She checked her travel on a book of maps she kept in her car. Laura relied on her GPS, but she always checked approximately by which roads she would drive. She liked to have an overview of where she drove to. She also did not want to be caught by a breakdown of her electronic guiding system. She would take the E25 highway to Luxemburg, a road she knew by heart, and then the A3 and A31 to Metz in France, the A4 to Strasbourg and the A35 to Basel. Her driving was easy, for she would remain on highways almost from her front door to the Basel hotel.

This was not the first time Laura travelled to Basel. She had visited the Swiss town many times already in the past, to attend meetings and conferences. Basel was a small Swiss provincial city to her, a peaceful little bourgeois town. In the world of international industry and finance, however, Basel was a very famous place.

Basel was not just one of the largest centres of chemical and pharmaceutical centres of Europe. The town also housed the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision. The BCBS had been established by the governors of the central banks of many countries to provide a forum for the cooperation on banking supervisory matters. The committee published guidelines and standards in many areas of banking. The guidelines, called the Basel I, Basel II and Basel III Accords, were known and applied all over the world. They provided best practice recommendations for banking. The committee's secretariat was located in the building of another famous institution, in the Bank for International Settlements, also in Basel. The BIS was equally a very important institution for financiers and bankers.

Charles and Laura de Trioteignes were especially interested in the risk management recommendations of the BCBS. By their involvement in the BCBS, they heard about the latest advances in risk management for their operations. Through conferences, usually organised in the *Baseler Messe*, the exhibition and conference centre of the town, they heard about new developments, and kept contacts with the Banking Commission of the International Chamber of Commerce, the ICC, and the Banking Association for Finance and Trade. The financial heart of Switzerland might mainly beat in Switzerland's main city of Zürich, the world's most important joint financial institutions happened to be in Basel.

Charles de Trioteignes had worked together in and with the Wolfsberg Group. This was an association of representatives of thirteen of the world's largest banks. The Wolfsberg Group had been so called, because the discussions among the banks had taken place at Castle Wolfsberg in the north of Switzerland. Wolfsberg was an executive development centre of the Swiss UBS Bank. In the Wolfsberg Group also worked professors and researchers of Basel University. The group produced papers on the banking industry regulations. It developed standards of behaviour in the global trade finance community.

Charles de Trioteignes took a keen interest in such issues. The Wolfsberg Group had published statements on the financing of terrorism, papers on anti-money-laundering principles, papers for mutual guidance against financial corruption, guidance on credit card issuing, all to combat and mitigate bribery risks, and so on.

The Wolfsberg Group and the other BCBS papers provided what Charles and Laura considered the closest thing to a common bankers' conscience. Laura would have wished the declarations and statements to be more clear, detailed, precise and specific, but she accepted the papers defined an excellent framework of measures that could evolve with time. The papers, reflections and discussions formed a first step more and more people staunchly believed in, and wanted to support. Who would refuse to work for better, cleaner, more honest practices, also in finance? The alternative was a jungle in which only the law of the strongest prevailed.

Charles de Trioteignes had worked together with these groups and institutions. He had taken his daughter with him, even while she was still a university student. He often presented her as his secretary, which sometimes drew up eyebrows, for she was a very handsome young woman travelling with an elderly gentleman. Laura felt excited when she accompanied her father, and she had followed him proudly. She had adored her father when she was young. The added tinge of being considered her father's lover by some men who were unaware she was his daughter, brought her a sweet satisfaction and pride at that time. She had outgrown such feelings, however.

Basel was thus not an unknown city for Laura. She had often walked alone in the streets of the town centre, and visited the museums. She had seen in the *Kunstmuseum* Hans Holbein the Younger's painting of the body of the dead Christ. She had read and heard of the connections of the Humanist Erasmus with the town. Erasmus had died in Basel. He had been buried in the Basel Cathedral, the current *Baseler Minster*, for this was protestant country.

Laura had a pleasant trip. She enjoyed driving. In Basel, Laura had usually stayed with her father or alone in the huge, high-rise Ramada hotel near the *Baseler Messe*. Now, she rode to the *Basler Garten* Hotel in the *Steinentorstrasse*, a discreet five-star hotel, where the Pharmtelia Board meeting would take place. She could ride straight into the hotel's *Tiefgarage*, went up to the lobby, and was given a large room reserved by her father. She took a shower, changed clothes, felt refreshed, and immediately left the hotel for a long walk in the town and along the Rhine.

Seeing so many people in the streets alleviated her loneliness. She had a tea and a thick piece of cheesecake in a *Konditorei* on the Rhine, near the bridge over the stream leading to the *Messegelände*, a tearoom that was familiar to her.

She then went shopping. To take revenge on her father, she bought two silk blouses, a white one and a very light pink blouse, in one of the best women's clothes shops. She also bought two new skirts there, an austere light grey one and a very colourful, *dirndl*-like Swiss one she found good fun. She paid with her corporate account credit card, knowing her father would smirk and choke at such extravagant expenses. On her own account, in her preferred jeweller's shop, she fell for a refined golden necklace that ended in an intricately woven together set of blue diamonds. The necklace cost a fortune, but had she not come into a

fortune of shares as a gift of her father? She walked on, and had supper in a fine restaurant of Basel, also one she had once been in with her father.

The next morning, Laura ordered breakfast to her room. She actually dreaded to meet with other Board Members early on. She spent her time re-reading and studying the papers prepared by her father. Except for the curriculum vitae of the Board Members, she didn't learn much. She did not go downstairs for dinner. She kept to herself in her room, rested, read a little, dozed a little.

By noon, she began to prepare for the meeting. She dressed up in her new clothes, but decided against wearing too obvious jewels.

At twenty minutes to two in the afternoon, looking very much the smart businesswoman, a fine leather folder under her arm, she walked to the Pharmtelia meeting two floors lower. When she stepped into the room, almost all the Members of the Board, about a dozen men, were already present. They sat around a long table covered with an immaculate broken white tablecloth. Some men walked around, chatted, and served themselves a coffee or tea from a side-table. The room looked cosy, with fine windows on one side, except in front, nice coloured curtains around the windows. It was bright, sunny weather outside. The room looked old but well-cleaned and smart. Laura shook hands, presenting herself, trying to place a name on each face, as she had seen and memorised from the photographs in the biographies her father had provided for her. All the men present were older gentlemen, from fifty-five to seventy years old. Some had brought an assistant. Laura was the only woman in the room, and the only young woman.

While she went among them, she noticed eager and greedy eyes staring at her, studying her from top to toe. Laura felt eyes following her in her back, eyes no doubt taking in the curves of her back and legs. These men, she knew were predators all! They would not have hesitated making their lover of her. Well, Laura did not particularly hate these men, but she also would not allow the least of them to even touch her. Laura went from one side of the table to the other, shaking hands, answering short questions by equally polite, short phrases. She went up to the last man, who sat at the head of the table, at the farthest end, the man she recognised as Arnold Felsing, the President of the Board.

Felsing welcomed Laura warmly. He was an ageing man, elegant of stature, a Swiss banker, an associate in one of the many private, very discreet banks of Basel and Switzerland, an entirely polished member of the elite bankers' society and of the sophisticated finance world of Switzerland. Laura also greeted him warmly, hesitating to give too gentle words, knowing she would have to stab this man in the back, very soon now. She had not heard her father say Felsing was a dishonest or unscrupulous man. He was not tall, but wiry, sportive, smartly dressed. He had no need of glasses, showed greying hair, a pale complexion. He was very cleanly shaven, and perfumed with a masculine, pungent musk cologne. He was dressed in a dark brown suit and bright yellow tie, which sure made him stand out among the invariably dark grey and black dressed men around. Felsing held a nice smile, and always piercing brown eyes. He looked intelligent and professional. Beside him stood a much younger man, whom he introduced as his secretary. On his other side sat Johann Haller, the CEO of Pharmtelia. Felsing also introduced Laura to him. Haller looked the more powerful

man, the doer, the thumper, a heavier man with a square face and prominent jaw. Instinctively, Laura already nicknamed him the rugby man.

After more welcomes, chatting and shuffling around, Arnold Felsing announced the start of the meeting.

By then, some panic rose in Laura's mind. One seat opposite hers, remained empty. She had not recognised Andreas Stratten among the men present. If she voted against the capital raise now, she might well only be able to cast a minority vote, and be rejected. Charles's scheme would fall through!

What could she do? She might protest at having the decision accepted by the Board, arguing the Stratten vote was crucial. Her argument might be accepted, but the absence of Stratten could also be regarded as a tacit vote in favour of the proposal. It all depended on the mood in the room and on the number of men Felsing could count on, compared to her father. Laura should have asked Charles about the Board Members who were sympathetic to their cause. She should have been able to speak to these persons beforehand.

Arnold Felsing offered a few opening words to have everybody seated well. Then, he introduced his secretary, to present the global financial figures of Pharmtelia and a few highlights about the successes of the firm. The data were presented as computer slides, projected onto a large screen behind Felsing, so that Felsing and Haller had to move somewhat aside. Laura was very nervous by then, and at her second cup of strong coffee.

Then suddenly, the door to the room was thrown open, and a hotel hostess showed in a young man. He stormed into the room. He had been running. He was panting. He looked around for a free chair. Felsing pointed to the last, empty seat. The young man sank down in front of Laura. He nodded at her with a friendly grin.

'Ah,' cried out Arnold Felsing, seemingly relieved, and standing up from his seat, interrupting his assistant's speech. 'Lady and gentlemen, I welcome Count Georg Stratten in our midst. Herr Stratten will now seat in our Board in place of his father, our esteemed friend Count Andreas. Our young man phoned me a while ago, and apologised for being a little late. It seems traffic jams between Stuttgart and here delayed him.'

Stratten nodded to the other men present, looked around, and then concentrated again on the blond Laura. Laura stared back at the Stratten boy. So, this was Andreas's son! She remembered him vaguely from when they were children. She remembered a very noisy boy, always running in the corridors and rooms of Castle Schillersberg, never able to sit still for longer than one miserable minute. He played with car models and tin soldiers. He hadn't taken any notice of her, back then. He didn't play with girls! She hadn't seen him for how long? Twenty years? The man in front of her was now of her own age, tall and as blond of hair as she was. He had an angular, strong-jawed head, short clipped blond hair. He too was clean shaven, looking all the way the ununiformed World War Two *Sturmbannführer*, athletic, powerful, healthy, in every aspect the image of a German *Übermensch* and warrior of those times.

What was he doing here? How had he come to replace Andreas Stratten? Why had her father told her nothing of the change? This Georg still showed a Stratten face, a boyish look, charming and strong. He had a smile in his eyes and an arrogant grin around his lips when he

devised Laura. She noticed his eyes remained on her, and he almost entirely ignored Arnold Felsing. He was gauging her.

‘All right,’ Felsing continued. ‘I almost forgot to present everybody, though most of you know each other. We are now complete. Our two new members are Laura de Trioteignes and Count Georg Stratten. Just to make sure, I will briefly present everybody.’

Felsing began with the man on his left and named all the men present. Laura also could pride in the title of countess, though Felsing had not used her title on her. He had done so for Georg Stratten! Laura was used to such form of machismo. She didn’t care, but didn’t appreciate either. Georg Stratten’s eyes once more lingered a long time on Laura when Felsing spoke out her name. Georg seemed as surprised as she to find not her father at the meeting. Stratten continued staring at her.

Laura felt oddly moved. The young man’s very bright grey eyes seemed to penetrate her mind, and to undress her. She nervously tugged at her blouse, and cursed herself for it. She unwillingly blushed. Georg nodded once more at her, his grin widened, his eyes looked amused. Had he guessed her thoughts? The slight grin never left his mouth. Laura’s mind was racing. Why was Andreas Stratten not here? How would his son vote? Which attitude would he take in the discussion?

Arnold Felsing had finished his introduction. His secretary started his presentation from the beginning, repeating the first two slides for Georg’s sake. He entered a lengthy presentation of the financial results of Pharmtelia. He had a plastic folder distributed with all the relevant data he explained. He projected photographs of the chemistry laboratories and of the two plants the company had built in Switzerland, the largest one at Basel and another one near Lausanne.

The figures proved Pharmtelia to be a very healthy enterprise. Its EBITDA, Earnings Before Interests, Depreciations and Amortizations, had risen once more by two-figure percentages. The fine result was a proxy for the company’s operating profitability, the profit the company made with its current assets and its operations on the chemical products it produced and sold. The EBITDA was also an excellent financial measurement of the cash flow from operations. Laura should be pleased with these figures. Double figure augmentation in percentage of cash flow had become rare in the present economic crisis Europe went through, and in fairly old technologies. Laura found no details in the projected slides on the areas and the actual products for which the percentage rise was strongest and lowest. The figures did not allow her to draw conclusions on how the firm should evolve into the future. Why care? Laura could find out the details later, and get an idea of where reforms were necessary, which measures management had already installed to guarantee future success. Only the global figures influenced share value and dividends. The message given was: we did well, in areas you don’t know anything about, so you’ll be fine financially, and leave us alone. Still, Laura would have liked hearing more about which products had done well, which less so. A few Board Members asked questions. Laura refrained from doing so. She did not want to draw attention to her at this stadium. Georg Stratten also kept quiet. He looked somewhat bored. He did not seem much interested by the projected data.

Arnold Felsing then embarked on a general overview of the activities and new initiatives of Pharmtelia. Some detail for certain figures, on but a few new products, were given now. Felsing used his last slides to show in which areas Pharmtelia could expand, and which new products could be developed for strategic advantage. He wanted the research laboratories to be extended. He ended his presentation by saying development needed more funds. He pointed to his secretary to explain the means of financing sought.

The secretary then showed some slides proposing the capital raise offered by a South-American investment fund. He presented the fund as a financial trust directed to innovative developments in chemistry and in the food industries, a trustworthy and capital-rich fund, solid in its investments in other ventures. The name of Colombia was never mentioned, but the address of the fund stated clearly it was an investment fund with headquarters located at Bogota, Colombia's million-plus inhabitants' capital. Some more slides and explanations followed, on the fund's involvement in other, similar European and American chemistry enterprises. The slides then detailed to which new products the capital would be dedicated to. Further slides and more explanations came about the quality standards demanded for the production at Pharmtelia. The last slides showed how famous Pharmtelia had become in the industry.

At the end of the presentation, Arnold Felsing held a pause for more coffee. This lasted only for a few minutes, as slim hostesses presented the coffee at the tables. Nobody had to get out of the chairs.

Lastly, the President of the Board announced the meeting had mainly been called together to accept the capital raise from Pharmtelia. He put the proposal to the vote. He began left from him, to right.

The Board Members agreed with the figures presented for Pharmtelia, congratulated its management, and agreed with the capital raise. When the voting came to Laura, she voted against, providing no arguments. Many heads, which had by then slumped down a little, rose in shock. Everybody looked in her direction. When the vote came to Georg Stratten, he too voted against. Laura Trioteignes sighed almost audibly, pleased she would not be double-crossed. Arnold Felsing turned pale. He imperturbably continued the voting around the table. Only Laura and Georg had voted against, but everybody knew Felsing was in trouble! His majority voters had voted against him! Laura saw red anger come to his face and distort it.

At the end of the vote, Felsing had turned to ashen, as the understanding sank in. He asked, 'may I know for which reasons Miss Trioteignes voted against the proposal of capital raise?'

Laura answered.

The room went very quiet when she said briefly, 'Mister President, with all due respect, Pharmtelia is doing very well as it is. I can agree with the new projects and the future views of the company. Pharmtelia has done well in the previous years too, as the figures prove. I cannot agree with a capital raise from a Colombian firm, however, because I feel alternative, European fund raising could have been sought. Exactly which funds Pharmtelia would use can be determined by a Board Committee, or chosen by an independent consulting firm.'

Then, we would know all the credentials of the investment funds applied, and be able to compare the funds' results and solidity. Pharmtelia could easily tap various sources. Moreover, the Board would dispose of data in examined financial reports, which we would welcome.'

Felsingers' face reddened more.

He addressed Georg Stratten, 'may we know, Count, why you opposed our proposal?'

The young man's answer came very brief but definite, 'we fully support Countess Trioteignes' view, Mister President.'

With his address, he also had corrected Felsingers.

He had not more to say and nodded encouragingly at Laura. He then started turning pages in his folder, showing he would not say more and might not even be further interested in the matter.

Felsingers faced a serious issue in the Pharmtelia Board. He could now state most Members of the Board had accepted the proposal. He could state the proposal would go forward. That would start a war between him and the representatives of the majority shareholders. With the majority shareholders voting against his plan, Felsingers knew what would happen if he pushed the proposal through. The Trioteignes and the Stratten could force a General Assembly meeting to be organised, and Felsingers could then well be ousted out of the company. So might Johann Haller. They would not survive a negative shareholder vote and a motion of suspicion.

Laura heard distinctly another Board Member say to his neighbour, 'they don't want a capital raise because that would dilute the Trioteignes and Stratten shares!'

Laura didn't react immediately on the remark, but she knew this was the stark, true reason of her father's wish to vote negative, with doubts about the South-American fund.

Felsingers finally granted, 'we should hold the proposal suspended, then. We will contact the majority shareholders and hear from them just which procedure they would like us to follow for the capital raise. I seem to understand you are not opposed to a capital raise as such, Miss Trioteignes?'

Laura was forced to give some words again.

She said, 'true, Mister President. We do are concerned with the dilution of shares, as you gentlemen might easily comprehend. The dilution is also one of my issues. My arguments were clearly given, I hope. We feel a more profound examination of the sources of capital would be an asset for the company, and we trust the financial consultants can deliver us a detailed, objectively justified list of possible funds. I repeat, I am not opposed to the capital raise as such, although I would like to obtain more details about the figures presented before deciding. We are not opposed to a capital raise for all the right reasons and from an examined number of investment funds, including our own. Consider this my final answer. I welcome your new proposal to study this item on the agenda into further detail.'

Felsingers and Haller almost choked with anger. Nevertheless, they remained the gentlemen. Felsingers proceeded to a last presentation on further accomplishments of the firm. He also presented a general overview of the state of the industry, with the evolution of products in demand. Laura had the decency of not asking more damaging questions on how Felsingers had

come by the offer of the Colombian fund. She also supposed Felsing would not now concede to her more information on that subject. By then, most of the men in the room were almost not listening anymore to Felsing. They were whispering among each other. The room buzzed with talk, the indignation barely contained.

Felsing closed the meeting with, ‘we have presented you our figures and initiatives. All fit into our past and future strategy plans. We take our proposal for a capital raise as accepted, but the modalities temporarily delayed. We will want, of course, to discuss the issue further with our majority shareholders. I remind everybody Pharmtelia’s future is at stake. A company must innovate or die, and for innovation, funds are needed. With these final words, I declare the meeting closed.’

The whispering in the room became louder and louder. Laura saw out of a corner of her eyes Felsing and Haller wanting to come her way. She hastily left the room. She sat closer to the door than they. Felsing was held back by other board Members. She had to confer with her father, before she could discuss further actions with Felsing. She had done what she had come to Basel for. She had questions for her father. She longed to return home. She left the room, almost ran to the corridor, ran up the stairs instead of waiting for an elevator cabin, and entered her room with a big sigh of relief. When she stepped through the door of the Board Meeting room, she had heard pandemonium break loose behind her. She wondered how Georg Stratten would have fared. The last thing she had seen, was Johan Haller slumping down again on his chair, sitting like a rock or a frozen body. Johann Haller let the other men cry out loud. He sat, wringing his hands, his face also very red, but remaining closed and silent.

Laura lay on her bed in silence. Her heart raced. After more than an hour, during which her telephone rang several times, she decided to sneak out of the hotel. She went down using the stairs again, not waiting for the elevator, not looking to left or right. She ran through the lobby, heard a few men loudly speaking in the bar, but unaware of whether the men were Pharmtelia Board Members or not. She dared not look behind her. She escaped to a walk in the smaller streets of the city centre.

Laura walked on, at first also a little numb in her mind. Then, the doubts and the questions came. Why had her father not told her Andreas Stratten would not attend the meeting after all? Had the change to Andreas’s son happened so late, at the very last moment, so that she could not have been warned in advance? No, that could not be, for also for Georg Stratten a transfer of shares had to be prepared and executed! She had only come to Basel to say no to the proposed scheme, not much explanation given, because she did not know more. Just for this no, she had to sacrifice at least four days of her time, and tiresome drives to and fro Basel. Her father had gone through the operation of handing over to her the crucial shares he owned in a very profitable firm. Why had he gone through so much trouble? Why so much trouble for merely sending her over to Basel as an errand-girl?

Felsing and Haller had not expected the refusal. She had clearly seen that. But they had also not detailed for which projects a capital raise was necessary. Who gave a blanco cheque? Not Laura de Trioteignes! They had been publicly embarrassed by the rebuke in an official Board

Meeting. This was not the way matters were arranged in corporate Europe, and least of all in Switzerland! The Board of Pharmtelia was an ‘old-boy’ institution. She had clearly noticed so. A telefax could have been sent out of Trioteignes and out of Schillersberg, telling Felsing the Trioteignes and the Stratten did not agree with the capital raise. An internal discussion between Trioteignes, Stratten and Felsing could then have been organised to smooth out the differences of financial views.

If she had been sent as an errand-girl, Georg Stratten had been even more the errand-boy! The only thing he had to say at the meeting was that he was of the same opinion as she. He had joined the Trioteignes vote. Such a message could have been delivered by telephone. Andreas Stratten had also not needed to send his son over here! Laura had no knowledge of any important issues her father could have had to address in Belgium. Why finally, had he sent her? She had a funny feeling about the affair. She felt manipulated, a puppet on a string. Coming from her father, that realisation hurt!

Maybe Laura was just seeing ghosts where none existed. Next time, she should be more suspicious of such missions from her father, and not comply immediately without full knowledge and sound reasons. The impression of having been betrayed by her father, of having been too credulous, too confident, nagged at her mind. She felt unwell. She walked for about an hour, tried pushing her doubts out of her mind, and then returned to the hotel. Evening fell. The least satisfaction she felt was that her mission was accomplished. She had nothing to blame herself for. Or had she?

1.3. Georg Stratten

Laura de Trioteignes returned to the *Basler Garten* hotel. She had walked into the Swiss evening without aim, turning streets at the whim of her feet, looking at the last sunrays shimmering red on the Rhine. Almost without directing her steps, she arrived back at her hotel. She still dreaded confronting somebody from the Pharmtelia Board. But the questions she had formed had cleared her mind. She could formulate a few simple, true arguments for justifying her negative vote concerning Felsing's proposal. The capital raise would dilute the shares of the majority owners; not sufficient information had been provided about the reasons for why a Colombian investment fund should provide the money. Those two reasons she considered sound and enough, and she had already alluded at them in her answer during the voting session. Laura felt at ease, now, with her mind and with her conscience. So much settled, she needed a drink and some supper. The hotel restaurant was small. She studied the proposed dishes outside on the displayed menu, and was satisfied. The menu looked decent. She was certain the food would be prepared with care. It was the kind of international food served the same, clean way in all the starred hotels of the world, totally characterless, but it would suffice this evening. She didn't want to phone for a reservation in one of the Michelin-star gastronomic restaurants of Basel. She felt exhausted, and she might as probably find Board Members in the more expensive restaurants.

Laura hurried through the lobby, into the restaurant. She asked for a table. The head waiter wondered whether she wanted a table for one person alone. He gave her a somewhat surprised glance. She nodded. The waiter proposed a table near the entry. Laura didn't want to sit in the draught, and certainly not where somebody could spot her from the lobby. She noticed the restaurant was L-shaped. She stepped on, the waiter in tow. The man might have been annoyed, or amused. He didn't change the expression on his face. He was used to clients with strange moods and wishes, and used to fickle women in special. Laura turned the corner, to safety.

Only one man sat in the space that opened to her glances. The man sat with his back to her, as if he too was trying to ignore the rest of the world. He showed a shock of blond hair, and he was alone. Laura thought she recognised the head, the broad shoulders. She wasn't sure. She went forward. When she came at the same height as the man who was studying the menu, her expectations, her hopes realised. Georg Stratten sat on his own in the *Basler Garten* restaurant.

Laura stepped next to him. Georg became aware of somebody at his side. He looked up, and saw Laura with obvious surprise, and delight also. He immediately tried to get up from his chair and stand, like an old-fashioned army officer would have done. Laura was certain he would click his heels!

She smiled, and asked, 'good evening, count. Are you expecting somebody or can I join you? I hope I don't disturb.'

Georg didn't click his heels after all. Still, he stood. He looked amazed.

He answered quickly, 'no, no, I mean yes, countess. I am not expecting somebody. In fact, I tried to phone you several times the last couple of hours, wanting to invite you for supper, but

you were not in your room. Please sit, if this place suits you. I'd be delighted with your presence. Also, please, no count and countess between us. We know each other since too long, don't we? May we Laura and Georg?'

Laura smiled, sat, and waved the waiter off. The waiter lingered, however, wondered whether she wanted an aperitif. Laura hesitated. Georg had an empty Cognac glass in front of him.

'I'd like a glass of Champagne, thank you,' Laura nodded to the waiter.

She pointed to Georg's empty crystal glass, 'care for a second one?'

Georg looked somewhat surprised at his brandy glass.

He pouted his lips and shook no with his head, 'not a second one of this,' he addressed the waiter. 'Make it a second glass of Champagne too, please.'

The waiter left, ostensibly pleased with himself. The atmosphere seemed to warm up by his gentle, knowing smile. Nobody in the *Basler Garten* should have supper alone! The waiter took Laura's raincoat, and helped her in her seat. Georg still stood. He sat down a little later than Laura.

Laura began instantly with the subject that had remained on her mind.

'We had an awkward moment this afternoon,' she sighed.

'True,' Georg smiled. 'You handled it brilliantly. The vote had to be cast, and cast negative. There was no escaping to that!'

'No, indeed,' Laura chuckled.

'You must have felt bad,' Georg continued. 'Most of the burden was placed on your shoulders. I realise not much explanation was given to you beforehand. I'm very sorry for that, as I am probably the first reason for this awkward procedure. There was not much time, you see, and neither your father nor mine could have provided you with adequate reasons for a behaviour that must have seemed quite unsatisfactory. Please accept my apologies.'

Georg reddened in the face.

Laura didn't understand. She didn't know what to think, once more.

'You sound outright mysterious, Georg! What possible explanation was there to give, except for what I said?'

The waiter brought the two Champagne glasses.

Georg took his glass, brought it high, and told, 'to us!'

Laura wondered again what he meant with this address.

She found herself in a better mood, though, and repeated, 'to us!'

'It's been a long time, isn't it, since we met the last time at Schillersberg?' Georg started, leading the conversation into another direction and another time.

'It has. We must have been ten or eleven at most. You were a noisy, bragging, hard-headed boy, daring to being reckless, and you didn't appreciate nosy girls too much.'

'I've changed!' Georg exclaimed. 'I hope for the better!'

His smile melted down Laura's last defences.

'You were always teasing me,' he justified. 'You were so smart! You made a fool of me at all times. You topped me!'

'Did I? I remember I could be naughty, yes. I had to defend myself! I lived with a brother who resembled you so much,' she laughed.

He smiled more openly, sipping at his Champagne.

He pointed to the menu. ‘Please choose whatever you wish. I’ll follow you! You’ll surprise me once more.’

Laura took up the menu book. She studied it for a few seconds in silence, and felt his eyes lingering on her.

She decided, ‘I’ll have the Saint Jacques scallops, the lamb and the season’s fruit dish.’

‘Suits me,’ Georg concluded. ‘We’ll order two of each.’

When she looked up out of the menu, they stared in each other’s eyes. Laura saw boyish enthusiasm, honesty, determination, some naïveté maybe, and a little of the recklessness of when he had been much, much younger. She also noticed warm admiration. Was that for her intelligence, as he had just mentioned, or for her figure? She felt pleased, at ease, and oddly protected. The other Members of the Board might all dash in, now. She could cope. She might lash out. And she didn’t want them around.

They drank their sparkling wine, but kept a silence for a while. Laura noticed he eagerly kept his eyes on her.

‘You speak French without a noticeable accent,’ Laura complimented him, shoving her napkin a little farther from her Limoges, porcelain dish.

‘The French streak in our line runs strong. There is Trioteignes blood in my veins too, you know!’

‘Yes, of course,’ Laura conceded.

She had almost forgotten about that. Her face darkened a little. How much co-sanguine were they, actually? Then she wondered, why in hell do I ask myself that question?

The waiter stood again next to them. They ordered. As any fine Swiss would have done, the waiter asked Laura first, and as any proud German would have done, Georg answered for her. The waiter bowed. He left.

‘I remember you knew German quite well too, already,’ Georg remarked.

‘I only knew a few words, but we didn’t need many words when we played, didn’t we?’

‘No, we didn’t,’ Georg smiled again.

‘You were saying you owed me an explanation of sorts,’ Laura insisted.

Georg seemed to draw himself out of a trance. He straightened, moved the forks besides his dish.

‘I do. You see, father told me about the shares he owned in Pharmtelia. He wanted me to get involved. I took it as a first assignment, some form of probation. I got interested. I checked on some of the data he provided to me. Then, I got intrigued and dug somewhat deeper into the figures. I asked for additional figures and spreadsheets from the accountant. Then, I visited the plants of Pharmtelia. Nothing special! I just phoned a director of the Basel plant, told him who I was, and asked whether he could show me around the production units. I also visited the Lausanne factory. Nice people. Very clean halls! Very Swiss order. I looked around.’

Georg paused. The waiter brought their scallops.

‘The scallops are warm,’ the waiter warned. ‘The plates are hot. Please be careful.’

They nodded. Georg ordered a dry, white Médoc wine. They ate.

Halfway through their hors d’oeuvre, Georg continued talking.

‘Everything seemed all right to me. Typical German-Swiss *Gründlichkeit*, well defined procedures, processes well thought out, strict quality rules, fine measurement data, personnel polite, competent and quite pleased with themselves. Everything looked for the best.’

‘But?’ Laura asked, her eyes quite interested.

The waiter apologised for only now serving their Sauvignon Bordeaux white wine. They drank. The wine was very chilled and tasted mineral, though subtly and not unpleasantly.

‘Later, at home,’ Georg resumed, ‘I discovered some, let’s say unusual shipments.’

Laura looked up, but finished her scallops.

Georg said, ‘the shipments, the products that accounted for some of the highest value added, were systematically being transported to South America. Not in the more modest quantities I would have expected! Transported by the tons!’

‘By South America, you mean Colombia?’ Laura guessed.

‘Aha!’ Georg pointed with his spoon to her, telling she had guessed right. ‘No, not exactly to Colombia. Not to Bogota. From Basel, the products were transported in containers by train to Antwerp, and from Antwerp by ship to Maracaibo.’

‘Maracaibo?’ Laura exclaimed incredulously, ‘where is that?’

Her knowledge of South American geography was far from excellent.

‘I didn’t know either. I had to look it up. Maracaibo is a seaport of Venezuela. It is a large city. It has an airport, quite fine road connections to the neighbouring country, from which it is not far. The neighbour on the side of Maracaibo is Colombia! Maracaibo is mainly a coffee and petrol port.’

‘Are the Pharmtelia products used to work on or for the coffee industry?’

‘Oh no, not at all,’ Georg smiled at so little science knowledge. ‘That is the point! I have no idea what Venezuela could be doing with the chemical products Pharmtelia ships to it.’

‘Imagine. Maracaibo lays close to Colombia,’ Georg continued, eating a last mouthful.

‘Products can be transported from this port, in the shortest of times, to any city of Colombia. Medellin, for instance, is at about 600 miles from Maracaibo, a day’s truck drive.’

‘Aha!’ Laura exclaimed again, imitating Georg.

She had a feeling they were conspirators, now.

‘Aha!’ Georg repeated. ‘When my father told me about a Colombian fund wishing to enter in the capital of Pharmtelia, I suspected I was on to something strange.’

‘Interesting,’ Laura grumbled. ‘But what kind of connection could there be?’

The indication made little sense to Laura.

‘You mentioned chemical products,’ Laura remarked, ‘but Pharmtelia is a pharmaceutical company. Does Pharmtelia deliver other products too, then?’

‘Yes and no,’ Georg shook his head. ‘Most products Pharmtelia produces are indeed pharmaceutical products ready for consumption as medicines. Some are chemical products that can be used otherwise. Consider them basic substances for the pharmaceutical industry, not end-products. The products are high-grade, difficult to produce, of high quality, free of impurities, in other words, quite unique. I found something else, too!’

‘What then,’ Laura wondered, while the waiter brought them their rosy lamb with a bouquet of legumes and small, boiled potatoes.

‘Quite large shipments of the same product were transported by train and trucks, not to Antwerp in Belgium, but to another Belgian town, to the town of Namur in Wallony.’

Laura was lost. From Venezuela and Colombia to Namur, to close of Robois and to Trioteignes? Was her father somehow involved in the transport of Pharmtelia products? To what was Georg leading her? He kind of liked to feed the suspense.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I suppose Belgian pharmaceutical firms, of which there are quite some in Belgium too, might need basic products such as Pharmtelia produces.’

‘Indeed, indeed,’ Georg almost whispered, now, while propping a piece of red, juicy lamb in his mouth.

Laura let him chew.

‘The product shipped to Namur and to Maracaibo is ephedrine,’ Georg announced, as if he had struck pure gold.

‘Ephedrine?’ Laura was lost again.

‘Yes! Ephedrine!’ Georg looked up, noticing the word did not ring bells to Laura. ‘How much do you know about chemistry?’

‘Close to nothing, nada,’ Laura admitted. ‘I have a master’s degree in law, and an MBA, a Master of Business Administration title, in economics, and one in management. Chemistry is a black, closed domain for me!’

Georg looked up once more. He seemed surprised she was a girl with brains. He didn’t want to look stupid in his turn.

He said, ‘I have a master’s degree of applied sciences in chemistry from the University of Heidelberg and I am University *Diplom-Ingenieur* in chemistry from Göttingen. I too studied management. I have an MBA in management from the London Global Business School.

Where did you get your MBA?’

‘Harvard,’ Laura whispered.

Georg was beaten again. He smiled.

‘Do you like Basel?’ he mused.

‘I do. There are quiet streets behind the centre and along the Rhine. I feel good here. Of course, I suppose, this is Switzerland, after all. It is also close to the French Alsace Region.’

‘There are world-famous banking institutions here, too,’ Georg continued, embarking on an altogether other subject. ‘My father told me how you and Charles de Trioteignes participated in workgroups, among others in the Wolfsberg Group. It seems the tide of massive tax frauds is turning slowly. The banks give more attention to fraudulent practices.’

‘Don’t get over-excited,’ Laura warned. ‘Yes, bankers have become more vowed to honesty, as well as the younger men and women in the financial industry. They work hard on best practices papers to help install procedures to avoid fraud, tax evasion, whitewashing of money and the like. But some of the largest banks and most of the private banks show two faces, like the ancient Janus. Only, they are looking to the present and the future with both faces, not with one to the past and the other to the future like Janus! On the one hand, they support the more idealistic elements in their companies. They organise workgroups such as the Wolfsberg Group. On the other hand, they still build elaborate financial structures for tax evasions and whitewashing of illegal funds. The pressure on the banks’ Chief Executive Officers, plus the temptation of human greed, are enormous. Such high amounts of money are handled here! The CEO’s too have their bonuses linked to company results. Ultimately, black money washed clean, ends back into the accounts of the banks where the money started in the

first place. I admit this happens probably more in Luxemburg than in Switzerland these days. Luxemburg and Switzerland are the two main countries that have profited from their advantageous tax regulations and bank secrecy schemes. Yet, I suppose each European country has organised some form of tax avoidance schemes, also Belgium among them.’

‘But you were talking about ephedrine,’ Laura forced Georg back.

‘Ah yes, ephedrine! Ephedrine is a substance that can be used to form several pharmaceutical end products. Let’s say it is a basic product. Pharmtelia seems to be one of only a small number of firms capable worldwide to provide such basic molecular structures. They ship them to the giant pharmaceutical companies. One of the medicines in which ephedrine can be used is cough syrup.’

‘Cough syrup! Now, that is an interesting medicine,’ Laura exclaimed. ‘Who doesn’t take a few spoonfuls of the stuff in winter? Hundreds of millions of consumers!’

‘Right. True enough. Ephedrine is being replaced in cough syrup by other products, however. Lately, ephedrine is increasingly being avoided in cough syrups.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Due to its side effects. Ephedrine lowers the attention, for instance when driving or at work. To understand more, you would have to know the chemical, three-dimensional structure of the molecule. The formula of ephedrine is also close to that of the methamphetamines. And methamphetamines are synthetic hallucinatory drugs!’

‘Ephedrine is similar to drugs?’

‘Yes and no. To hard drugs, even. The structure of ephedrine is similar to that of the amphetamines. It can be used rather easily to create methamphetamine and methcathinone. Meth and Cat produce euphoria and many other hallucinatory states. Other synthetic drugs can be derived from ephedrine. Ecstasy and Molly pills are methamphetamines. The chemical name of Ecstasy is MDMA, for 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine. Mexico, for instance, thrives on meth. The drug barons of the world crave for ephedrine! They transform it, crystallise the results, and sell them in the form of pills or other, often mixed with other drug products.’

‘And so, ephedrine produced by Pharmtelia is sent to Colombia to be transformed in a last phase to drugs?’

‘Possibly. Most probably.’

Laura de Trioteignes paled. Her spine trembled. Drugs! That made much clear. What were her father and Andreas Stratten up to? Were they involved in the drug business?

Laura said it out loud, ‘are you implying Pharmtelia and our fathers are involved in the drug business?’

‘Yes, no. Pharmtelia is most probably involved. I should say, it may be involved. I’m not entirely sure! Ephedrine import and production is prohibited in many countries. Our fathers are definitely not involved! They don’t know, or rather, didn’t know, what Pharmtelia was doing. I told my father very recently. He phoned your father.’

‘And then our fathers withdrew from the firm, put us in charge, and sent us to clean up the mess!’

‘I wouldn’t put it quite like that, Laura. They are getting older. Old men aspire to tranquillity. I suppose they want to be out of Pharmtelia, but they are majority shareholders. They want to stop Pharmtelia from producing substances that can be transformed into drugs. Maybe they

consider us adults finally, and think we can better handle the issue, with the drive and energy of youth or something of the sort. My father knows nothing of chemistry. I do. You know more about law and modern finance even than your father. We did vote against Felsing's plan of capital raise with Colombian funds. That will send shock waves through the Board and the main directors. My father would like to keep Pharmtelia shares, but force the company back to decent production lines. The Stratten will send more clear signals. We don't want ephedrine, and possibly other pre-drug substances to be produced and sold by Pharmtelia. I'm not sure I found out everything. A main management change will have to be initiated at Pharmtelia. My father wants to avoid a scandal. He wants a strategic investment department at Pharmtelia. He even wants me to supervise it. I refused to work full-time in it, though. Charles de Trioteignes will have a very long talk with you when you get back from Basel.'

'He should have done that before I left,' Laura answered coldly. 'I will need a lot more information than my father provided to me. I suppose we two then, will have to spearhead the operational and managerial change.'

'I think so too. Audit firms should be sent in, led by friends of Andreas and Charles. We'll get all the data.'

'My father should have explained everything before sending me out,' Laura regretted once more.

'Some of what I discovered are data from only days ago. My father wouldn't believe me at first. I had to insist. I heard only yesterday, for instance, ephedrine was also sent to Namur, to a company called Oneiro SA. I would want to have a look at what that company works on, what it produces. We have no stakes in that company. I don't think it is a daughter-firm of Pharmtelia. Getting more information may prove tricky.'

They held a pause. They finished their lamb plate in silence. Laura felt depressed. She felt for the first time in her life disappointed in her father. Georg had ordered a bottle of red South-West French Gaillac wine. Laura's head grew light, but not joyful. Georg drank now with large gulps, affected also. He had drunk little while finishing his lamb. The red wine bottle remained half full. So had the white one. Georg and Laura tried to relax. After the shock, Laura had a need to put everything in perspective. She tried to think clearly. She changed subjects for a while.

She asked, 'how well do you know Switzerland? Do you come here regularly? Also to Basel?'

'First time in Basel, really,' Georg grumbled. 'I like the young Swiss people quite well. They are not very different from other young men and women all over Europe. Still, the country bewilders me. The French-speaking and the Italian parts seem to me to definitely be pro-European Union. In the last referendum, they voted to join the European Union. The German or *Schweizer-Deutsch* speaking cantons form the majority. They are far more conservative. They are not really anti-European, but pro total independence. They refused to join the European Union. They speak of Europeans as of foreigners. The Swiss still harbour the *Eidgenossenschaft* mentality, I surmise. They are well aware there is a world outside their cantons, but they mainly intend to profit from that outside world, not to harbour other kinds of generous relationships. I agree mentalities are changing rapidly in the younger generation, though.'

Georg sighed, ‘European money and now also money coming from the entire world, Russian and Chinese mainly, is flowing into the country. That is because of Swiss financial law, because of the banking secrecy that is still very much in place, and of low taxes on capital. It is a rogue country, isn’t it, in finance? It is so much that, like Luxemburg is! Luxemburg, additionally, succeeded in appointing one of its former Prime Ministers to President of the European Commission! Do we all in Europe, then, have to take an example on Luxemburg and Switzerland? I should think not! I prefer more symbiosis with the world to the egocentricity of these countries. I understand why the British people voted out of the Union. Many other peoples of Europe would have done so in a referendum on the matter!’

Laura interrupted him, agreeing with his words.

She added, ‘I read recently that for 2016, the GDP, the Gross Domestic Product for Switzerland per capita, per person, was almost twice as high as that of Belgium, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. It was three times that of Spain, and ten times that of Albania. The GDP per capita of Luxemburg was even twenty percent higher than that of Switzerland! You know as well as I where those figures come from. Not from industry and agriculture! Drive to the Kirchberg plateau in Luxemburg and you will find many magnificent, luxurious buildings of banks, banks and financial institutions. Most of the European investment funds propose Luxemburg-based products. Switzerland and Luxemburg top the ranking of the world’s countries with the highest GDP per capita, higher still than Qatar!’

Georg dropped his head over his glass of wine.

He continued, ‘you know what I would do? I would apply as much economic and political pressure as I could on the Swiss, and tell them to amend their ways and laws. I would apply that pressure as long as the leading politicians and industry lobbyists of the country did not change their ways!’

Georg paused, smiled, and then he quickly continued. ‘The very rich of the world feel very cosy and safe in Switzerland. Here is one reason why. Have you ever heard of the *Burg Schweiz*? About the Swiss Castle? The Swiss transformed the Alps into a fortified castle! They built shelters to accommodate the entire population. The shelters can survive from nuclear explosions. Even smaller towns have underground parking garages that can serve as community shelters. Similar shelters can accommodate hospitals and command centres in case of emergencies. Thousands of tunnels were dug to use against invading forces. Bridges were built with tank traps, and they held spaces for demolition charges. Fortifications were established in the Alps, underground air bases, and caverns for storing ammunitions, materials and crews. Much of that has been dismantled after the 1995 military reform programs, but the effort said something about the mentality of paranoia of the Swiss system. They keep one of the largest armies in Europe! Yet, they are not members of NATO. They are neutral! What does the word ‘neutral’ still means nowadays? During an armed conflict, the cities of the Swiss valleys may be captured and destroyed, but the elite will be able to strike back and continue the fight out of the *Burg Schweiz*!’

Georg held a silence for a few seconds. He remained lost in thoughts, turning his glass. Then, he continued in the same tone, not looking at Laura, just talking on.

‘Something called the Global Militarisation Index or GMI, is an index for the relative weight and importance of the military forces of a state in regard to society as a whole. The GMI uses a number of indicators to represent the militarisation of a country. In this index, the USA ranked around thirty. Switzerland ranked at about fifty, Belgium and Germany at over ninety. The number of active military per capita in Switzerland stands at about four times those of Belgium and ten times those of Germany. I like the Swiss younger people, but I would like to see the country more in tune with the issues of the world, especially with the poverty issues.’

‘I don’t like any mentality of isolation from the world, of protectionism, of egocentricity. I truly don’t! It is definitely outdated. It is wrong!’ Georg spat out. ‘Long life to Jean Ziegler! Switzerland voted immigrants out, lately. At least, our Angela Merkel opened our German borders for the poor immigrants from Syria. She showed Germany was not only the economic heart of Europe, but also had now the true, human heart of the continent. I know, many of my countrymen don’t share her opinion. And saying this may sound indecent from out of a Germany that caused the Second World War and the Holocaust. But *Mutti* Merkel was right. *Wir würden es schaffen!*

The Swiss, on the other hand, in the richest country on earth, refuse immigrants. Do you also know that, except for the canton of Neuchâtel, Swiss law still does not define minimum wages? Of course, individual contracts determine wages, and collective employment agreements concluded with the trade unions provide for minimum wages in certain lines of industry. Nevertheless, I would say, let’s apply all political and economic pressure we can wield to bring countries like Switzerland and Luxemburg to better sense.’

Laura smiled. The wine seemed to have taken its effect on Georg. He truly was a German officer! His diatribe had been delivered passionately, as a loud cry. He knew his scheme was impractical, of course, outrageous, but he felt tough against the rogue countries. Was this not the opinion of a large part of the people in the European Union?

Georg saw her obfuscated face, and he started laughing too. He gulped down the rest of the wine in his glass. He didn’t refill it.

‘There!’ he smiled, ‘I know! Now you must consider me an ogre, a new German Nazi! I drew a caricature, though much of the gist is true.’

‘I know, yes,’ Laura said seriously. ‘There are other ways to force the Swiss to mend their ways. Also, no European country goes out entirely free. Why blame only Luxemburg and Switzerland? They did what we all allowed them to do during decades. And with the Brexit, the European Union will have another issue. What if the frustrated post hard-Brexit Great-Britain turns equally into a rogue country in the world of finance? The London City bankers and financiers are powerful enough. They must already now be gloating over the possibilities of not having to behave as the continental financial world has more or less informally agreed to with the European governments. Of which schemes for supporting the British economy and industry and other interests are the London City powerful bankers and financiers thinking of, at this very moment?’

Laura said, calmly, quietly, in a lowered voice, ‘after all, the story of Switzerland is not so complicated. By chance, it emerged unscathed out of World War II. The Nazi Germans probably had some use for it as a deposit of illicit funds. Ever heard of operation

Tannenbaum, the project of Nazi invasion of Switzerland? It did exist! Hitler allegedly once declared Switzerland was a pimple on the face of Europe. Apparently, it still is. After the war, money flew into the country due to its aura of political stability and of being an inviolate haven. Added to this were the Swiss laws, lenient towards anonymous fund deposits, funds got by whatever means. There were the numbered accounts and the banking secrets. As money flowed in, interests had to be paid on deposits, so the banks made the money roll. Who can blame them? The system forced them to. It was easy to establish industrial companies in Switzerland, easy to loan, easy to invest money. The banks made it easy to loan. The companies made more money, which added to the wealth of the country, and then the spiral was on for good. Many investments, more money made. There was the wealth to create universities, fine poly-technical schools, and research laboratories. The expanding spiral made Switzerland great. That and immunity of person. And now, the financial institutions have formed a powerhouse. Can that power still be controlled? I wonder! What happened in Luxemburg is pretty much the same, with but a little less aura. As so many other countries of Europe, Switzerland is an independent political entity. Touch at that principle of inviolability of frontiers, and the card-house of European states starts to tumble once again.

Switzerland defends its own interests exclusively. It has every right to do so. I believe no country in the world sticks to all-moral attitudes. Maybe I am a worse cynic than you. Our world is still one of hypocrisy, yes. If you don't want to accept that fact, try to get off the earth! Or fight the attitude, a people's attitude, slowly, strenuously slowly. Or swim in it, preferably with the tide. There are no alternatives.

Laura remained silent for a while.'

An awkward silence set in once more. Laura expected him to say, 'and that is what you do? You swim with the tide?' But Georg just looked at his glass.

Laura continued, 'all this would only end a little when the European Union could impose common tax regulations for all its current member countries. But how could that be done with economies so different as those of Germany and Greece for instance, in the same Union? And will our countries ever be willing to give up their autonomy of individual financial policies? If ever the Union arrives at that point, it will have effectively realised political union too. Will proud France and prouder Poland ever accept such a drastic change?'

'I do hate the hypocrisy of it all,' Georg let off the rest of his heart. 'Switzerland doesn't produce methamphetamines and the like. Oh no! They prohibited the production of hallucinatory drugs by law. It would be immoral, unethical to produce drugs. Their conscience is clear. But they continue shipping the basic constituents of artificial drugs without real control, so that other unscrupulous men of the world can easily turn their products into drugs!'

Laura had to contain Georg. He spoke louder and louder. Luckily, nobody was around this evening.

She tried to change the subject.

'Why methamphetamines?' she asked. 'Cocaine and Heroin are natural recreational drugs. Why use synthetic drugs?'

‘Other experiences, other effects. Methamphetamines and all derived drugs are far more hallucinatory. The dreams are more fantastic, colourful, more intense. Sexual effects are more prolonged. Euphoria and energy are stronger. All effects are more powerful, and higher, actually. The natural drugs are harder to come by, these days, more expensive to produce. The United States have almost brought to an end cannabis and coca plantations in South America. Production in the Far East is much lower. The largest exports now come from Afghanistan, Iran and Irak even. Those are difficult countries to trade with in illegal substances! Have you noticed the main exports of organic drugs come from countries at war? From the governmental and rebel groups that are in need of money to wage hostilities! Evil creates more evil.’

‘You seem to know a lot about drugs. How come?’

Georg’s face changed. His eyes focused more. He did not answer immediately.

‘I am a chemical engineer,’ he allowed finally. ‘Drugs are products mankind created, at first probably for fun and relaxation, or as medicine. Now, drugs are the main products of the degradation and decay of our western civilisations. The effects of drugs are working devastatingly on a large part of our youth.’

‘I absolutely join you in that assessment,’ Laura agreed. ‘It seems to me, however, any strong need or desire in a society must sooner or later be satisfied. I mean, the drive for drugs must be the result of underlying issues in our societies. Everybody in our countries has some need or searches for the realisation of something that can lift the individual out of daily drudgery. When such urges cannot be satisfied, then the young move to self-annihilation, to violence and even to terrorism, to the pursuit of pleasures brought by the natural drugs or alcohol. We have an enormous issue in our societies with how to make our children aware of those urges. And we have to provide some decent answers! We have to teach them how to self-realise in initiatives that are less harmful to themselves than drugs. There is art, associations, non-governmental organisations, benevolent and very satisfying work, and so on.’

‘True,’ Georg acquiesced. ‘With drugs, there is an additional problem. There must exist a gene responsible for addiction. People with such a gene seem to be more prone to addiction than others. Hence some people, maybe the majority, only once get a taste of the effects of drugs, sometimes tempted into trying by thoughtless friends. Then, they rapidly cannot liberate themselves from the physical cravings for ever more powerful drugs. This issue, the awareness of the danger, is also not sufficiently exposed in schools. I have seen people who use or used drugs regularly, and of whom I don’t think they were addicted. I’ve seen some draw away from drugs rather easily. Whereas others could not.’

‘Hear, hear,’ Laura burst out. ‘We are sitting in a fine restaurant, in agreeable company, and we keep talking of such grave subjects! Don’t you feel at least a little on vacation, here? Basel is a nice town, a beautiful town at places. Not everything here makes me want to think of such gloomy subjects. Tell me, what have you been up to since our childhood? How come, also, we grew apart so much, our younger generation of the Stratten and the Trioteignes?’

‘Indeed, good point,’ Georg mused. ‘Sorry I’m not good company this evening. Well, I was very busy with my studies, actually. I only emerged out of those periods of intense work three years or so ago. I was a very serious student, probably much too serious. I’ve been at things here and there, doing not much since.’

Then, recently, my father nagged at me and forced me to become more involved in his business. I am his only son. I have two sisters, but I am his only son. I understand his fears, and his wish to draw me into the business, into his finances, into his issues, his management, his enterprises. I told him I was quite willing, given time, to take over some of his responsibilities. I guess my vacation time is over, and my probation time on!

‘I started to work with my father right after university,’ Laura admitted. ‘My brother Diego has become disillusioned with many aspects of the world of contemporary finance and industry. He is married to a Turkish woman. They have children. You should visit us. I would like that.’

‘Would you?’ Georg interrogated. ‘As you just heard, I can be pretty morose!’

He looked at her with some insistence, maybe with hope in his eyes.

‘I would, yes, of course,’ Laura confirmed.

‘Well then,’ Georg shook his head again. ‘I would like to visit that Belgian firm to which Pharmtelia is sending part of its ephedrine. That firm’s address is in Namur, not far from Trioteignes. I’ll drop by.’

Laura had an idea forming in her head.

‘When do you intend to travel to Belgium?’

‘I thought of pretty soon, now, right after the past Board Meeting.’

‘You drove to Basel by car?’

‘No, I flew from Stuttgart by plane.’

‘Felsing said you phoned to announce you would be late because you got stuck in a traffic jam,’ Laura remarked.

‘Indeed. But I only spoke of traffic jam to Felsing. He interpreted this as a highway jam. I came by plane. My plane was three quarters of an hour late due to air traffic jam. Smaller planes like mine were delayed. Then, in Basel, many planes arrived together at about the same time. A long queue of people waited for a taxi. I arrived more than two hours late at the hotel. I checked in, dropped my bag in my room, and ran to the meeting.’

‘If you want right away to visit that firm in Namur, Georg, you can drive with me. I came by car from Trioteignes. My car is in the hotel garage. I thought of leaving the hotel by ten o’clock in the morning. Why not drive with me? We have guestrooms at Castle Trioteignes. My father allowed me a vacation after Basel. I can show you around in Namur.’

Georg thought for a while. He turned his glass of wine in his hands.

‘I’d love to,’ he finally answered. ‘I don’t want to abuse of your time. I’m truly not fine company, I’m afraid. But if you want to put up with me, I’ll accept.’

‘Of course. I’m delighted! I dreaded driving home all by myself. It will take five, six hours of driving, you know!’

‘Well, we talked agreeably in here. Time has flown by. Our desert is finished. Can I serve you some more wine or do you want a coffee or a tea?’

‘No coffee, please,’ Laura told. ‘Decaf or not, I would not be able to sleep. I intend to have a good night’s sleep. The wine is tempting, though.’

‘Half a glass, red or white?’ Georg asked.

They chatted agreeably, at ease, for over an hour more. They fished up old memories of Trioteignes and of Schillersberg. When all the guests had deserted the restaurant, they walked together to the elevator and to their rooms. They agreed to have breakfast together at eight

thirty in the hotel. They didn't care anymore for the possible presence tomorrow morning of other Board Members in the breakfast room.

Laura slept well. The next morning, she woke up at seven. She prepared her bags to leave the hotel. She made up her face somewhat longer than usually.

'Why am I doing this?' she asked herself before the mirror.

The answer was obvious. She had come to like Georg Stratten! The realisation came as a shock. A German!

She also then phoned Trioteignes. Laura's mother took the call. Laura asked her mother to prepare a guestroom. She didn't mention a name.

'Male guest or female?' Monique asked.

'Male. My age.'

'Oho!' went her mother, but Monique didn't ask more details. 'I'll prepare the largest guestroom. He'll have a sitting-room for himself, that mysterious invitee.'

'Thank you, mum,' Laura sighed. 'Can you also ask father whether our guest can use one of his cars, please, and have it prepared?'

'Sure, honey. Does the young man have a name?'

'It's a surprise, mum!'

'Fine, darling. See you this afternoon. You and Mister Mysterious are invited to supper this evening.'

Laura and Georg had breakfast together. They didn't meet any persons from the Pharmtelia Board. Then, they both went to their respective rooms to prepare for the trip to Trioteignes. They would meet in the lobby. Laura came down early. She went to the reception desk and paid for her stay, then checked out.

She wanted to go to the garage to put her bags in the trunk of her car. A dark-skinned, stout man accosted her and blocked her way to the elevator.

'Miss Laura Trioteignes?' the man asked.

'I am, yes,' Laura answered, surprised by the man's insistence.

'We heard you yesterday voted against a proposal of a capital raise in the company Pharmtelia. Is that right?'

'None of your business,' Laura answered as rudely. 'Who are you?'

'Who I am is unimportant,' the man whispered, still blocking her way. 'I'm but a messenger.

I have to warn you. We are a very powerful group. We urge you to revise your decision.

You'll have to notify the President of the Board and the CEO of Pharmtelia you wish to vote

positive, because you changed your opinion. Very nasty things may happen to you and to

your family if your vote is not changed within three days. We are very serious with our

commitment to Pharmtelia. Your vote will also hurt the company beyond your imagination.

Please do as I say. This is in your total interest.'

With that, the man turned on his heels and sped out of the lobby, to outside.

Laura remained standing still for quite a while. She had been threatened, the first time in her life.

'Well I ever,' she said out loud.

She continued her way to the elevator. She took her bags to her car. Then, she slowly went

back to the lobby to wait for Georg. She did not have to wait long near the reception desk.

She must have looked pale. She had only just stopped trembling a little.

When Georg came into the lobby, she was all smiles. Georg only carried a small bag. He smiled at her. She felt safe. They went to the garage. When Georg saw her BMW Gran Coupé 650i Sport, he whistled.

‘Small girl, big car,’ he gave her, looking her up and down appreciatingly.

‘I’m a big girl too,’ she corrected.

She had to laugh at his surprise.

She drove out of Basel a little too fast.

They also chatted in the car. Somewhat haltingly at first, then as good friends do.

They didn’t stop talking once.

Laura came to asking Georg about his political ideas. He looked awkwardly at her, then explained he was probably a liberal humanist. He was for free markets, for free trade, and for the rights and duties of the individual.

‘But I want the best our societies can offer for everybody,’ he said. ‘I believe it is a damn scandal poverty is so high in our societies. Why do we build very expensive public buildings and care so little about the poor and the handicapped? I guess I’m a socialist too! Meet Georg Stratten, count and wealthy, a liberal socialist humanist democrat! I’m a contradiction in terms.’

Laura nevertheless agreed with his ideas.

They decided together to drive into the city of Metz and have dinner. The dinner happened in a fine Alsatian restaurant, not far from the cathedral. They took a few minutes to admire the Marc Chagall painted glass panes in the church. Afterwards, they walked back to the car, shoulders touching. They felt good in each other’s presence.

Georg drove the car to near Namur. They had a last cup of coffee in a highway restaurant.

Laura drove the last stretch. They arrived quite late at Trioteignes.

‘Mother, I bring you Georg Stratten!’ Laura shouted in the entry hall of Castle Trioteignes.

She pushed Georg in. Monique screamed of surprise and pleasure. Georg got his room.

Monique took possession of him, embraced him as if he were a lost son. Then, she prepared a light supper.

Charles de Trioteignes arrived late, while they were at the table in the dining-room. They hadn’t waited for him. He was delighted welcoming Andreas’s son. He watched his daughter with obvious wonder. It seemed to him Laura and Georg liked each other. He had rarely if ever seen the warmth and feeling of togetherness between his daughter and another young man, not even between Laura and her brother Diego. Had something grown between Laura and the young German?

Georg and Laura explained what had happened in Basel. Laura didn’t say a word about the threats proffered at her.

Chapter 2. Namur

2.1. Véronique Dupas

A few months before Laura de Trioteignes' trip to Basel, Véronique Dupas ran in the streets of High-Robois. She had at first, almost instinctively, hurried to the Abbey in the old town centre. The former abbey housed all the communal institutions that might help her with her issue. The town of Robois had installed in several parts of the buildings the *Commission Publique d'Assistance Sociale*, better known as the CPAS, the service that helped the poor. The Abbey also held the offices of the association for women in distress, a shelter for the homeless, the *Restaurant du Coeur*, a score of other associations Véronique didn't know anything about, and the local police office.

Her first thought after what happened at her home had been to complain to the police. She wanted to ask for refuge and assistance. At the moment, she should have walked through the massive stone arch and the gate of the Abbey. At the last moment, however, she had stepped back, and thought again. Should she really do this?

'Think,' her mind told her. 'What will they do to you, in there? They will ask you a lot of questions. The police don't like young girls who run away from home. You will have to admit you're not quite seventeen. Many people know who you are, here. They will find out immediately you're still at school in Robois. Faster than not, they will assert you really belong to your family, with your father and mother. They'll send you back. They may take a note of what you say, but not much more than that. There may be some sort of supervision, afterwards, and not much more. A social assistant will drop by your parents once every month or so. You will have to tell her or him everything is fine. Otherwise, Alfred, your stepfather, will beat you up. Or worse, he may beat up mum. So, you will have to concede with a sad, innocent, angelic face you are quite happy to be back home. But the last thing on earth you want is to go back there!'

Back was not even a true house. Véronique lived with her mother and stepfather in a trailer. The trailer was long, comfortable, but small for a family to live in. The people who lived in trailers in the park of Les Tignes, the suburb of Robois, were considered thieves and good-for-nothings. Véronique had lived in a true house once, in a real home of bricks and all, a long time ago. That was in the times her real father still lived. He had died in an accident in the glass factory he worked in. He had been imprudent, the bosses had said to her and to her mum. He had been burnt severely by molten glass poured inadvertently over him. But the manufactory would not evade responsibilities. Her mother would get insurance money from the firm.

Their home had been small, one in a row of a workers' street of Bas-Robois. Still, the house was cosy, clean, the rooms fine and large. They were not rich, but they never suffered from hunger, and could buy a few electrical appliances without making debts. Véronique was dressed neatly, in fine and clean clothes. Mum seemed to love dad, and he was a gentle man. Dad had been a big man, not really a smiling husband and father, but he brought his money

home and never went to have a drink first. Each month the money came, and the money lasted easily till the last day. They had good food on the table, as dad also kept a small legumes garden behind the house. Her mother too worked in the glass factory in those days. Mum and dad were nice to their daughter. They quarrelled, but their quarrels remained in words only, and no insults were thrown to and fro. Véronique's father liked a drink. He also laughed a lot. Who knows, maybe his good humour had been the true cause of his death, for he was too confident with everything and everybody, her father. In Véronique's world, nobody laughed for long. Why had her father not been more careful? He did not have to die! When Véronique's father died, all the misery in her life had truly begun.

Véronique's mother had received some money from the factory her father worked in. She continued working after her husband's death, but refused to remain in the glass factory, blaming the factory for the death of her husband. She cleaned in houses, now, often in one building after the other, in different places. She cleaned for a company of cleaners, and she earned less than before.

Véronique could place a name on her present misery. The name was Alfred. Alfred had been the man her mother had shacked up with, two years after Véronique's dad had died. It seemed Alfred had been nice to her mother. At least, such was what her mother had told her in the first months Alfred and her mother had begun seeing each other. For Véronique, it was torture to see the man move in the sitting-room, and later in her mum's bedroom. She had never truly accepted that! Alfred had come to live with them. He was a new dad, he had told the then ten-year old Véronique. He found the name Véronique much too long. She would be Véro, now, he grumbled, for Véro sounded like zero. The name Véro was modern, quick, and Véro sounded better. Véronique hated the abbreviation.

Alfred worked. He brought in money, like dad, but much less so. Alfred worked at odd jobs, here and there, and not all the time. He remained unemployed, sometimes, for prolonged periods. He received government money then. His salary was small, his allowance smaller, but the money served well enough to let them live in the same house. Then, there was the insurance money from the glass factory. For a while, that money brought in a new television set with a very large screen, and fine, new clothes for mum and Alfred. Alfred talked about buying a car. Mum gave Alfred the money. She said she was in love with him. Was Alfred in love with mum or with mum's money? Alfred drank, and he drank more and more. Matters had remained satisfactorily, as long as some money was left from the insurance of her father's accident. Things worsened when that money had dwindled. Alfred began to drink heavily. Blows fell, Véronique knew, for her mother showed bruises on her face she had never had before. Véronique understood her mother and Alfred made debts. Bad debts. A car never came, but a new radio, an electromagnetic cooker, all sorts of tools for hobbyists, and more such stuff came in. Alfred was no gardener. He wanted not to dirty his hands with ground and manure.

When Véronique was fourteen years old, merely a year after her mother had met Alfred and lived with him, people took away their home. A man came several times to threaten them, urging them to pay their debts. Finally, the man told them the house had to be sold to pay the debts, and they had to move.

Véronique's mother went to the town's CPAS commission, and received a new home to live in. Véronique, her mother and Alfred went to live in a trailer of the town's community services, one of many in the trailer park of Les Tignes. This was the best the town could offer them at that moment, waiting for a somewhat larger apartment. Years later, the family still lived in the trailer. The rent was paid by the commune. Alfred and her mother still worked then, but Alfred got less and less jobs. He worked for one interim firm after the other, and he always ended on the street.

Véronique understood less and less why and how mother continued putting up with Alfred. Alfred was not by far as nice as Véronique's dad had been. Alfred and Véronique's mother quarrelled more often. Always, at one point, Alfred lost his patience and hit her mother. He was not nearly as intelligent as her mother. He ended the arguments he could not win with blows! Véronique fled from the trailer when this happened. With time, the blows fell heavier and more frequently. As more blows came, more screams came, high-pitched screams of her mother, low grunts of Alfred. Alfred's strokes could be vicious, less in the face and more on the body. Véronique fled from the trailer, in rain and in wind, in snow and in frost. She grabbed her parka and roamed through the streets of Robois. She would only return a few hours later. In summer, she dared to sleep outside, huddled in the woods near Robois. But she always returned.

Véronique Dupas went to school in High-Robois. She was not what one called an excellent, exemplary pupil. Still, after her exams, she always ended at between the fourth and eighth place in a class of thirty. She was not the daughter of a doctor or a notary or a lawyer, so she drew no attention.

After her primary school years, her parents sent her to the Robois Technical School. Nothing fancy for her: she studied cooking and hairdressing. She might have followed the courses of the local *lycée*, but her parents told her they had no money to spend on her attending such schools. She had to learn a profession, fast. Véro never quite understood that argument, for the *lycée* didn't ask more money from her parents than the Technical School!

She was not very dextrous with her hands, but also in her new school, she tried to be a fine student. She got her books on loan from the school. She did not have to ask money for her books, as long as she brought them back in good shape at the end of the year. She also received her notebooks from school. Most other kids discarded these and brought finer notebooks with very white, shining paper to take notes in. Véro used the ones she received. She never asked for other or more notebooks. She wrote with black charcoal pencils instead of with ink, but her notes were in good order. She brought regular bulletins from school with reasonable quotes. Some of her teachers even wrote she was a fine, dedicated student. Véro did not have many friends at school. She ran, dressed in the same dirty clothes for months. She rarely washed. She could only wash in a tub of cold water when she was alone in the trailer. The money mother gave her she used to buy tampons for her regular bleedings. To everybody in her school, she looked a quite unremarkable person.

Véronique often wondered whether she was pretty. Being pretty was one of the first questions on the mind of the girls of her class. She thought many other girls were beautiful. She could tell that. They wore fine clothes and ribbons in their hair. They wore fine blouses, shirts, stockings and shoes. Her clothes remained drab. She wore her things until they fell apart. She

was not a tall girl, and rather plump for her age. Her hair was of the usual, dark brown colour that was common in Robois. Her skin was even, though, unscarred by pimples and blotches of adolescence. Her nose was a little too thick, her lips too fleshy, her mouth too long. No, Véronique didn't feel pretty. Her legs were not long enough, her bottom probably too thick, her breasts too heavy. Fine, grand breasts she had indeed. She had already heard two flat-chested girls at school comment acidly but with disguised envy on her breasts. Véronique considered she might nevertheless be attractive, well-dressed in fancy clothes, for boys kept pushing her about, and pinching her, at her calves, her bottom, her waist, and even at her breasts. Was that not because the boys knew she was a girl of the trailer park, hence of a rougher kind than the girls who lived in High-Robois?

Véronique tried not to be as vulgar as some of the young women she saw lingering in the trailer park, spending their time in idleness, merely attracting boys with alluring eyes and bodies, certainly not studying anything of value. She watched her language, said little, opened not easily to others. She had no real friends, but tried to remain polite and respectful with her teachers. Her teachers were gratified, and seemed to like her. Véronique had learned the hard way that in order to receive you had to give some. She got good notes. Her mother and Alfred scarcely looked at the fine notes she brought in. Alfred signed without looking. Véronique's teachers helped her. They showed her some more sympathy than other girls. One teacher, a woman, tried to break through her defences. She told Véronique she could become a good cook. This teacher told her she should go to the *École Hôtelière de Namur*, the Cooking School of the Province of Namur, a high-rated school at which some of the best chefs of Belgium had followed courses. But how could she do such a thing? Her parents had no money, and in this school, you needed money for the food you cooked, and you had to buy your own kitchen utensils. Her parents had no money, and didn't care. After her secondary school, Véronique would have to find work. At the best, she could look for a job as a cashier in a supermarket, or as an irregular worker, arranging goods on the shelves. In a restaurant, she would probably have to work to clean the dishes and wipe the tables for years.

Véronique wanted one thing above much else. She wanted to be on her own. She wanted to leave her mother and Alfred as soon as possible. That could in theory happen only about a year from today, for she had only one year to do at secondary school. She could not stand the quarrelling between her parents, the violence, the beatings, the screams. So far, she had held out only because she could not live on her own just now. She was a minor. She wanted the diploma at the end of her secondary studies. Living in the trailer was becoming harder and harder. A couple and a child in a trailer was cumbersome, privacy difficult to obtain, if non-existing, and Véronique was becoming a young adult. And she was a smart girl. She looked at her mother and at Alfred, and she saw she wanted something else out of life than how they lived. She acquired a keen sense of self-assessment, of observing the world around her with detached eyes. She judged the way she lived in a cool, objective way. She wanted more of life than what she had currently!

As Véronique grew older, she noticed she was an intelligent woman. She had read much. She saw clearly the misery, also the moral misery her parents lived in. She liked reading. She could lend books from the town library, located in the same Abbey she was now still looking at. Not even a newspaper or an occasional magazine entered the trailer. Her parents never

read anything, and Véronique had doubts Alfred could read easily. Mother and Alfred didn't even watch the daily news on the small television set in the trailer. Véronique came to realise she was also much more intelligent than her mother. She took pride in the knowledge she had inherited her father's genes.

Alfred was nothing more than a dumb moron. She said so, of course, which made him very mad. She screamed he was a stupid man. He beat her. From that time on, Alfred came to pick on her. When she made a sarcastic remark, and when Alfred got the jest of what she said, he beat her. Véro didn't hit back. She thought once of grabbing a knife and threaten Alfred. She never did anything of the sort, though she screamed hard not to touch her. Alfred was afraid of the neighbours, so when she screamed high enough, he would stop beating her. Shame could put him down.

Lately, Alfred's interest had evolved. He began to grab at her. His hands probed at her breasts, at her buttocks, to between her legs. Véronique pushed Alfred away, but he became more insisting by the day, holding her longer, moving his hands over her. She dared not tell her mother.

The trailer held two bedrooms. Alfred and her mother slept in one, she in the other. Her room, a cubicle merely, was very small. The walls were thin. She could hear her parents grunt when they had sex. Whenever that happened, Véronique placed her hands to her ears. She understood what happened all too well.

She could not lock her room closed. The key to her room had been lost a long time ago. Twice, when her mother had early duty, Alfred had come to her room to run his hands over her. Véronique knew Alfred would become more insisting with time. She threw him off, but he kept coming at her. She tried to avoid him by getting up very early, at the same time as her mother. Véronique also went to sleep early, to avoid Alfred in the evenings, preferring anyway to be on her own rather than to remain in the sitting-room of the trailer, together with Alfred and her mother watching popular series and games on television. And then, yesterday evening, had happened what she had been fearing for some time.

Véronique's mother had to work afternoon shift, from two in the afternoon to nine-thirty in the evening. She would arrive at Les Tignes by bus around ten. At six, Véronique went to her room. She made her last homework for school. She took off her clothes, put on a night shift, and went to bed. She read a little and cut off light around eight-thirty. No longer than a quarter of an hour later, the door to her room opened. Alfred entered her room, moved to the bed, sat on it, and began to caress her body under the covers. Véronique smelled the beer on his breath. She pushed his hands away. He insisted, pinned her arms to the bed, and held his hard hand roughly at her mouth to stifle her screams. Then he forced himself on her with violence. Véronique had never had intercourse before. She hurt. Blood was left on the sheets when Alfred left.

The next morning, Véronique did not get up early. She was still dazed about what had happened to her. Then, she got up and dressed. She brought her soiled sheets herself to the washing machine and set the water turning. Alfred had left early. Her mother still slept. Véronique began to think clearly about what had happened. She had been raped. She knew

that to be a crime. Blue blotches of bruises covered her legs and her back and neck. She ached at several places. Her vagina was on fire.

She realised quite well what she had suffered. She also knew it would happen again and again. She could not let that repeat! She had to go to the police and tell her story. She had to denounce Alfred and seek protection. Her teachers might help. She could not anymore bring up the least respect for her mother and for Alfred. She could not and wanted not to stay with them any longer. The last links of meagre affection for her parents had irremediably been broken.

Véronique then placed most of her clothes in a brown bag she could wear on her back. She took most of her underwear, her tampons, her blouses and shirts, her pullovers. She had two pairs of shoes, two jeans. She stuffed a winter parka in her bag and put on the lighter one. She went back to the main room of the trailer. The money of the family was kept in two drawers, in a drawer of the dining-room, the other in the bedroom of her parents. Véronique grabbed the money of the drawer in the main room and stuffed it in her pockets. Then she went into the bedroom, saw her mother sleeping, and took the rest of the money. The notes in her pockets amounted to about seven hundred Euros. She hesitated for a moment over whether she should leave some money, but decided on taking it all.

Véronique fled from the trailer. Her mother did not wake up. When she closed the door, she noticed Alfred a little farther, talking to neighbours. He didn't go to work today. He had his back turned to her. He didn't notice her leaving. She fled, running as hard as she could, the other way. Alfred may have thought she was running to school. Nobody truly bothered with her. She ran for two streets, and then walked up the hill, to High-Robois, to the main town street leading to the Abbey.

Véronique stood now under the arch of the Abbey in which the communal services of her home town, Robois, were housed. She stood, and didn't know what to do next. She needed to think. If she went to the police now, all hell would break loose. What should she do? She felt ashamed and dirtied. Would the police believe her when she accused Alfred? She might be sent back to her parents' trailer! She found herself unable to think logically about what had happened, even though she realised thinking logically was the best she should do. She simply did not want to think anymore! She did not want to think of Alfred pushing into her. What would all the people she would meet in the next hours do to her? How humiliating everything would be! She only wanted to be left in peace.

Véronique ran.

While running down the High-Robois main shopping street, Véronique arrived at the bus station, not far from the Abbey. Busses to all directions stopped there, most of them coming from the railway station of Robois, deeper down. A bus for the town of Namur stood ready. Véronique had been to Namur many times. Namur was the large town nearest to Robois. Véronique ran to the bus. She asked for a ticket to Namur, she had the money in her hand. The bus driver drew a face. He was reluctant to give her a ticket. What was a girl at this time of the day doing in his bus? Didn't she have to go to school? The bus driver told her to go to the railway station and take the train to Namur. The train would take her there in less than

twenty minutes. He and his bus would make a tour through all the villages before reaching Namur. It would take her close to two hours to reach the city!

Véronique ran out of the bus. She was in a panic. She had travelled in busses before, never in a train. She ran all the way to the train station in Bas-Robois. She looked at what other people did, went up to the counter and with a stammering voice asked for a ticket to Namur. The man behind the counter gave her a small paper, and told her to go to quay two. She sought the quay, going down stairs underground, and waited for ten minutes on the next train. She arrived at the station of Namur less than half an hour later. She was lucky. She had to ask nobody in which station the train stopped, for she saw the signs indicating Namur.

It was a nice spring day. It didn't rain and a soft sun shone, providing some warmth in the streets. Véronique slowly walked into the main shopping street in front of the station. Everything here was new to her! She was free! She felt elated for finally being on her own, without the worries of her family. She vowed never to return to Robois and to the trailer park. She walked past the shops, took her time to watch what was on sale at each window. She walked among the crowd. She saw her own figure, her sad reflection, in the vast windows. Suddenly, her mood changed. She felt very gloomy. She was alone. Nobody in the world cared for her. She wanted to hide for a few days, and then gather courage to tell her story to the police, come what might. She did want to go to the police, but she would refuse to go back to her mother and to Alfred. She would cry and stamp her feet, claw at the policemen. She would scream she refused to be raped again. She would have to fake being utterly hysterical on being sent back to the trailer in Robois. She would scream she would kill Alfred. There was one thing she remained adamant about. She wanted to go back to school. She had to finish her studies, to have a diploma, and be able to get a decent job. She had only one year to finish her secondary school! She would work, save money and then enrol at the Provincial School for Cooking.

Where could she go to in the meantime? Véronique wandered to the Sambre River. Namur lay at the confluence of the Sambre and the Meuse Stream. Along the Sambre, Véronique looked up at the fortifications of the citadel of Namur, high up on the hills of the Meuse Valley. The Meuse and the Sambre had cut deep in the landscape, and below the high slopes, Namur had been founded. On the top of the hill, she knew, stood the hotel and restaurant of the famous Cooking School. She wanted to follow the courses there! She should have a closer look at what now constituted, high up, her dreams and aims.

The name of the hotel was the *Château de Namur*, very appropriately. It stood on the highest point of the hill. One had a magnificent view from close by on the valley of the Meuse and on the city of Namur. She could not see the hotel from where she stood, as it remained hidden by the woods on the citadel. She had been there once, on a tour organised by her school. She knew approximately how to get there. The hotel stood in heaven. How could she get there? She walked along the Sambre, then along the Meuse. What would she do with her time? She could ask in the cafés and restaurants for a job, if only for a few hours to help in the kitchens. Where would she sleep tonight? She had money, but she could not go to a hotel. She had her identity card, but she was still a minor. The hotel might call the police. Too soon. She wanted no police yet. She had to get over Alfred. She felt so humiliated.

All day, Véronique wandered through the streets of Namur. The only food she ate was a sandwich bought at a stall in the *Rue de Fer*. When evening fell, she went up the citadel on foot. She went as far as the *Esplanade*, almost to the top of the hill. This was an open space, where concerts and other spectacles took place in open air. An old, imposing building stood there. It was built as half a Roman amphitheatre, with stairs sloping upwards to a row of colonnades. The site looked abandoned. She went up the rows of stairs. She hid in a corner of the colonnades, which were covered by a roof of a few metres. She would be sheltered from rain. She hid in the farthest corner, spread her second parka under her, and laid down to sleep.

Véronique couldn't sleep well from the icy cold. She felt the humidity of the morning on her. She stood up early. She regretted she couldn't wash. She would have to find a warmer place to sleep in for the next night. She walked down the citadel, once more to roam in the centre of the town.

The city lay peacefully below her! She saw the Sambre River shimmering in the first sunrays. She walked over the small, old bridge at the building called the *Arsenal*, where the restaurant of the university students was housed. She looked with envy at the boys and girls around. They hurried to their classes. Why was she not so lucky as to attend classes? Why should she have the parents she had? God must have arranged her fate! But no, God didn't bother with her. She would not have to bear her family if he had. There was no God for her! She felt angry with her fate, and very bitter. She walked on, back to the main shopping street of the town. She walked into a few shops to get warm. Then, she was drawn back to the Sambre. She looked at the fine, long row of houses on the other side of the river. They held apartments and stores, but this side showed only the back façades of the houses. The shops had their fronts on the street in the inner town. She noticed several of the buildings had iron stairs along the river façade, fire escape stairs.

Véronique went to the quay and walked along the houses. She advanced on the pavements of a narrow street, used a long time ago to row boats on along the river. She noticed in particular one, very old house. A set of stairs ran all along the back façade, to high up. It was a kind of fire escape. Its iron stairs looked very rusted. The iron gate at ground level of the stairs was closed with a chain and a lock. Véronique thought she could smash the lock with a few well-placed hits of a stone. At the highest floor, there was a large window or door on a sort of balcony. The highest floor must have been used tens if not hundreds of years ago to haul up goods from the river boats, below. Véronique developed a splendid idea. If she could break the chains or the lock, she could get up the stairs to that high door or window, break it open too, and get into the house's attic. She could sleep there. The floor looked totally abandoned.

Véronique still didn't feel ready yet to go to the police office. She was not ready yet to confront her mother and Alfred. She would accuse Alfred of rape and wait for the outcome. Alfred would deny. A doctor would examine her. She didn't like the humiliation of someone else again probing into her. Not for now! Alfred would deny, of course. What if he accused her of being a slut, of having drawn him to her, of lying only to spite him? She didn't think her bruises might be some proof of him mistreating her.

Véronique again wandered on, through the streets of Namur. She rested on benches near the Sambre, on the benches in the railway station, and even on chairs in the waiting-room of the

town's *Hôtel-de-Ville*, the town hall. She simply took no ticket in the waiting-room, and sat. It was warm there. She went out by noon, and had a coffee in a tea-room. She received a tiny biscuit. Later, once more, she bought only one sandwich for lunch. In the afternoon, she bought a cinema ticket and stayed in the darkened room for two times the same movie. When she came out of the building, darkness had fallen over the town. She went back to the Sambre quays, to the iron stairs she had discovered.

Near the stairs, she found an iron bar. She hit the lock that closed the gate. She made a lot of noise in the night. After three hard strokes, not the lock but a rotten chain ring broke. It had been rusted through and through. Véronique went up the stairs. They didn't move. They were still sufficiently strong to support her weight. She thought the stairs had hardly ever been used. She arrived as high as she could get, at the panels that closed the wooden window. She hit with her iron bar against the wood, forced two panels open, slid inside, and looked down. She could hardly see anything, but she did notice the very dusty floor lurked a mere three feet lower. Wooden stairs even led from where she stood to inside the attic. She sighed from pleasure, for the attic felt warm. She went down cautiously, and carefully placed the broken planks behind her back in place. She found a corner, once more put her heavier parka under her, and slept.

Véronique woke up with the sun. Rays of light broke into the attic. She had passed the night agreeably. She had slept on a hard floor, but she didn't care. She was grateful. She had much less suffered from the cold in her attic than on the *Esplanade*. She was quite pleased to have found this hideout.

The attic was free of furniture. A few cartons, filled with old clothes, stood to one side. She formed a bed with the clothes. She placed the cartons around the clothes, so that somebody who came up here from through the other door, from inside the building, would not immediately notice somebody could have slept here. She had a home! So much dirt had gathered in the attic, she was almost certain nobody had come up here for ages! There was a shop at the ground floor, and people lived on the second floor, but only during the day. The higher floors did not seem to be used. Véronique could now hide her backpack in here, in one of the empty cartons, and walk more lightly into town. She would come back here only late in the evenings, and leave early. Nobody lower down would hear any noise she made. Véronique didn't want somebody to come up here for quite a time!

It was Saturday. She ran back into the streets of Namur. Saturday was Market Day! Very many sellers' stalls stood in the main streets of the old town. At one of the stalls in town, she bought an old lock, walked back to the iron stairs, and closed the iron gate with her own lock. She was proud of herself! From now on, she could get into her attic room with a real key! She would also know when somebody had tried to get in from below. She felt so proud with her finding a place to sleep, she had a fine meal in a fast food restaurant near the railway station.

In the following days, Véronique Dupas roamed the streets of Namur in a fixed pattern. In the morning, she walked in the main streets of the centre. She looked at the shops and took all her time. In the afternoon, she lingered on the benches along the Sambre, sat in the sun, and looked at the traffic. She saw beggars in the streets. Not many, just a few men sat and begged. Sometimes, Rumanian gypsy women would arrive and occupy other places in the streets. One

of the beggars had only one leg. He showed his wooden prosthesis to the people who passed by. Véronique too began to beg. She sat in a side street, where also many people passed, a pedestrian street only, in which stood many restaurants and shops. She sat with an outstretched hand and tried to look as miserably as she could. She actually received a few coins. Nobody bothered about her. Once, policemen walked by her before she had spotted them. They looked at her, but went by. In the evening, she counted enough coins to buy a sandwich. She could survive on the money she begged! She saved her precious coins.

Véronique bought a small light bulb and plugged it in a lamp that hung from the ceiling in her attic. The light worked! She now filled all the holes near the window by which she entered, and she could read during her evenings. She gathered old newspapers, old magazines discarded in the railway station, and grabbed a few books from a bookseller at the Saturday Market. She settled in her attic.

After two weeks of this life at leisure, she applied the same routine every day. She didn't think anymore of school, and also not of going to the police. She lived and survived. Still, this life could not continue. She grew very gloomy. She hadn't washed for two weeks. She had spotted two bars, where she could have a coffee, or even not, and go to the toilets. A few fast-food restaurants could also be used to that purpose. She could splash her face with a little water, there, though always other people were present. Her face would be clean. That was all. She became sadder and sadder with the day, however, for she was a clever girl and understood there was no future in the way she was living. She might stay a few months in the attic, but sooner or later she would be expelled.

She still held a good reserve of money, but her money slowly, steadily, diminished. When the money was gone, she would grow hungry. Winter in the attic might be very hard. She did not go to school anymore. She had no future. She did want to seek help somewhere, but she still refrained from going to the police or to the Public Assistance building. She feared much being sent back to her mother and to Alfred. She surmised she could live on like this through the summer, but probably not through the next winter. She decided she would go to the police at the end of spring. Maybe she could still finish her year of school that way. With some luck, she might find her way into an institution for difficult young girls, and be sent back to school. That, most of all, she now craved for.

And then, she met Phil.

Véronique had tried drugs before. At school, she didn't have the money to buy weed, cannabis, but girls she knew, who never seemed to lack money, had let her try it. She had twice been able to smoke pot after school, hiding with two other girls in a quiet spot of the Robois Park. Now, in Namur, and several times, she had noticed the strange dealings of a particular young man. He often lingered in a street near a school for boys. He only just hung out there. He was a tall, skinny young man of maybe a few years older than she. He might have been nineteen to twenty-one. He too wore dirty clothes and jeans a little torn at one side. One day, while she observed him from a distance, she clearly saw him sell weed to schoolboys. She also saw how small plastic bags with a few white pills were being handed over. Older men too bought drugs from the young man. After a few days of merely observing him, she went up to the young man and whispered she wanted a little weed for a smoke. He

looked her over, for she was new to him. He asked for five Euro. Five Euro was a lot of money for Véronique. Still, she bought a little plastic bag. She asked for tobacco and cigarette paper. The young man hesitated, but gave her some for an additional Euro. He even rolled her a cigarette, in which she mixed some of the cannabis. She left. She smoked in her attic. She felt much better after a while. All the inner voices in her mind stopped. She felt comfortable, free of worries. Life was good again. She felt euphoric, and was content with how she lived. She slept well that night.

Two days later, she went back up to the young man. He nodded to her and smiled. She bought some more cannabis. He asked for her name. She didn't answer. He said he was Phil. He told her he had stronger stuff if she needed some. She answered of no, not now.

Véronique tracked Phil. She followed him from the far. Phil was not a suspicious young man. He hardly ever looked over his shoulder to behind him. Following him was easy. When the schools of Namur had spilled out their students in the late afternoon, Phil went up to the university buildings and tried to sell some more of his stuff there. Véronique saw he didn't sell much, maybe only two or three bags per evening. He received more money, though, sometimes as much as fifty Euro at each transaction.

Véronique considered Phil was making from one hundred to two hundred Euro per day. On that kind of money, she could be a princess! She followed Phil until late in the evening. He went over the Bridge of Jambes and entered that suburb of Namur. Véronique had to walk for about an hour, way behind Phil, until she saw him entering a large apartment building on a road to another suburb of Namur, to Wépion. The building looked modern. Not only poor people lived here! Phil did not come out soon, so she surmised she had found Phil's home. He lived in one of those apartments! She followed him thus for three days, and he walked in the same pattern in the evening, always to the apartment block. He never did come out the same evening.

Véronique bought more drugs from Phil, each time in the centre of the town. He had to ask her name three times, before she answered 'Véro'. He gave her some more weed than she wanted to buy, and he pushed two pills in her hand.

'Try this,' he said. 'Try them. You'll like it. It's called ecstasy. Have you heard of ecstasy?' She nodded. Yes, she had heard of the drug. She knew where they were sold in Robois, mostly in the two dancing clubs of the town. Véronique had never tasted it. She accepted the pills. Why not? Phil gave her two more.

She never used drugs in the streets of Namur. She always consumed her weed in her attic. She kept to that habit. No policeman would find her high in the town centre! At the beginning of the night, the first ecstasy pill drew her to heights of emptiness and then of euphoria she had never experienced before. She fell into blissful dreams. She felt light, happy, young, strong. She had never felt so good before.

The next morning, she slept quite late. She woke up only after noon. She was quite willing to repeat the experience. She took a second pill, and she stayed in her attic the entire day, in blissful unawareness of the real world beckoning outside. What could that world offer her? Nothing!

Véronique returned several times in the next two weeks to her dealer, to Phil. She bought ecstasy from him, no more cannabis. With ecstasy, she could take just one pill every evening

and feel fine till in the next afternoon. Then, she would take another pill in the late afternoon and feel fine till evening, till when she dozed in. She had no craving for food those days. She grew skinnier. Her money went to drugs, now.

Véronique still begged a little in the streets, but less than before. She loved her evening, when a little high still, she read her books, newspapers and discarded magazines. Her money reserve lowered, although she regularly received some Euros from her begging in the streets. She sought out the supermarkets of the suburbs, now. People used carts to shop there, and to have a cart they had to put a Euro in them. She craved for those single Euros, and many women indeed took pity on her and gave her the Euro they had used to take a cart. Her sitting at the gates of the supermarkets meant more risks, though. Often, she was chased away by the owners of the supermarkets. Twice, policemen came for her, but she could sprint away before they could catch her. The policemen seemed to have spotted her all through town, so that the policemen actually became one of her greatest worries. She only nearly escaped out of their hands, also in Namur. She found the fact ludicrous. Once, she had wanted to go and speak to the police, now she fled them. One policeman in particular, a young man too, once chased her through the streets before she could shake him off.

She learned to sit and beg at places from where she could watch the people coming her way. She once spotted Alfred in Namur's main street. Véronique had a sudden urge to run up to him with a knife and kill him. Instead, she flew. Had her mother gone to the police and declared her missing? She had seen no posters with her name and face. She thought her mother and Alfred might be glad to be rid of her. She avoided policemen several times. She considered changing towns, but she dreaded having to find another hideout and another dealer of drugs. Véronique Dupas had become a junkie, but she lived on.

2.2. Joseph Bikri

Joseph Bikri, the *Commissaire de Police*, or Superintendent, of the town of Robois and environs, sat in an Italian restaurant of Namur, having lunch with his boss, Paolo Timario. Timario was the head of the police zone of larger Namur, which included Robois. Timario was the *Chef de Corps* and *Commissaire Divisionnaire* of the zone of Namur. Joseph seldom needed Paolo for matters of management of the modest police force in the district he was responsible for, the town of Robois. He usually contacted Timario for issues with budgets and accounts, rarely for help. Joseph knew the ways to access the special forces Timario headed. He could phone them on his own, without first asking for Timario's permission. Nevertheless, Joseph appreciated the advice of Paolo, respected him much for his knowledge and wisdom, and he liked the other man for his humanity. Timario looked tough, but he was gifted with a heart of gold. The two men felt sympathy for each other. Timario did not intervene in what Joseph did best, keeping the peace in Robois. Some coordination of their actions was sometimes necessary. Timario liked knowing how things were in Robois, and Joseph liked to hear the larger picture of the police issues in the zone. So, they met once a month. The meetings developed into the coming together of two friends. Paolo Timario usually first exposed a fine, synthetic view of the evolution of crime in the province of Namur and in Belgium, overviews Joseph Bikri liked to hear. Joseph was delighted to share the information on Robois with his boss, though Robois generally remained very quiet. Some would have said boringly quiet.

Joseph Bikri regarded Paolo Timario as his mentor in the police forces. Timario's family was of Italian origins, though Paolo was born in Belgium. He considered himself of the second generation of Italian immigrants. He still spoke Italian with his over ninety years old mother. Joseph Bikri too was born in Belgium, but he from Moroccan immigrants. He too was second generation of immigrants. He spoke Moroccan with his parents, who were both still alive and living in Brussels. Joseph Bikri had wanted to escape from turbulent Brussels, and had found a job at Robois. Maybe Timario and Bikri felt sympathy for each other, because they both felt Belgian, and yet also something else. They nurtured double roots. Their roots were still lively on them, though others made them remember where they came from more easily than they themselves. Timario spent his yearly vacation in Italy, but Joseph Bikri had seldom flown to North Africa since his early youth. Belgium was his land, not Morocco.

At first, Timario and Bikri had met formally in Timario's office of Namur. They were both dressed in uniform, then. Quite rapidly, they had decided to leave their uniform on the rack those Thursdays, and to meet over lunch in one of the many Italian restaurants of Namur. More often than not they came to the Italian restaurant they were also seated in presently. The owner, the chef, the waiters and the wife of the owner knew them well, and served them the best. You didn't eat what you wanted, here. You ate what the owner's wife told was the freshest and finest. Her advice had become adamant.

The two police officers sat in a quiet place, hidden from the street view by a curtained screen. Their usual bottle of excellent Piemontese Barbera wine waited for them, opened on the table, and at room temperature. Timario and Bikri were always greeted with warm welcomes. They had looked at the menu, but followed the advice of the owner's wife. They asked to be served

slowly, for they wanted to talk. They had no inkling to leave the restaurant too soon and continue their conversation in Timario's police office. They were not in uniform. Here, they could relax, and yet justify their hours lost on a long meal.

Joseph Bikri asked Timario what was up for police matters in Namur. Timario answered with pleasure crime was generally low and diminishing. Timario's greatest worries were with the growing number of burglaries committed by East-European gangs.

'Once our politicians opened up the borders of the Schengen Zone,' Timario grumbled, 'all the thieves of the East-European countries felt they could rob our wealthy western countries clean at wish. They were right too. We had not expected so much theft. Poverty leads to crime. I understand the pickings from a burglary in Belgium are many times higher than those from burglaries in poorer Rumanian or Bulgarian farms. Also, the Serbians and the Albanians are over here in numbers. The Serbians form the toughest gangs, the Albanians are in prostitution and banditism. The Rumanians sent their gypsies here, and those are specialised in burglaries. Some Bulgarians work at cybercrime. We recently caught a gang that stole catalyser pots on Diesel cars. When we found the hideout of the gang, we discovered a real Ali Baba's cave. Our biggest surprise was to find a large number of the round, very heavy iron covers placed in the streets over the sewer entries and the water feeds. Metals are quite expensive these days, so these guys stole even the iron covers to our sewer system! You laugh, and I too find this rather ridiculous, but when you drive innocently along one of our national roads and suddenly you ride with your car over and in an open sewer hole, you do not only come abruptly to a stop, but you may turn over, and you can see your hind tyres rolling faster than your car in front of you!'

Bikri laughed even more, though the accidents were no laughing matter, and he had heard of them.

'We have to watch out for everything that is made of iron, copper and bronze,' Timario continued. 'These groups even steal bronze plaques and handles in our cemeteries. This month alone, we had over a hundred tombs and funeral cellars robbed and devastated, every metal scrap stolen. They steal the copper cables of our railway system, the telecommunication cables, and so on. The more we catch of those gangs, the more they send other hoodlums over to here. Well, they give us work. We play cat and mice with them, so that we can complain we have never enough men on our teams. Which is of course the plain and simple truth. Still, if this would be the only crime in town, we would be quite happy!'

'They seem not yet to have discovered Robois,' Bikri stated. 'I guess they will come over when the heat is felt high in Namur.'

'Oh, we do give them the heat, all right,' Timario responded. 'Not that it matters much. Our prisons are filled with those guys. The magistrates release them quickly. Usually, the ones we have names and faces of, disappear to another country. New ones are sent here, though. Theft has become an organised institution! We know by now where they shack up. They have their specific hideouts. We know which quarters they prefer, who their informants are. We have the addresses. They like the quieter but poor suburbs of Namur. They dwell less in the town centre. Too expensive, even for them.'

'So, it is business as usual,' Bikri concluded.

'No, it isn't,' Timario shook his head, with a sudden dark frown of worry, surprising Joseph Bikri. 'we have a new problem.'

Paolo Timario drank his wine, paused, and held the suspense for Bikri to start on a new chapter.

‘The new problem is drugs,’ Timario announced.

‘Drugs have always been a problem,’ Bikri grunted.

‘They are. But the problem has become much worse, lately,’ Timario stated, lowering his head deeper over his plate of *Ossobuco*. Timario was very serious now, Bikri could tell. Timario stopped eating from his soft meat for a while. He only pitched his fork in his long, white, steaming pasta.

‘We have always had a drug problem in Namur,’ Timario told. ‘We have many secondary schools to where youngsters from the envioning villages come, and we have a university, growing each year with students. Mind you, we always caught a few dealers and threw them in prison.

So far, drug selling stayed within reasonable limits. We caught the dealers and then it took a while until new dealers appeared. You will always find the occasional youngster with issues at home, who wants to taste from the low-hanging forbidden drug fruit to forget his troubles for a while. The problem has worsened.

On the one hand, the Dutch sources of cheap and abundant cannabis weeds are drying out. Even the Dutch cities near us have come to understand they had to act against drugs and against the criminal gangs who bring them over the borders. The Netherlands, and especially the region of Maastricht, has become less and less a provider of weed. A few Dutch hoodlums have come over in person to Wallony to teach our own gangs to grow the plants. I don’t have to tell you how many small farms, many of them isolated in the vast meadows of our countryside, have been built in the plains and plateaus around Namur.

The last two months, we caught three massive plantations of cannabis in farm halls and in large country houses around Namur. At each place, we found hundreds of cannabis plants. The other *commissaires* of the zones have found similar farms. The men who worked on them didn’t even speak French! They were illegal immigrants from the Maghreb of northern Africa, or East-Europeans. Not all of them, of course; we caught Belgians at it too. The people working in the farms do not know for whom they work.

The problem is not just a plague near Namur. It must be spreading out. You may have to start looking seriously for cannabis plantations in your zone, too. The trick that works well, is to ask the electricity supplier for unusual peaks in energy consumption. You need powerful lamps to grow cannabis inside barns and so on.

We found a guy at the electricity company, who is a real bulldog at pinpointing to such sites. He is an IT freak, an information technology guy. He has written programs to come up with lists of clients who suddenly use much more electricity than normal. The procedure may not be entirely legal, the leftist anarchist boys may take us to court over the process for reasons of privacy. So, after a while, this guy may have to stop delivering us his lists, but the lists of addresses have been a great help already. We don’t always find a drug plantation following on that list, but more often than not we do. Very few people know of the IT guy’s lists, in Namur only me and an assistant of mine.’

Timario handed a paper over to Joseph Bikri. Bikri looked at it. Only a few addresses stood on the list.

‘I have prepared a list for Robois,’ Timario said. ‘You should look into that list and start observing the places. The list is not very long for Robois. In other zones, we have typically no more than five addresses or so. You may expect two or three hits per list. Simply observe the farms or houses, watch out for intense light in the evening and the night, and dash in! Until today, we didn’t have much trouble at those sites. We found mostly illegal workers, never the bosses. But if you might fall on the bosses in one of those farms, there may be some shooting! So, take care! Go in with real guns, with riot guns, not only with your popguns!’ ‘All right, thank you,’ Joseph Bikri nodded, and he placed the piece of paper Timario handed over to him in his inner pocket.

‘There is more and worse,’ Timario added. ‘We have to regret the deaths of two young people from drug overdoses in two months. I’m not sure whether I should talk of overdoses, for we found no large quantities of drugs around them. We found some pills, pills in all sorts of colours. No cocaine or heroin! At first, we thought they died from too high doses of ecstasy. We had the pills analysed, and had a big, strange surprise. The pills contained some ecstasy, indeed, but also a mixture of cocaine and heroin, and more substances. Our analysts also told us they could not determine exactly what kind of substances were in the pills added to these drugs. The pills are a cocktail of substances. They are amphetamines, but which ones, so far nobody has been able to tell us. They are of a new kind. Establishing the chemical structure of an unknown drug seems to take a lot of time. It looks like very probable some amphetamine toxin was worked into the pills. That toxin may have caused the deaths. No drug dealer mixes toxins in drugs on purpose, of course, for they lose customers that way, so the toxins may be unknown by-products of the process of production of the pills. The deaths were caused by acute heart failure! When the ambulances arrived, the drug users were already dead. We found at least three different sorts of pills, red ones, blue ones, and green ones, mixed with the normally white ecstasy ones. Different substances were found in the three kinds of new pills. Our analysts are still trying to determine the structure of the substances found in the three kinds of pills. University labs are at them. We caught two dealers with white ecstasy pills. They had large quantities of the pills, on their body and in their apartments. We could not trace to where they got the pills from. They speak of other dealers. A pyramid of dealers seems to have been installed. We are following one of these dealers now, as we speak.’
Timario drank.

He whispered placing his head closer to the other side, ‘I am worried, Joseph. I have an excruciating dilemma with the guy we are tracking, a dilemma that keeps me awake at night. If I catch the guy now, I have sufficient evidence to throw him into prison for a few months, but I will most probably never know where he gets his pills from. If we follow him and observe him and his hideout, we may eventually trace his suppliers, but we run the risk of having the death of another boy or girl on our conscience. I can let my men track the dealer at every step he takes, but not longer than a few weeks. I have not enough men to have him followed day and night. And most probably, following him will not bring anything.’

Paolo Timario drew back from Joseph. He stopped eating.

He continued, ‘I hate these drug dealers, Joseph. They are true criminals. Far worse than the metal snatchers from Rumania. They cause the death of promising young people! They

destroy the mind of our young people. Only, we merely get them in prison after the death of a boy or a girl. If we catch them before, they do not even get into prison. The judges give them a reprimand, note their name, and send them back on the streets, because our prisons are full.’ Timario paused again, and then said, ‘anyway, I tell this to all of my *commissaires*: take care! The killer-drugs may arrive in their zone, so also in Robois. Especially watch out for the schools, Joseph. It is there the drug dealers seem to be working in the first place with the dangerous pills. In Namur, we have a university with older students, and with students having more money on them than sixteen-year old adolescents. They too are prime targets for dealers. The problem we face is bigger.’

‘Were the victims from overdoses or from the killer-drugs university students?’

‘No. They were much younger. Secondary school students. More gullible youngsters. A young boy of fifteen, a girl of sixteen. Real tragedies! I had to tell their parents we found them in abandoned buildings. Tragedies!’

‘Did you catch their dealers?’

‘We did catch one. Only, he had none of the killer-pills on him. He kept to his story he knew nothing of the coloured pills. Mind you, the chemists who mixed the substances may not have known themselves what exactly they were producing, and the killer substances might have been by-products of the production process. This dealer kept telling us he only sold ecstasy pills. We kept him in our office for two days, then we had to let him go. He will not sell pills anymore in Namur, because we are on him. But he may move to Liège or Brussels, or to anywhere, and continue his dirty business. You can’t imagine how much I would like to get my hands on the supplier. Nothing so far!’

‘I’ll take care, and observe more than ever,’ Joseph Bikri promised.

He was already thinking at what he should do, making of drugs one of his priorities, call a sense of urgency into his police force.

‘Why would there be more drugs now in Namur?’ Joseph asked, as much to himself as to Timario.

‘Oh, many reasons,’ Timario answered. ‘Many small reasons add up. More poverty, more misery. Internal family crisis, divorces, rich boys out for sensations. Our CPAS budgets, the budgets of our social institutions, rose spectacularly these last years. High unemployment of the young. More youngsters look for video games and drugs, for porn movies on the Internet, out for spectacular pleasures. The drugs are sold near the gates of our schools, in dancings, in bars, at certain places in the streets. We watch out, all right. The dealers are like water running through our fingers. It is not easy to catch all the dealers. They also learned how to spot us, and disappear in the crowd. Many dealers are young, too. We had some success talking to the beggars who sit in the streets, to the SDF men and women, the *Sans Domicile Fixe*, the men and women who live in the streets. They buy drugs sometimes, but the real SDF does not have enough money to buy hard drugs, not in large quantities anyway. They do not deal, for we know them too well. They sit day after day at the same places. They are good lookouts, though. Quite a few of the men vowed to help us, and that had offered us some good results. Can you imagine us, the city police, having to work together with beggars? Disgraceful!’

‘The beggars themselves have become something of an issue,’ Bikri mentioned. ‘They hang out in the streets and squares in numbers, lately. Our citizens don’t like them. They would want to see them off the streets, and placed in guarded institutions.’

‘We wanted the beggars and SDF picked out of the streets,’ Timario reminded Joseph Bikri. ‘We even got as far as having the aldermen and the *bourgemestre* of Namur forbid as of the first of July of 2014, to beg in the streets of the centre of Namur. The aldermen, the *échevins*, issued such a decree of the city, and for the duration of one year.

In August already, the Belgian League of Human Rights and an association called *Lutte Solidarité-Travail*, as well as an individual citizen, entered protests at the Council of State, intending to defend the right to human dignity of the beggars. The Council of State, as of 6 January of 2015, suspended the execution of the communal dispositions. The Council found the perimeter of the decree too large, the duration too long. They agreed the fundamental fact of the act of begging by a man or woman accompanied by a child or a potentially dangerous animal, in casu a dog, could be prohibited, but also nothing more. The Council added most importantly the right to lead a life conformant to human dignity held the right to have a means of existence. To which the act of begging might help, by default of a better, concrete and effective solution. Begging was not considered to be an act of public disorder, even if it caused some distress in the population. In other words, begging was perfectly allowed in the streets of our city! No, we cannot get rid of beggars in Namur!’

Joseph Bikri didn’t answer at first. Such things depressed him. He knew the issue in Belgian Law.

‘Poverty is on the rise in Wallony,’ Joseph Bikri said. ‘We have beggars too in Robois, a phenomenon that is also new. Five to ten years ago, we did not have one beggar in Robois. Now, a few sit constantly in our main shopping street. Our local CPAS institution of the town administration has the money to react to beggars, but they do not have the people to roam the streets, talk to the SDF and beggars, and persuade them to leave the streets and use the CPAS structure. Most of the beggars want to be left alone. As for the gypsy women or the look-alike who sit in the streets with babies in their arms, they have become a real industry! My policemen have seen the women being dropped out of large, black Mercedes cars with Brussels number plates. The number plates are false, and they are changed regularly.’

Paolo Timario had his emotions back in control. He changed subjects. They ordered coffee. Paolo told Joseph he would be asking for his pension within three years.

‘You are my best *commissaire* of the zone,’ Paolo Timario whispered. ‘I would like you to be the new head of the zone of Namur. You should start some lobbying. Make yourself be known to the right people in Namur, not only in Robois. Have talks with politicians, with the bosses of the police at higher levels. Meet the judges, the procurators. Meet them casually, talk to the influential judges at drinks, use the influence of the Trioteignes family, meet the businessmen. I’ll back you up, of course.’

‘I’m flattered, and I thank you for your concern and support,’ Bikri answered. ‘I’ll give some of the items you now bring up some thought. However, I’m a *commissaire* who emerged from the Maghreb immigration waves. I’d rather think an autochthone superintendent will be preferred, so I regard my chances as very slim for such a promotion. It is only human, I understand quite well. Moreover, I’m not sure at all I would want to leave Robois! My home is in Robois. My friends are in Robois. I get a lot of help from the community.’

‘Yes,’ Paolo Timario smiled. ‘You have built quite a nice solidarity of the people with the police of Robois around you. That is the right way! And that is why I would like to have you in Namur. Didn’t I hear rumours of both the Christian and the Muslim communities working together to fend off that last terror danger? And you know how to get help, indeed. I have also heard rumours of secret agents of Brussels, Turkey and Israel helping you! I must say, some of those rumours stunned me to stone. Secret agents? Helping you? I said we needed such a man in Namur! But of course, they were only rumours, weren’t they? None of it reached the courts.’

Joseph Bikri reddened, ‘merely rumours,’ he grumbled.

Paolo Timario grinned.

‘I would not prefer somebody else as my successor,’ he said very seriously. ‘I will write the most laudable reports on your duty of service. But you’ve got to help yourself a little too, Joseph!’

Joseph Bikri didn’t laugh anymore. He had one more worry to take home. They let the matter stand. He and Paolo paid. They went to their cars and said goodbye. Joseph Bikri rode home, back to Robois.

Joseph didn’t drive home immediately. He needed the words of more friends that day. He drove his car slowly to the Horse Bayard for a last coffee. Monsieur François, the owner, received him ebulliently. He served Bikri’s coffee himself, and drank one in front of the *commissaire*, shoving his beloved business temporarily aside. A little later, the older Karim Khedis entered, and Karim had a tea. Karim was the former gardener of the Horse Bayard, a Muslim, and one of the most respected men of Robois. The three friends talked. Joseph Bikri told them of his conversation with the *commissaire* of Namur, the part of their conversation on the drugs problem.

‘Drugs are a major threat,’ Karim Khedis exclaimed. ‘Not only here, but much more so in the Maghreb. I’ll spread the message. We’ll look out for drugs and dealers.’

‘So will I,’ Monsieur François promised. ‘I want a clean bar, a clean restaurant and a clean hotel. I too will spread the word in the Italian community. We, Italians, don’t like drugs. They come with corruption, with the mafia and with scum. Haven’t we had our ‘clean hands’ movement in Italy, our *Mani pulite*? We don’t want drugs in Robois! What a tragedy with youngsters falling victims to unscrupulous dealers! What a shame!’

Joseph Bikri smiled.

He said, ‘thank you. Please do so! I’ll also ask our Catholic priest to watch out.’

‘Talk to the leaders of the football clubs,’ Karim Khedis suggested. ‘They reach many youngsters. Add the school directors. We know a few teachers who will help and look out.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Bikri nodded.

They talked for an hour about happier subjects. Khedis and Monsieur François knew everybody who had married and enjoyed a birth in Robois.

When Joseph Bikri stepped out of Monsieur François’s bar, he considered it too late to still get to his office. He rode home.

Samia Bennani, Joseph Bikri’s wife, was already at home. Samia was a lawyer in Brussels. She was a very successful lawyer, and had recently brought a lot more money to her

household than the *commissaire*. She was thinking about accepting a post as a judge in the capital. Joseph Bikri told her too about Paolo Timario's bigger problem.

'You have to take this very serious, Joseph,' Samia said. 'Drugs are the worst modern plague. I can tell! I hear a lot about the ravages caused by drugs in the capital. By the way, have you heard anything about that girl who ran away from home?'

'Véronique Dupas is her name,' Joseph Bikri mentioned. 'We found a bus driver who remembered seeing her. She asked a ticket to Namur. He refused, and sent her to the railway station. Nobody remembers seeing her there, however. We warned the Namur police and provided them with a photograph of her. So far, we found nothing. The Namur police will look out for her, but I do not expect too much of them. The city is too large. Something is not clear in that case. Why has the girl run away from home? I talked to her teachers. The girl seems to have been a fine, intelligent student with an even mood. She got high scores in her last exams and tests. Her father died. Her mother married another man. This man is known as a moron, and he may even be a violent man. I wonder what happened in that household! Well, maybe she just sought some adventure. She may as yet turn up unexpectedly.'

'That also has become a serious issue, Joseph,' Samia mused. 'Our young people, especially the ones from the poorer families, have become less and less satisfied with the way they live. They have seen so many intrepid heroes in so many movies, doing extraordinary things, they must feel their lives at school are very dull. I really wouldn't know how to inspire these kids with the simple life. How can I show them life is beautiful? Who still finds beauty somewhere? I hear of teachers in Brussels and also in Namur having it more and more difficult to cope with such issues. The teachers complain about the circumstances in which they have to teach in classes of the difficult quarters. They get aggressive children in front of them, who refuse to listen, who do not accept the authority of teachers, and who constantly challenge all adults. The children don't obey their teachers anymore. Punishment doesn't help. Punishment only strengthens the children in their revolt. They seem to live out of reality. They only react to their own, fictitious reality. The police should not be surprised to hear these kids revolt against authority, also outside the schools. Then, they fall victims to all sorts of people who exploit their anger and distress. The gangs of thieves, dangerous bandits, of drug dealers, of burglars, and the radical terrorists, find their soldiers too easily among our youngsters. We have to watch out very carefully, for our children's sake! Somebody should learn how to reach them, and then tell on television and in the newspapers how we can do the same. Not every adult displays the charisma necessary nowadays to lead our children! Luckily, we still have a community here, in Robois, where we can inspire our young people with sound values, along which respect for their elders.'

'We have indeed,' Joseph Bikri answered, but he remained in a morose mood for the rest of the evening. He hated having to cope with such issues of society, and not knowing where to begin.

2.3. Bernard Gorelle

A long, gleaming black Mercedes Maybach car slid silently through the imposing gate of the Ghijsen farm on the territory of the village of Trioteignes. The farm stood square and isolated in the fields of the countryside. Vast lands lay around the farm, the grain stalks growing still green in the landscape. The car rode straight into the courtyard and stopped in front of the manor.

The Ghijsen farm was a typical construction of the Hesbaye, a vast region of the agriculturally most fertile Belgian countryside. It stood massive in buildings of manor and stables, totally enclosed by the long, high constructions of the barns, and by a very high wall. The farm looked as impressive as a large castle.

Only one man sat in the car. He drove the vehicle, a luxury car as none other existed in the small town of Robois and in the village of Trioteignes. His car had entered the yard almost without a sound. When the Mercedes came to a halt, a man in a white shirt and black, striped pants stepped cautiously out. He first looked around, taking in the buildings and the layout of the farm. He had expected a manure-heap in the middle of the yard, but there was none, here. He had expected old cobblestones on a very uneven ground, but the pavement was as smooth as a ballroom floor, laid with even, grey square paves. He had expected dirt of animals on his shoes, mud and the stink in his nostrils of dung and urine, but he noticed and smelled nothing other than the clean space and air of the countryside. All gates to the barns stood closed, he noticed. He looked around a second time, somewhat perplexed with the quietness of the premises. Did somebody live here? He took out his jacket from the back seat of his car, and put it on. He buttoned the jacket and drew it right and tight. A child would have noticed the expensive cut.

He was a broad-shouldered man. Ample brown hair stood in well-tended waves on his head. He was proud of his fine hair and flattened it with his hands at both temples. His face was burnt by the sun, as one would expect from a man living in the countryside. But someone looking more closely, could have readily remarked his tan was too even, too regular for a man used to walk the fields. The wrinkles around his eyes remained pale at places. He was a man who might have returned from a vacation in a southern land, from the mountains, or who frequented sun-lamp tanning parlours.

His face was square, hard, energetic, very masculine, with sharp traits. His eyes lurked small, half-closed in the bright sunrays, under bushy, dark brown eyebrows. The sharp nose descended straight, long and perfect of shape to his mouth of bulbous lips.

The man drew on his belt to get his pants higher up, and went in shining black shoes to the manor. The image of the perfect dandy in front of the splendid Maybach could have been used for a publicity photograph. He formed a fine figure, and he knew it. He went as a very self-conscious man, sure of himself and of his polished charm. He came to the front door of the living quarters of the farm. He looked for, and found a bell next to the door of the house. He did not doubt for one second the owner of the farm must be living in here. After ringing, he went back a few steps, down the three stairs in front of the door. He looked around once more, then, watching the windows of the house. He remarked the wood of the windows and of the door was new, recently placed and recently painted white. The sun warmed him in the back.

The door opened. A woman appeared. The man was surprised again. In the opening stood not a plump farmer's wife or a maid, but a very elegant, very beautiful, fine woman of about thirty years. She did not wear the dress of a working woman. She wore no boots, no smock. The heels of her black shoes were very high. She stood before him in a broken white silk blouse and a blue skirt, of which the man could instantly tell they had been knit to fit by a master-tailor. The woman had long, flowing, jet-black hair, fine though sharp, slightly exotic features, a somewhat darker skin and very red lips. She wore touches of makeup around her eyes and a shining lipstick emphasised her mouth. Her bosom filled the blouse and her well-formed legs, in the short skirt, were long and slim. She was a very attractive woman, the man concluded rapidly. How had such a woman arrived at this backward countryside? He smiled. He snorted. This was no maid, and could also not be a farmer's wife!

'Good afternoon,' the man cried loudly, 'I was looking for the proprietor of the farm. I was told an elderly lady called Monique Ghijsen was the proprietor. I would like to speak with her, please.'

The woman smiled, 'Monique Ghijsen is my mother-in-law. She doesn't live here anymore. My husband and I now run the farm. I'm sorry. Can I help you?'

'Maybe you could, then! I would like to talk about a piece of land Madame Ghijsen owns near the National Road, not far from here. The piece of land lying in front of Robchem.'

'You had better come inside,' the woman continued.

The man followed the beauty. She stopped in the corridor to close the front door after him. With a gesture of her hand, on which he remarked a Rolex Oyster watch, she invited him into the hall, through another, open door in the corridor. The man entered a living-room. There, he experienced his third surprise of the day.

The living-room could have been the hall of a house built yesterday! To start with, it was impressively large! All the walls gleamed white, smooth, also the ceiling. The floor was laid with a soft, beige stone, probably a French Burgundy sandstone, polished to show the small inclusions of what looked like orange veins and tiny sea-shells. The man once more drew his breath in, for everything in the room showed wealthy occupiers. The furniture was very modern, of the best quality, with luxurious, deep-grey leather sofa and seats. The colour in the room came from huge, very old, impeccably preserved and finely carved cupboards of the sort only found in castles. The man saw the coloured crystal vases glitter on the cupboards, blue-and-white Tournai porcelain dishes throne majestically on the traditional stand. Very colourful other dishes and vases he recognised as Longwy-ware, caught his amazed gaze. Long ago, his father had prided in one such vase. Here stood more modern Longwy vases, with the very colourful Zanella Venetian images. He had never seen such glorious colours. The crystal he saw was of the highest quality, of Val Saint-Lambert or Baccarat, or maybe the whiter ones of the older Vonèche factories. He recognised a fortune when he saw one!

The woman offered him a seat. She went to sit on the sofa in front of him. A low, lacquered black table stood between them.

She asked, 'may I know who you are, and why you are interested in our land?'

'Oh yes, I didn't introduce myself. My name is Bernard Gorelle. I am the General Manager of Robchem. May I know your name, please?'

‘My name is Deniz Sürkoglou.’

Gorelle understood the French ‘Denise’, a common first name. The name of Sürkoglou seemed unfamiliar to him. He supposed the woman was of African or Near-Eastern origin. Libya came first to his mind.

‘Mrs Sürkoglou,’ he continued, ‘like I said, I thought Mrs Ghijsen owned the piece of land I have been looking at lately, ten hectares of land, actually, in front of the buildings of my company Robchem, on the other side of the National Road. I am the owner, President and CEO of Robchem. We are a small yet thriving company of the biochemical and medical industry. I would like to acquire the land in front of my company to build me a villa, there. I live near Namur, you see, and I would like to live closer to my work. I wanted to build a villa, my new home, closer to my company. Here is my card.’

Gorelle placed a business card on the long table. He slid the card over the table to Deniz, the letters turned to her. She did not pick up the card, but looked at it and read what was printed. Gorelle went on, ‘that is the reason why I would have liked to talk to the real proprietor of the land. The land lies way back from this farm, is separated by trees from the neighbouring stretches, and I would not bother you in any way. Your price will be mine.’

‘My husband and I now own the farm and its land, Monsieur Gorelle,’ Deniz shook her head. ‘We have no intention at all of selling any land of ours, and neither would my mother-in-law. I’m sorry, I cannot help you.’

Bernard Gorelle held a pause, drew a very disappointed face, and studied Deniz again, probing to her eyes.

He seemed suddenly to have an idea.

‘I suppose your name indicates you are of African or Near-East origins, maybe Lebanese, Syrian or Turkish? You helped the lady of the house and married her son. I truly would like to talk with the proper owner of the land. Could you tell me where I can find her? I might yet be able to convince her of the benefits, with the generous price I could offer her.’

Deniz hesitated.

Finally, she sighed and said, ‘my mother-in-law is Monique Ghijsen, countess of Trioteignes by her marriage. My husband is her son, Diego de Trioteignes. You can find my mother-in-law at Castle Trioteignes. I am sure you know where the castle is. Please phone to announce yourself. The number is in the telephone book’s white pages. Once more, I assure you your visit will not be fruitful. We do not sell land. Not any land we own.’

Bernard Gorelle blemished. He had heard of the Trioteignes family. His partner had warned him never to mingle and certainly not to antagonise the count of Trioteignes. Gorelle understood he had reached a dead end. He hated not being able to obtain what he desired.

He looked again at the woman who sat in front of him. Her skirt was short indeed, her legs full and long and of the same tanned colour as her face. His eyes slid up to her chest, and he suddenly felt aroused. The woman in front of him looked a very sensual female. He was not astonished anymore she had seduced the Trioteignes son into marriage. Maybe she was someone like him, ambitious and unscrupulous. He generally got along well with such women. He had to find what she longed for, and then offer it to her.

Gorelle stood, tall and imposing in front of Deniz. He felt he should either abandon hope on the land he coveted, or try other ways.

He concluded, ‘then I won’t disturb you any longer, Mrs Sürkoglou!’

He began to make for the door of the living-room, but waited for her to show him out. Deniz also stood, a little angry to be addressed as Mrs Sürkoglou and not as Mrs de Trioteignes.

She said, 'I'll show you out.'

Gorelle let her pass by him, but when Deniz pushed forward, he moved just a little forward so that he slightly touched her body.

Deniz disliked the contact, drew a face, and thought, 'you sneaky bastard!'

Her lips tightened. She drew back as if bitten by a serpent. Gorelle might have interpreted her recoil as an assertion of some form of dominance he might exert over her. Could he think she was attracted to him? Deniz sped to the door of the living-room, then to the front door. She opened the door and remained standing behind the panel.

'Now, now, little lady,' Gorelle whispered, coming closer to her, trying to touch her with an outstretched arm, 'we might come to some understanding too, both of us. I could make this very much worth your personal while, you know!'

He might have expected a flirting, knowing smile, a word of encouragement. But Deniz opened the door wider and showed the courtyard with her arm. She even drew back from Gorelle.

Gorelle was disappointed once more. He had thought a flirting smile would have appeared in her face, a conspiracy blink of the eye, but Deniz showed him out.

'All right, then, have it your way,' Gorelle said.

Regrets appeared on his mouth and eyes. He turned to step down the stairs leading to the courtyard. Something strange happened then. When he placed his foot down on the blue stones of the upper of the three stairs, that foot never seemed to reach the stone. Gorelle slipped and inexorably fell forward and down. He realised he would go down on the pavement of the courtyard, legs wide apart. He managed to half turn, tried to grab the door styles, but he lost balance, stumbled, fell, and in doing so hit the stairs with his head. All went black in his eyes.

Gorelle woke on the pavement in the courtyard when very cold water poured in his face. He opened his eyes painfully, remembered, and saw the woman Deniz Sürkoglou standing next to him, a bucket in her hands.

'Now, now, dear Sir,' Sürkoglou began, grinning at him, 'you definitely are not used to farms, aren't you, Monsieur Gorelle? Blue stone is particularly slippery, you know! You slipped, missed a step and hit your head. You passed out for a few seconds! Will you be all right? I'm happy you came by from the water. Shall I call an ambulance?'

Gorelle shook his head. He crawled farther on the pavements with outstretched feet and hands. He felt dizzy. He hurt at this left temple. He touched there, and came back with a red finger to his eyes. Blood! How had he fallen down? He was also wet all over, water on his face, head, and upper body. His suit might have been ruined. His shirt and jacket were soaked. He should go home and change.

'Are you sure you will be able to drive?' Deniz asked, without any feeling of concern in her voice.

'I'll manage,' Gorelle grumbled.

He saw Deniz throwing the bucket to under the old, iron, manual pump fixed to the wall near the door to the manor. She must have thrown a full bucket at him, Gorelle surmised. She gave him no last look, and went to the house, slammed the door close on him. She had offered no apology.

Gorelle strumpled, unsure on his legs, to his big Mercedes. Rivulets of blood reddened his shirt. He still felt dizzy. He got in his car, ignited the engine, and pushed in gear. He turned the car. He pushed hard on the acceleration pedal, and the Mercedes jumped forward, out to the gate of the farm. Outside, the Mercedes turned right for the National Road, but part of the chassis streaked against the large stone side of the gate. The hard stone drew long, ugly lines and dents in the black chassis, from front to end.

Deniz Sürkoglou saw the scene from out of the window of her living-room. She smiled, as she noticed the damage to the proud car.

Bernard Gorelle did not even felt what he did to his car. He sped off in a cloud of dust.

Deniz Sürkoglou laughed harder.

2.4. Decline

Véronique Dupas had run out of money rather quickly. And with the money, she had run out of everything else. Especially out of any hope for whatever might be a happy life. She had been a girl with a precise plan when she arrived at Namur. She had known exactly what to do and when. With time, and with the drugs, though she didn't admit this to her mind, and with the dreariness of wandering about the same streets every day, the same shops, the same places in search of food, she had come to lose all notion of past and future. She moved in the now. She did not think in the afternoon about what she would do in the evening. Evening and events happened. She followed a fixed pattern, concentrated on survival, day in and day out. Her money had begun to run out quickly. She tried not to worry.

The reason for her dullness of the senses, she vaguely realised but pushed to the darkest domains of her brain, had been the mounting usage of all sorts of drugs. She had smoked weed to feel at ease, to seek peace and quiet, to stiffen and blow away the many protesting voices in her head. It had been so nice to simply lie down and think of nothing! She had sought beer and later strong, grains brandy of all colours, green, red, blue, yellow, to make her cheerfully and forget all her sorrows. Namur was known for its *péket* strong brandy. Véro could buy large bottles of it at affordable prices. Not anymore. Even that kind of money had gone from her.

She could forget she once had lived in a real house, in a real family. She could turn aside the haze of her most painful thoughts. The boys and girls who went to school in the city looked happy. She envied them. This was the kind of life she too might have enjoyed with other parents. She saw young girls and boys walk and shop with their mother in the streets of the centre of Namur. She saw girls of her own age walk hand in hand with handsome boys. The girls walked with their well-dressed boyfriends along the river quays. They kissed and embraced occasionally. She had nobody! Why was that? When had she last heard a tender word? When had she last felt a tender hand resting on her? Why could a youngster like she, have such a hard life and others be so lucky? What had she done to have received, or rather be inflicted upon, with such a hard fate? Was there then no justice in the world? When her mood degraded and she felt on the brink of terrible depression, she longed for harder drugs, for cocaine and for her dealer Phil's stranger meth pills. Only the pills could chase the loneliness and the bitterness of the injustice done to her. With the pills, she could feel confident again, strong, sharp and fresh.

Fresh, Véronique did not feel herself to be anymore. She hadn't washed for ages. She could not tell for how long she had not washed. She had lost the count of the days. She could not tell which day it was, though one could easily recognise Saturdays by the markets and Sundays by the quietness in Namur.

She still sneaked into the fast-food restaurants to go to the toilets. She avoided the toilets in the railway station, for one had to pay twenty cents there to use the restrooms. She slipped into the open restaurants to go to the toilets, but she had increasingly to watch out for the owners and the waiters or waitresses. She found out the hard way when the toilets were being cleaned and when she had better not enter. She now only walked into the larger, cheaper

restaurants when they were full of people, so that the attendants were very busy serving at the tables or taking away plates and dishes. They knew her by now, of course, and chased her off whenever they spotted her. On some days, she could not even splash some water on her face. Véronique avoided looking at herself in the mirrors. She had no comb and had not washed her hair since she had fled from Robois. Her hair was slick, greasy and entangled. On rainy days, her hair stuck in tails out of her head.

Véronique continued to beg in different streets. Some of the male beggars noticed her and chased her away from their domain. One man, who had only one leg and a wooden prosthesis on the other, chased her out of Namur's main shopping area. He had grabbed her, but she could tear away out of his hands. She cried she had as much right to sit on the hard stairs with her hand out as anybody else, but he had hit her hard on the head, with his cane, shouting abuse. Whenever he saw her, he chased her.

Véronique then roamed the other streets where still many people passed. She sat at the gates of the university buildings when the students came out. Few students noticed her, and when they did, most of them ignored her outstretched hand. They looked at her in disgust. Nevertheless, the university buildings were her last resort. She always received a few coins, there. She felt very depressed each time she went to beg, meekly asking for ten cents from boys and girls of her own age. She realised she might have been one of them, followed the same courses, worn the same books and folders with notes as these lucky adolescents did. Who was to blame for the state she was in? Fate? God? Her parents? Her mother, who had become the slave of Alfred? Alfred? Herself? What had she done to be so punished in life? Véronique needed to dream, then. She needed to dissolve her darkest thoughts in colourful landscapes of red pastures, brown skies and blue trees. These, and the happiness that accompanied them, were provided by the ecstasy pills. She knew she would be a little bit more depressed the next day, but as long as she had money, the dreams could come, and the pleasant happiness they delivered without fail. With the meth pills, she felt other and more pleasant emotions in her mind. She could dream she was a queen, a heroin, a master of the world. These were the agreeable emotions of power she obtained from some of Phil's meth pills, the moments she relished and sought eagerly.

Véronique knew Phil well by now. He advised her on which pills to buy.

In those last days, before her money dried out, Véro spent more than hundred Euros a day on drugs. Her money had not lasted long, merely a few days more than a week.

Disaster truly struck Véro when her hideout had been discovered. It happened in two events.

First, she had stepped one evening up to the iron gate leading to the rusty stairs of her attic, when she was attacked violently. It was a rainy afternoon and a dark evening. Two men grabbed her from behind, even before she could open the iron gate downstairs with her key, and escape higher up. Maybe that had been her ultimate luck, for the men who pinned her to the brick wall near the stairs never found the small key. She had hidden it in the loose seam of her pullover, under her parka. Two men grabbed her violently. One man held her mouth closed with a dirty hand, so that she could not scream. She screamed inside her head. The men who assaulted her were still young men, maybe members of one of the two or three gangs of young brawlers and hoodlums who hung out around the railway station. Véronique

had seen these young men at work, bothering sellers of journals in the station. She had avoided the station ever since.

The young men were after her body, she soon realised. They wrung at her breasts with their hands. They pinched her nipples to hard pain. They pushed her along the wall, bruising her face, down the stairs leading to a cellar. The door to the cellar was closed, but they pushed her to the lowest place, where they were hidden from view. Only people walking up to the stairs on the quay, would see and hear something violent was happening down under. The men threw off her jeans very roughly, tore away her underpants, moved their hand over her buttocks and to between her legs, and pried her legs open. Then, they raped her, each in turn. They raped her methodically, calmly but roughly, quickly, one after the other, always holding a hand over her mouth. They stole the coins in the pocket of her jeans, and made off only after their horrible satisfaction. They didn't beat her.

Véronique remained lying at the end of the stairs for a few moments, until all noise of footsteps had stopped. Then she stood, drew up her jeans, and staggered up the stairs. When she held her hands between her painful legs, she felt and smelled blood. The men had torn her. She opened the gate to the iron stairs, mounted and fell in her attic. She used some of the rags to stem the blood. She dropped on her improvised bed, took a pill with a little water from a bottle, and slept.

After that horrible evening, Véro dared only come near the iron stairs very late at night. And even then, she studied as well as she could the environs of the quay from the other side of the Sambre River. Once, two days later, hiding behind a tree on the other side, she spotted the same men, accompanied by two more youngsters her age, walk and hide near her stairs. She spied on them. She waited in hiding until they lost patience and sauntered on, visibly frustrated. She followed them until they had gone far from where she slept. They entered a bar. She waited still, and only then returned to her hideout.

The spying before entering became a routine for Véronique. It never occurred to the young men they could have smashed the iron chains of the gate the same way as she had done, to wait for her upstairs! They could have had much more fun upstairs, in the attic. They were but a stupid bunch!

The second event proved far worse for Véronique. The people of the newly installed bar and restaurant downstairs, found out somebody had been living in their attic. One evening, Véronique found a new lock on the gate to the stairs, not her lock. She knew the rusted chain at a certain place was the weak link, so she once more smashed one of the rings with a stone. This took her over half an hour of work in agonising fear of being heard by somebody in the street.

She ran up the stairs, to find a new, sturdy wooden door had been placed in the window that allowed her access to the hiding place. However strongly she pushed and kicked with her feet, this door did not give way. It had been fastened tight from the inside, and the new door was made of one, solid plank of thick plywood. She couldn't enter the attic anymore! She went back down, found a piece of iron and tried with that to break open the door with it, but she did not succeed. She would have to go down the stairs and seek a place to sleep in the darkness of the night. She had kept her backpack with her spare underwear upstairs, a few of

the last banknotes hidden in one of the cardboard boxes under rags, and her identity card. All that was lost! From Véronique Dupas, she had become an anonymous nobody!

Véronique ran away into the night, in despair, in tears. She ran up the citadel of Namur, shouting out her misery and her desperate anger over the rooftops and over the valley of the rivers. The lights of the city, deep under her, invited her to throw herself down from a cliff. She was not ready yet to die, however, so she lay down among the trees and slept. Once more, she suffered from the cold. She crept together, her legs against her body, as if she still remained in the womb of her mother.

The next days were hell worse. Véronique roamed the streets of Namur in utter despair. She begged for food and for money to buy the drugs that allowed her to live and not become an altogether mad woman. She got very few coins that day. At the end of the afternoon, she sought out the places where the dustbins stood at the backs of the restaurants. She found a few of these accessible from the street. She drew some of the rubbish out, until she found food, pressed together to a mash. She avoided mildewed rests, and the rests visited by rats, but she swallowed the discarded potato fries with traces of all kinds of sauces worked into them, the last mussels, pieces of roasted beef and chops of lamb, rests of pizzas, half eaten carrots, broccoli thrown together with asparagus heads. She found a half-filled can of cold soup and a filet of white fish. She gorged on the rests.

She did this also the following days. After a few days, in the evening, fits of cramps shook her body. She felt hot, and she was violently sick. She suffered fits of cramps in her stomach, and had to hide between the trees of the citadel to empty her bowels repeatedly. In the middle of the night, her body shivering from the cold and possibly a fever, she felt her heart beat fast and violently. She wondered whether she had eaten something badly spoilt, or whether she was convulsing because she had not been able to buy drugs for three days. Her craving for drugs became obsessional, but she could not buy some. She was sparing all her coins to buy weed. She could not afford any of the harder drugs. She had to wait and endure the withdrawal pains of her addiction.

Véronique continued sleeping on the *Esplanade*. She hid behind the colonnaded building, between the trees and bushes. There, she was more protected from the cold winds of night, and from the rains. She had no tent. She slept on the cold stones. She had found two torn blankets in a bin. She slept in these, and hid them under a bush. Everything she owned, she now had with her while she wandered through the streets. She had only the clothes on her! She walked sullenly, barely aware of what happened around her. She avoided cars when she crossed the roads, in automatic acts of self-preservation. She avoided bumping into people on the pavements, but she looked up at nobody. She did not notice how people gaped at her, made remarks about how dirty she ran. She was still vaguely aware she might become seriously ill any moment, now, for she continued eating old, spoilt food. Maybe, unconsciously, she would have welcomed being violently sick, falling down on the pavements of a street and being rescued by the police. She did not seek such a thing, however. She struggled on. She didn't think of an external event to happen to her. Whether such an event would cause her death or salvation, she didn't care anymore. She had been reduced to a dying animal.

Véronique wandered like a ghost in the streets of Namur. She looked very pale. She walked slowly and automatically. She found herself in streets she had no idea how she had got so far. She needed money. She realised she would never have enough money from her begging to buy the drugs she craved now for with a fierce longing. Three times she went up to beggars, almost weeping, proposing to have sex with them for a little money. She offered her body for almost nothing to men so dirty she would have fled from them earlier on.

Two of the men agreed. They drew her with them in dark alleys and had rough, standing sex with her. They raped her hard, but she let them. With the coins they threw at her, she had almost enough for a dose of soft drugs.

She sauntered on, however, as it was very late in the evening that day. The last drunkards spilled out of the bars of the centre. She offered sex to these men too. Two more men agreed. She walked without her underpants off, showing the men what they desired. She opened her blouse and showed her naked breasts.

She was left standing on a corner of a dark street, crying her soul out, with a few meagre banknotes clutched in her hands. She hurt down under. The only thing that mattered to her was that she now had the money to buy one or two doses of weed. She felt saved but defiled. Desperation filled her mind. She could not go on living like this. She might as well jump in the Sambre or in the Meuse and drown herself. She slowly, very slowly, went up the high hill again, to the citadel, to sleep, hidden among the trees.

Salvation arrived with Phil, her drugs dealer. When Véronique finally surmised she had enough money to buy the minimum dose of weed, of cannabis, she sought for Phil, the only dealer she knew. She found him near the cathedral of Saint-Aubain, the enormous baroque main catholic church of Namur. She had sat in the church often, hidden in a corner or in a confessional chair. Phil was on his way to a nearby square, where several university halls spilled out their large numbers of students. Véronique clamped to Phil and stopped him. She asked for a small bag of cannabis. Phil turned, and looked at her. He had seen her evolve the last weeks from a rather lively, but suspicious, independent and introvert young woman to a human wreck. He hadn't seen her coming to him to buy drugs for many days. He had wondered what might have happened to her. She must have felt the terrible withdrawal torture of a woman derived of her daily dose of his meth drugs. He imagined what she might have endured. Or she could have found another dealer. Phil doubted this, for he knew he was the only dealer who still regularly worked the streets. The other dealers worked inside, in bars and halls, not in the streets. They stood at fixed places, dry and comfortable. They did not go to the clients anymore, the clients came to them. The girl he knew only as Véro, might have fallen ill, and then she would either be lying somewhere in agony in a hidden place, or she might have been brought to one or other desintoxication centre. He had better watch out, then, for she might have provided indications to the police of his whereabouts.

Phil was oddly delighted for seeing Véro again. He could put his worries about the police aside. He remarked how much she had changed for the worse in a few days. Her face was dirty, unwashed, her hands were dirty, her parka was torn. Stains of mud hung on her jeans. She stank. Phil was not anymore sure she had used new tampons for her regular bleedings. Véro stank ten feet around! Her eyes were sullen. She looked all the time to the pavement. She didn't seem to care anymore about what was happening around her. Phil had seen before

boys and girls in this state of being deprived of drugs. He recognised the state. He remained amazed at how she could still walk around without convulsions on her body. Her hands did not shake much, when she came to him clutching a handful of coins, begging for a dose of weed. But she stood clearly in front of him in an acute state of deprivation.

Phil drew Véronique into the alley behind the cathedral, onto a parking lot, behind a corner.

He asked, 'have you had drugs from somebody else lately?'

She shook her head of no.

'Weed will not help you. Did you have uncontrolled shivers, cramps, convulsions?'

Véronique stood, propped against a brick wall. She did not respond for a few moments, then she moved her head for yes.

Phil insisted, 'are you out of money? Since when didn't you get to pills?'

She shook her head the same way, more impatiently, faster. She pushed out her hand again. She wanted her weed.

'Do you live in a house? Do you have a place to sleep?'

She looked up to him for the first time, then, but he found no gleam in her eyes.

She spoke then, but only the word of 'no' came from her lips in a whisper.

'I can help you,' Phil offered, holding her pinned to the wall. 'I need somebody to help with the drugs, to tell me the effect of the pills. I can give you the drugs you need, for free. I will give you drugs, not too many, not so many as to harm you or dull you entirely. I can bring you to a shelter. We can go to an apartment of mine. It is warm and dry there. There is food. I can give you a little money. There will be a shower and toilet of your own. Would you like me to take you there?'

Véronique looked again up to him. She seemed to understand. He too wanted to abuse of her body in some way. She did not exactly comprehend what he wanted of her, but she suspected he wanted some girl for sex. He wanted to make his whore out of her, of course, like Alfred. She really didn't care anymore. She merely wanted the bare necessities of survival, the simple things he proposed her: decent food, drugs, and shelter.

Slowly, dark sadness in her eyes and voice, she nodded. Her head shook for yes, her mind shouted out for no.

It was late in the afternoon. For Phil, it was not the moment yet to return home. He had not earned much this day. He could not leave Véronique alone. She might wander off to where he might not find her anymore. He looked around, hesitating.

Finally, he decided, 'all right! Come with me. I'll take you there.'

Phil took Véronique by the arm and dragged her along. She followed him docilely, but tore her arm from his grip. She wanted no constraint. Phil was amazed again at her still strong will. She knew well the streets he took. When he passed the bridge over the River Meuse to Jambes, she suddenly grasped he was leading her to the building he lived in. She felt a sudden urge to run away, but instead of doing that, she stepped alongside him. She continued walking next to Phil.

Phil brought her indeed to the apartment building he lived in. He first brought her to the third floor, where he entered his apartment and took two keys from a rack. Then, he went with her two floors higher in the lift, to a door on which hung a metal badge with the number ten in numerals on it. He opened the door with one of the keys, and let her in.

Véronique stood in the hallway of a small studio. She saw a door at the end of the entry hall, which led to a small living-room and kitchen. She only got a glance, for Phil led her by the arm into the corridor on her right. He showed her another door. He opened, and invited her to a spacious bedroom.

‘Your heaven,’ Phil grinned, pointing with his hand. ‘The next room is the bathroom, and at the end is a toilet. Come on.’

They took a few steps, and Phil showed her yet another small room which held a separate shower, a washing-stand and another toilet. They went back to the living-room. Phil went up to the window.

‘You have a fine view over the River Meuse and over the city of Namur,’ he added. ‘You can cook here, but you have to promise me not to start doing so today or tomorrow. Your senses are too dulled by your lack of the right drugs. Don’t open the gas cooker too soon. I’ll show you how to do that. There is no food in the fridge yet. I’ll bring you some within the hour or so. I’m now going to give you the ecstasy pills you need to get better. Have a shower and wash. I’ll bring you some new clothes, this evening, nothing fancy, but new. Don’t put your old clothes back on. Put them in the dustbin, here. I’ll take the dustbin down, later. Today, you must eat some, but first you must sleep, with the pills. I’ll drop by again this evening. Then we’ll eat. I’ll spend a little time with you. Then you can sleep more. If you can’t sleep, watch the television set, but don’t put the sound too loud, too late in the night. The neighbours may complain. Tomorrow, I’ll only come around noon, to see how you’re doing. I’ll come with other pills. Get better. We may take a walk in the evening, depending on how you feel. I’ll show you the surroundings. We’ll discuss and start working. The key is on the door. You can lock yourself in, but you must always take the key out of the lock, so that I can come in. I have another key to the front door. I must be able to come in, but I’ll always ring three times first. Just three loud, short rings. You’ll know it’s me at the door. If something happens to you, I must be able to come in, so it is important you always take the key out of the lock. Do you understand that?’

Véronique shook her head in recognition.

‘Do you have tampons?’ Phil asked.

‘No, not anymore,’ she answered, slightly embarrassed.

‘I’ll bring you some, also within the hour,’ Phil continued. ‘I’ll bring you a toothbrush and paste, and more soap. Tell me anything else you need. Here are your first two pills. Take them, have a shower, and go to sleep. I’ll be back soon, but you don’t have to wake up. You’ll find the food in the fridge.’

Véronique said nothing further but ‘yes’.

She was very tired, now. She didn’t ask Phil why he was doing this, why he was helping her. She didn’t ask whose apartment she was in. She thought she understood what Phil wanted of her. He needed sex and probably wanted a cunt at hand at all times. She could give him that. He needed somebody to tell him what the effect of his drugs were. Well, she could do both. What did she care? She would have a bedroom, food to eat, drugs, a warm and dry bed, a roof above her head at night. What more could she wish?

‘All right,’ Phil concluded. ‘For the moment, don’t touch anything, especially not the cook plates in the kitchenette. I’ll show you later how they work. I’ll be back. Here is your key. Remember to take the key out of the lock!’

He placed a small key on the kitchen table.

Phil went to the apartment door, thinking it better to leave her for a while. He waved her goodbye, managed a smile, opened the door, went out and closed the door behind him.

Véronique heard him lock the door with his own key.

She fell down on the sofa in the living-room. She remained there, lying in a half-daze only for a few moments. She stood. She went to admire the view. The river and the city deployed so peacefully before her eyes! How happy and restful this all seemed. Why could she have no share of this?

Véronique walked in the corridor, throwing her dirty clothes off. She went to the small shower-room, and let the water stream very hot over her body. She felt fortunate.

Chapter 3. First investigation

3.1. Oneiro

Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten had arrived at Castle Trioteignes. Quarters had been prepared for Georg. Charles de Trioteignes and Monique Ghijsen welcomed the young man warmly. Georg had never before been at the Belgian castle, but he remembered Charles and Monique from their visits in Germany. He also knew in detail the family connections, dating from the last World War. Laura and Georg were related. They failed to put a name on their family links, and got no farther than calling themselves far, far cousins.

Monique, Laura's mother, sought for signs of a tighter involvement still between Georg and Laura. She did discover furtive looks of interest, definitely softer and maybe amorous in her daughter, but no particular attraction in Georg. Would her daughter forever remain unmarried, the new maiden patriarch of the Trioteignes? Monique had to admit defeat, finally, and give up hope on more grandchildren from that side. Monique only noticed friendly, warm remarks passing between the two young people. She wondered once more what exactly her daughter expected in a man and of life. She considered her daughter rather shallow at that moment.

Laura and Georg told Charles de Trioteignes about Georg's suspicions. The trail of some wrongdoing led to Namur. Charles took in the information, listened, shifted his napkin to and fro on the table, but he seemed merely to nod politely and not to be very interested. He gave no particular attention to the matter. He may have thought the two young people were chasing phantoms. Yet, he too encouraged them briefly to have a look at the address discovered by Georg.

And so Laura and Georg did.

Two days after their arrival, they rode together to Namur, still in Laura's car, Laura still at the steering wheel. Georg entered the address in the car's GPS system. They followed the indications given by the female voice of Laura's directions system. The GPS led them to a street in the very centre of Namur, a side street of the main shopping street of the city. The street was narrow, and Laura had to drive in circles because of the no entry signs in crowded Namur. She parked the car in an underground parking lot. Laura and Georg continued on foot.

Even before they arrived at the discovered address, Laura told Georg they would find nothing here. Not in the centre of the city, she presumed. There could not be a chemical factory in the narrow streets of the ancient vicus of the town.

She was right. There wasn't! They walked past an apartment building, organised in an old burgher's house of centuries old, with rectangular Renaissance windows and lintels in the form of crosses. The house had been transformed to several living quarters, in which students and families lived. Trucks laden with goods could not unload crates in this street! Laura's car would barely have passed stepwise! She and Georg went to near the front door of the house, which bore the number mentioned on their piece of paper. They looked around, saw no warehouse of sorts, and no manufacturing facility attached to the address or near. The given

address was a false one! They looked at the name list near the bells of the house. At least six families lived in the building. A little plaque, not larger than the other, marked just the one word of 'Oneiro'.

Laura rang the bell beside the name of Oneiro. They heard no sound, and nobody showed up, answered or opened the door. The Swiss ephedrine produced by Pharmtelia could not have been sent here. Georg cursed loudly. Yes, he asserted to Laura, this was the right address mentioned on the bill of lading. The address was false. The conductors of the trucks must have received another paper and another address. Georg and Laura stood in the street, looking up and sideways, unable to find a place the chemical products might have been delivered. They stood at a dead end!

Georg began to talk about returning to Basel and ask some tough questions at Pharmtelia. He wanted to force people in the company to hand him the real address the products had been sent to. But who had falsified the documents?

Laura had an idea. She proposed to go to the Town Hall nearby, and interrogate the administration about the owners of the house, and also about the name of Oneiro. If indeed Oneiro rented only a room in the building, some trace of who had rented in the house might be unearthed. Georg admired Laura's tenacity. He told her he didn't believe further clues could thus be found. Laura drew Georg on. She seemed more tenacious, now, than he.

The Namur Town Hall was a quite modern building in the middle of the main shopping street. Laura and Georg were directed to an office in which three people worked on the files of the addresses of the population of the town. Laura explained she and Georg had become interested in a beautiful old building at the address she provided. She told she and her partner, working in real estate, might want to acquire the house. She didn't know who to contact, and asked the name of the owner and where he lived.

The woman, the clerk who served Laura and Georg, began by telling she wanted them to ask for this information in writing. Laura insisted. She promised to send a letter officially, but asked for the information right away. She told with a grave face she wanted to avoid losing much time. Wasn't the information she asked small, insignificant, and totally harmless? Laura offered a few fine words of praise in favour of the town of Namur, and the woman melted to them.

Laura and Georg received a name read from a computer screen. The owner of the building was a man called Bernard Gorelle. Laura obtained an address, which turned out to be, to her enormous astonishment, a place in her own town of Robois! Laura looked at Georg when she heard the address, but she didn't change one muscle of her face. Georg nodded at her. To him, the address meant nothing.

Laura mentioned then to the clerk the building held apartments rented by several people. The woman nodded. This was true. Could the clerk of Namur's population service provide an address for a person or company renting under the name of Oneiro? The woman searched for names on her computer. She did not hesitate long to come up with the name of Oneiro SA, *Société Anonyme*, renting a small apartment, rather one room, in the building. The second address was likewise in Robois, an address Laura knew was one in the industrial zone of Robois.

‘This is probably no coincidence,’ the clerk explained. ‘Oneiro SA must be the name of a company that owns the building for the Monsieur Gorelle, and which arranges for the maintenance and the renting out of the apartments. The company may have a room or an office in the building. Monsieur Gorelle must be the administrator or General Manager of the firm.’

Laura and Georg asked no further questions. They had discovered another name and two new addresses.

‘What now?’ Georg wondered. ‘Your father might know who this Bernard Gorelle is, what his activities are, and how fine or bad his reputation.’

‘True,’ Laura answered, but she remained reluctant to talk to her father. ‘I know somebody who may know a lot more on this person. This man knows everybody in Robois, including the gossip of ages. He may give us far more background information than my father could. Let’s go back to the car. I invite you to lunch at Robois!’

Laura and Georg rode back to Robois. Laura once more steered her car. Georg looked at her. He wondered a little why Laura had not first gone to her father and mother to ask about this man Gorelle. He didn’t formulate his remarks out loud. He sensed the tension in Laura concerning her father’s motives.

He continued to stare and study Laura. She drove rapidly, intent in the hunt, a determined streak now tight on her lips drawn to a line. He felt her to be nervous, yet firm and resolute to persevere. He thought he had discovered a quality more of her character. This woman was thorough, meticulous, resourceful, and she left nothing to chance. She had her own network of informers, rather of friends, who might help her. From now on, she would probably only stop and drop the hunt when the mystery of the shadow-addresses had been solved. Why did Basel have to ship ephedrine to false addresses? Georg thought it best not to irritate her with more questions. He also liked the presence of a woman next to him. He felt at ease. He smiled. This was how married men and women could live in harmony, locked in the same quest. Was he falling in love? He sure felt better in the presence of this woman than in the presence of any other person on earth, now and in the past.

Laura sensed she was being examined. She looked briefly at Georg, giving him only a side glance, then she concentrated again on the road.

She asked, ‘what are you smiling at? Did I do something funny?’

‘Oh, this woman also remains on her guard at all moments,’ Georg thought.

He answered, ‘no, no, nothing special. I was just thinking of a joke that came to my mind. I find it quite agreeable to ride with you in your car. It sits more comfortably than I would have thought for a sports car.’

‘Why is it agreeable?’ she jolted.

‘I don’t know, actually,’ Georg admitted. ‘I feel good. Maybe because I usually do the driving when I am in my car with invited women, driving myself. Having a woman drive me is new for me! It feels strange, but quite agreeable.’

‘There,’ Georg thought on to himself, ‘you have worked yourself into a nasty corner, old boy. You have admitted you had other, many girlfriends before. If she now probes on, you will only stammer some other stupid excuse, and you will be at loss to come up with better arguments. You can admit you like her, but what an improbable place to acknowledge she

interests you, astonishes you, gets you in her spell. No place to try a kiss! And this lady does not seem to be of the romantic type!’

Laura had to drive from short streets into short crowded alleys, however, so she diverted all her attention to the traffic.

They remained silent until they arrived at Robois, coming from the southern part of the highway. Laura rode on. Georg saw her drive into the parking lot of a hotel and restaurant called the Horse Bayard. Georg kept his silence. Laura had driven to here. He wondered what she had in mind. For the moment, he merely followed her and let her lead. He also found that a little disconcerting, but wasn't she the local girl, he a stranger in this town? They went into the restaurant hall, chose a table – and ordered.

Soon, a small, wiry, energetic man passed, saw them, made an instant U-turn, and arrived, arms wide open. He and Laura embraced with many exclamations of joy. Laura introduced her friend and family, Georg Stratten, to Monsieur François, the owner of the restaurant and hotel. Monsieur François nodded warmly to Georg, and shook hands with him. François looked inquisitively at Georg, then back at Laura. He made no remarks.

Laura and Monsieur François engaged in a long, varied conversation about the town's people. Georg heard the mayor and the police commissar mentioned several times. The entire genealogy of Robois seemed to become mentioned, flowed out of Monsieur François's mind and mouth, with births and deaths and remarkable events recalled. Laura received an overview of the gossip since she had last met Monsieur François. Georg got lost quickly in the meanders of marriages and other relationships that ebbed and flowed like the sea among the names that came from Monsieur François's lips, information which only a knowledgeable woman like Laura could appreciate. Then, Laura came up with the name of Bernard Gorelle.

‘Do you know a man called Bernard Gorelle? Have you heard of a company named Oneiro?’ Georg heard Laura ask.

‘Sure, I do,’ Monsieur François was quick to acknowledge. ‘I do know Monsieur Gorelle. He is a very rich man. He drives a big, black Mercedes. He owns houses in Namur and Robois. He lives in a villa of Bas-Robois, not far from the river. He owns and manages a chemical plant near the National Road in the industrial zone of Turgoux, south of Robois. His premises are hidden from the National Road by other warehouses and plants. When you drive south on the National, you have to take the road left, right before Recycfast, you know, and a little farther stands the buildings of Robchem. That is Gorelle's company. He also manages real estate with his company of Oneiro SA. Oneiro is not a name we hear often mentioned in Robois, though. Gorelle works with it at Namur. Yes, he is very wealthy, Monsieur Gorelle, a very active and sly man he is! He often sends guests to my hotel. They usually don't stay long. They must be the businessmen or clients who deal with him, I guess. Swiss men, South-American guests. His two companies are housed in the same buildings, here in Robois, but not many people work there. I have heard Oneiro mention in real estate dealings.’

‘Any marriage, a family?’ Laura asked.

‘A wife, foreign origins, relatively dark-skinned, no children. His wife is called Geraldine Tourneur. She is quite young, blonde, but I guess the real colour of her hair is black or brown. Heavy buxom, quite a figure!’ Monsieur François laughed, ‘very much an oh-la-la woman! She herself comes rarely to Robois, and even less to my establishment. She is the kind of

woman for whom my hotel seems to be too modest. I only saw her once, at a party given for Robchem's clients, here in my restaurant. I see her very seldom around. But then, also, the Gorelle villa lies at the other side of town.'

'What then does the company produce?' Georg interrupted.

'I believe it is a chemical and medical production plant,' Monsieur François continued. 'They send out all kinds of medical supplies, and medicines. I heard they sell quite some cough syrup and other medicines of which I don't know the names. The business seems very profitable. Still, few people work there.'

'How does he look like, this Gorelle?' Laura wanted to know.

'Big man, tall, elegant, always tanned, vain. He looks more like a sales representative than like a General Manager, always very chique, wears expensive suits of fine cut. He cares for his looks, smells of perfume. He may be something of a lady-killer, very charming. Square face, handsome, masculine, sleek. You, Laura, would like him for one minute, not much longer,' Monsieur François grinned.

He was being very frank with Laura, but that was how he knew her and could speak with her. He liked her a lot.

Laura laughed, 'why, what do you mean?'

'Laura, darling, do you think I'm daft? I know you! I held you on my knees when you were only five years old, remember? You are solid. Gorelle is all façade, show-off, no substance, no spine. He is not a man you would be interested in one bit. No character! The superficial type, the money-seeker type. A robot he is, Gorelle, though a robot with money. Typical no-brained business man, as they come in hordes. Shallow! No feelings! Bah! But lots of money. Or so it seems. He spends much, drinks only whiskey of my best brand when he comes in here, to impress the audience. He brings his clients and business-partners here sometimes. Every three to four months, he comes in with another woman, spends the evening upstairs in a room, but he never sleeps here. He pays with a company credit card. That's how I know of Oneiro and of Robchem.'

Georg started to appreciate Monsieur François. He smiled.

Laura changed subjects again and chatted on. During the entire meal, Georg could not place a word in between the two. He ate and listened and drank his beer. Only after a coffee did Monsieur François leave, to attend to other customers. He seemed to know everybody who entered, and always welcomed them with cheers.

'That Gorelle seems to be the perfect scoundrel to me,' Georg began. 'Even your Monsieur François doesn't like him, I think. Would you be able to find his villa?'

'Oh yes, I would. Of course. Monsieur François's indications sounded quite clear to me. I'm sure I know where he lives. Nice villa.'

'Good for you,' Georg sighed. 'I didn't understand a word about his directions. Drive right to the mill, then to the water tower, past Andrea's hedge, and so on. I forgot half of it already. A very local GPS, your Monsieur François!'

Laura smiled. They stood, and paid at the counter.

'I need a pair of binoculars,' Georg told. 'Do you know of a shop where we can buy them, on the way?'

'Sure,' Laura added.

Once more, Laura drove her car. She didn't want to hand over the wheel to Georg.

'I have no insurance for another driver,' she told.

'Prudent girl,' Georg commented.

Laura smiled. She first rode to High-Robois, where Georg bought his binoculars. Then, Laura drove to the Gorelle villa.

It was a large villa, almost as large as a manor, very modern in style, a long, two-storey house with two wings, a fine, large garden in front. Georg caught a glimpse of a swimming-pool at the back, garages with four doors, a second, smaller building on which ample photovoltaic panels had been arranged, and which probably also housed the air conditioning and the heating system. He noticed a large shed for the lawn-mowers and the like. The house showed every characteristic of the dwelling of a very rich family. Yet, Laura had never heard of Bernard Gorelle.

'This was once the house of a member of the Bazaine Family,' Laura mused. 'They must have left Robois and sold the house.'

Georg looked at how Laura drove. She turned a little farther in the street. Georg asked her to drive onto a path that ran perpendicular to the street in which the villa stood, then told her to stop the car. The Gorelle villa stood alone in the countryside. Other villas, none as grand as Gorelle's, stood in the distance. Georg stepped out of the car, wearing his binoculars.

'I'm going to have a look up there,' Georg pointed to a low hill above the Gorelle villa.

'Want to come with me? Seems pretty steep, though.'

Laura didn't answer, stepped out, closed her car, and followed. She walked in the grass next to Georg. He walked swiftly, with athletic stride. After a while, Laura had to ask him to advance more slowly. She was panting heavily. Georg muttered an apology, and he slowed down to beside her. He took her arm and helped her over low bushes and stones. The intimacy struck Laura. She had never let a man thus touch her. She had always refused the proximity. Now, she didn't seem to mind Georg staying close to her, helping her. It was a new sensation for Laura. She did not dislike the feeling. It seemed quite natural for him to touch her, support her. He took her hand to draw her on.

They arrived at a small wood at the top of the hill. Georg went up to the edge of the wood on the rim, from where they had a splendid, open view over the villa. The layout of the building was quite visible. Georg stopped, remained hidden among the trees and bushes. He went down on his belly, and gestured to Laura to do the same. Laura smiled. This looked like when she and her brother, many years younger, had played at hide-and-seek with their friends, and had waited behind the trees, looking at how the other boys and girls tried to find them. Georg took what he was doing very seriously, now. He looked through his binoculars, very intently, concentrated on the villa. He didn't seem aware anymore of Laura. Then after a while, he seemed to realise he was not alone, here. He turned to Laura. Laura had also been looking down, next to Georg.

In turning their faces to each other, their heads came close and a magic moment passed. Their eyes locked, their lips smiled. The hesitation lasted only a second. Georg bent just a little over, and kissed her on the mouth. He kissed Laura on the lips. He held the kiss. He moved closer to her, so that their bodies touched lightly. Then, he put his arm around her in a tender

embrace. The kiss lasted, worked, and spread its magic of longing and desire further. Georg turned on his back, drew Laura on. Laura came to lie upon Georg. She did not break off the kiss, and began to caress his neck with one hand. Their bodies slung together as passion grew. Suddenly, after a long time, Laura withdrew. She looked down into the valley, as if she was wondering how she had come here. She was panting. She slid off from Georg.

They both remained lying on their backs, facing the sun shining through the leaves of an oak tree.

‘Wow! What was that?’ Laura whispered.

Georg grinned, ‘well, I ever! I think I’m totally flabbergasted by you. I’m in love with you, my dear Laura! There are so many beautiful German girls around in my town, and I definitely have to fall for you! When you’re around, I feel good, at peace, quiet. I can talk with you without the superficiality and reserve I was learned to apply. I rarely if never did that with another woman! How about you? What are we going to do about it?’

‘I have not the slightest idea, dear Georg. I only know you since a few days, meaning I don’t know you at all. I feel like we would be marrying tomorrow, the concept of which will probably scare you to death, as it does to me, actually. Now, what indeed are we going to do about us? Do you believe in things like love on first sight and similar crap?’

‘Nope, not at all,’ Georg reflected. ‘No, I don’t. Still, I would like to kiss you again, and on and on, and only afterwards proceed more slowly to other things. You are right, we should learn to know each other better before taking drastic decisions.’

‘Yes, we should, shouldn’t we? Let’s try again.’

Laura slid back on Georg, and they kissed ever more passionately. Georg began to wander his hands over Laura’s body, and felt the firmness of her. His hand moved to her breasts, and Laura let him. She pushed to between his legs. After a long while, this time, Georg broke off the kiss first.

‘Wait, stop,’ Georg cried out loud. ‘Do this just a little longer and I’ll make a pass at you. We are practically making love. Wow!’

‘You *are* scared, aren’t you?’ Laura panted and laughed.

She had felt his erection grow. She continued kissing him, rubbing against him.

‘No, stop!’ Georg said. ‘I won’t answer for myself within one minute more. I don’t want to rape you!’

Laura laughed coarsely. She went to sit next to him. They remained lying and looking at each other.

Then, Laura began anew, ‘you should be watching the villa, shouldn’t you?’

Georg confessed he had almost forgotten about the villa. He turned, and took up his binoculars. He stared through the glasses, easing the beating of his heart. He only looked a few, brief moments at the villa. He turned back to Laura and kissed her, more tenderly this time.

Georg saw a large, black Mercedes enter the driveway of the villa. A man stepped out. Georg saw someone who fitted the description provided by Monsieur François. He handed the binoculars to Laura.

She noticed, ‘yes, this must be the Gorelle guy. He lives here, all right. But what now? The villa is just one other villa in the neighbourhood, not much movement around. What are we going to do?’

Georg didn't answer. He had no answers. He only wanted to wait a little longer and observe. There was no warehouse here, and no barn where any production of chemicals could be on. He too didn't know exactly what to do, neither with the villa nor with his newly-discovered emotions concerning Laura.

Why indeed did he feel so good with her, with this Belgian woman, when there were so many extremely pretty blonde German girls around? He didn't want to be separated from this Laura. Not anymore. Was his destiny in the making? He knew he should certainly not mess around with this woman as he had done with a few of his former girlfriends. Was Laura the one for him, his soul-mate? Either she would be part of him for the rest of their lives, or he should tell her, here and now, straight on, not to bother with him. He didn't really have to think about the matter, he said to himself. He had never felt so good, so much at peace, with other women. Laura was already part of him, he was suddenly sure of that. He would never leave her. Unless she rejected him. Maybe she felt the same about him. Meaning he had found his wife, his only and ultimate wife!

Laura's mind raced equally on with very many new feelings and thoughts. Her emotions overwhelmed her spirit. She could not think rationally anymore. Passion moved her body and mind. She felt utterly at a loss with what was happening to her. She was bewildered, conquered, confused, and ready for the wildest effluents of passion. She couldn't think straight anymore. She would have given her body and soul in this very instant to Georg. He had taken all her defences by storm, overwhelmed her with his kisses. She had become putty in his hands. What was left of the rational, self-confident, tough-minded, obstinate Laura Trioteignes? From now on, she would fight for her Georg. She felt like a girl of fifteen in love. Would she be ready to spend her life with this German boy? Marriage? She would have accepted anything, even a wild life of occasional meetings and love-making without marriage. Why not? Georg should always hold his arms around her! Laura too watched the villa down beneath and didn't move, but she was thinking of lots of other issues. She too eased the beating of her heart.

Georg scanned the villa over and over again with his binoculars, noticing nothing in particular. His mind raced on, meanwhile. He longed to throw Laura on her back, kiss her again, crush her, and take her, here.

He began to look at other villas. He looked meticulously at all the other villas in the environs. They were not so grand as the Gorelle one, but otherwise he saw nothing particular.

A little later, the door of the large villa opened, and Georg saw the man he assumed to be Gorelle come out of the house, and get back into his car. The black Mercedes rode to the National Road, southwards.

'He leaves the villa, that Gorelle,' Georg said out loud, without daring to look at Laura lest his heart would start beating its drums again.

He proposed, 'let's have a look at the warehouse Monsieur François told us about.'

Georg hoped Gorelle might drive to his office, but nothing was less or more probable.

Anyway, they might as well also have a look at the second address provided by Monsieur François and by the clerk in the Town Hall of Namur.

Georg stood and gave Laura a hand, helping her on her feet. When she rose, she threw herself back against him, and they embraced and kissed. Then, they went down the hill, hand in hand, to Laura's car.

Laura drove her car equally southwards, on to the National Road. They rode to Turgoux, to where, as Monsieur François had described to her, stood the premises of Robchem. Laura knew the building of Robchem could be found behind the warehouse of a company called Recycfast, which stood right next, on the left of the National Road.

Laura knew Recycfast. The company had been sold a few years ago to become a prosperous recycling site of metals. She remembered a road next to the buildings of Recycfast, leading to yet more industrial buildings, in a quarter she had never before been in. She rode to a corner of the Recycfast parking lot. From there she had an open view on another parking, deeper away from the National Road. The parking was of another building there, a low, one-story warehouse-like structure, not unlike most of the other companies around, and which bore huge letters stating Robchem on its façade. From where she had parked her car, she and Georg had a good overview on the entry to Robchem and on its small parking lot in front.

Laura and Georg saw the black Mercedes of Bernard Gorelle parked in front of the entry. Georg had memorised the license plate of the car. Few other cars stood in the parking lot, not more than five, but the side road curved around the Robchem parking space to behind the plant's front, where the larger trucks no doubt would turn to another parking space and to the facilities for loading and unloading trucks transporting goods for or from the company. Behind the hangar of Robchem might be the parking lot for the workers of the firm. The parking in front could be reserved for clients and management.

'Do you want to wait here, or do I drive around the building?' Laura asked Georg.

'Here seems fine for the moment,' Georg answered. 'Later on, we can have a quick look on the other side. Let's wait and see what happens.'

It was getting late in the afternoon. The traffic on the National Road and on its side roads augmented. People were leaving the industrial zone for home. Many people walked out of the buildings, took their cars and rode off. Many people also came out of Recycfast, both women and men. A few people only walked out of Robchem, not many. Only two cars also rode from behind the building of the company to the National Road.

'Not many people seem to be working at Robchem,' Laura remarked.

'There shouldn't be. Much of the chemical production is probably automated. In this building, no large quantities of bulk products can be produced, either. My guess is not more than a dozen or so men and women work here. Gorelle lives in a big villa, he drives a very expensive car. High-priced products must be produced here.'

After a while, also the man they assumed to be Bernard Gorelle, came out of the building. He stepped to his Mercedes and rode away, back to the National Road, and then north.

'He seems to be riding home,' Georg told Laura from behind his binoculars.

'Should we return home, too?' Laura wondered.

'Not yet, please,' Georg begged. 'Gorelle mustn't see us. Let's wait a little longer, then we go back to the castle. We have seen the sites, the villa, the company Robchem. It looks all very innocent. We cannot know what happens inside the villa, and not also what goes on inside that building, here. But we know the sites. These are no old industrial sites. They look fairly new to me. We must find out with other means than observation what happens inside.'

Robchem is a new name. I'll look up the name on the Internet. Maybe we can dig up some more information. Names of associates, of directors, and the like.'

'And what if you don't come up with anything out of the ordinary?' Laura asked.

Georg didn't answer.

He thought, 'then I'm going to pay a visit at the reception hall, here, and ask what kind of products Robchem produces and sells. If that yields nothing, I'm going to try to get in from behind, from the area where goods are loaded and unloaded during the day, and snoop around. That may get tricky. I can get in at night, but then there will be alarms to handle, and night guards. I'll also have to track the owners of the company, the main shareholders, the administrators, the directors, the engineers of product development, and so on.'

Georg waited. He waited for about half an hour longer. Nothing happened. He began to despair and lose patience, as no doubt Laura would have, too. Everybody who worked at Robchem must have left the building by then.

Georg wanted to tell Laura she could return the car to Castle Trioteignes, when the front doors opened and one more man came out of the premises. He was a small, thin man, wearing a dark suit like Gorelle, but otherwise in everything different from the head of the company. This man was small, looking the intellectual, wearing a thin, dark suitcase. The man turned and drew a light aluminium cart out of the reception hall. On the cart stood a few metal cases. He went up to an old Peugeot car that had remained on the parking lot, the last car in the space, the only vehicle left in front of Robchem.

'Can you follow that car?' Georg asked. 'That will be the last of today. That guy too, must be going home.'

'Why follow him?' Laura asked, losing her patience with this game of observance.

'I don't know,' Georg smiled. 'A hunch, instinct, a feeling? I know it's foolish of me. Just bear with me for only a while. Please.'

Laura nodded. The Peugeot was unmarked. It was a large car though, a grey car, no mention of Robchem on its sides. The car drove south. Laura followed, hoping she would not have to drive for hours. Georg held a silence.

The old Peugeot rode to Namur. Laura followed. She became quite bored with the pursuit. Why follow this car so far, back to Namur and its hellish traffic at this hour, so late in the afternoon? Darkness would soon fall. Laura agreed to do this last thing for Georg's sake, but where was all this leading them? To yet another innocent address? She could get more interesting information from out of the Internet and from her father's connections. Still, she drove on, without protests. She rode once more that day through the streets of the very centre of Namur. Traffic was very dense. She lost the Peugeot from sight twice. Twice she caught it at the last moment when it swung into smaller side streets. The driver knew Namur extraordinarily well! They rode over the bridge from the centre of the city to the suburb of Jambes. A little farther than the end of the bridge and the round square, the car stopped at an apartment building.

Laura drove on to the end of the street, turned, and parked her car in the street, opposite the old Peugeot. They saw the man taking out his aluminium cart and the metal cases. He disappeared with them in the building. A numerical code pad allowed entry to the apartments. The man disappeared inside.

Georg swore, 'I'm going to have a look at that building. Stay here, Will you? I'll be back in a moment. I want to have a look at who lives there.'

Laura didn't answer. She felt being reduced to the function of driver. She vowed to herself this was the last she would tolerate and do for Georg today. He had become obsessional in his hunt, she thought.

Georg got out of Laura's BMW. He went up to the apartment building, and also disappeared in the entry portico.

'He is going to try to get in there!' Laura thought. 'How is he going to do that?'

After only a few moments, Georg came back out. He returned to Laura's car. He sat next to her.

He explained, 'I couldn't get in. There is a numerical code. It seems just an apartment building, with many names on the bells. Nothing special. Fine neighbourhood, rather large apartments. Doctors, lawyers. Nothing special, really. But why would that guy take cases from Robchem to his own apartment?'

Laura ignited the motor, looked behind her to drive out of the row of parked cars along the street side.

'Wait! Wait!' Georg called out and grabbed Laura's arm to stop her from driving off. 'Wait!'

Laura was startled, for she noticed nothing in particular. Georg pointed with his head. A young man had come to the entry hall of the apartment block. He sounded a bell, waited, said something in the interphone, and entered. Georg held on to Laura's arm. Only moments later, another young man sauntered to the building, rang a bell and entered. Then a third. A little later, the first young man came back out, a plastic bag in his hand. Later, the second young man emerged, wearing a similar bag.

'Drug dealers,' Georg told suddenly. 'Dealers come here to get their stock of drugs.'

Laura looked at the third young man who came out. Indeed, the three young men resembled each other in a strange way. They showed the same furtive, vague look on their faces. They wore the same kind of clothes, simple, rumpled jeans and parkas. They looked shabby and not too clean. Not the kind of young people one would have expected around this rather well-to-do neighbourhood, in a building of larger, chic apartments with private balconies. Yes, maybe drug dealers. Maybe anything else.

'All right, we can go home, now. We won't find out much more,' Georg concluded. 'We found out a lot today. Time to rest and think. Thank you for having been so patient.'

Laura agreed wholeheartedly the time for thinking had come. While she drove through the Jambes street, Georg looked with astonishment at a car that had stood parked a little farther, on the same side Laura and he had stood. In that car sat two men in ordinary suits, obviously bored, but also looking in the direction of the apartment building.

'Drive on,' Georg told Laura. 'Don't slow down, don't look sideways, just drive on. Talk to me.'

'I understand,' Laura nodded. 'We are not the only ones observing the apartment block. Who are those guys? Policemen?'

'Yes, police probably,' Georg asserted. 'Drive on. We must not draw attention to us. We are just one more car driving past! Look, more young men arrive, more drug dealers coming to provision themselves.'

Laura rode on. She rode back to the large round centre point of Jambes, in front of the bridge to Namur. She passed into Namur, took a peripheral road, and soon rode on the highway, back to Robois and to Trioteignes.

On the way home, Laura only muttered, ‘we have spent a full day chasing ghosts. We found out nothing useful. The young men we saw at Jambes could have come to buy apples in a bag! What exactly are we chasing?’

She sounded disappointed and bitter.

Georg did not agree, ‘we found out a lot, actually! We have new names, Bernard Gorelle and Robchem. We discovered a possible courier distributing drugs in Namur. We found out the police knows about the drug traffic and is targeting the centre of the drug commerce. For the police, a major operation must already be on. It takes many officers to track drug dealers day in, day out. We found three new addresses, the villa of Gorelle, the site of Robchem, and the apartment building of Jambes. We also now know definitely fraud is being committed, for why else would the address of Oneiro in Namur be a false one? I say we discovered much! I agree it seems far-fetched what I now assume, but my gut feeling says I’m right. We may now be relatively certain Pharmtelia of Basel is in to some dirty business. The picture is clearing up. The issue now, is only to prove what I suspected. Pharmtelia or some people of Pharmtelia, are involved in illegal businesses.’

‘We don’t have to prove anything,’ Laura disagreed. ‘We merely have to convince our fathers the higher management of Pharmtelia has to be replaced, and dependable, honest men put in their place. We must prepare the General Assembly and at the next Board Meeting force the change. Then, our involvement will be finished. We don’t need proof of wrongdoing. We don’t need to play at police-and-thieves. We have to let the police do its work. We can force the managers out at will. Excuses and reasons can always be found.’

Georg didn’t answer.

‘Yes, your business can be finished,’ he thought, ‘but not entirely mine. The drug traffic must be stopped. The management change in Pharmtelia will not stop Robchem. It will only, temporarily, dry up the company’s provisioning of ephedrine. They may have stockpiled tons of the stuff by now, and produce from these reserves for months to come, until they find another reliable source of ephedrine and the like. I need definite proof of the wrongdoing. Stopping Pharmtelia is only part of what must be realised. What about the shipments of ephedrine to Colombia? What sits at that end? How do I go about all that? And how much can I confide in Laura and in Charles de Trioteignes? The Belgian addresses lie in their town. Is that a coincidence? Moreover, I’m in love with Laura, so much is sure. I want her, I desire her, I want her at my side for the rest of my life. All very much for my painful head!’

When Laura and Georg arrived at the Castle Trioteignes, they turned to their respective rooms in a rather morose mood. They stayed morose also through the supper that evening with Monique and Charles Trioteignes. Charles and Monique exchanged knowing glances when they noticed the younger people frowned, and said very little. They surmised Laura and Georg had quarrelled today. They didn’t ask what Laura and Georg had been up to in Namur. Monique did remark how now Laura and then Georg only sent tender glances to each other. Hunger showed in their eyes, but not hunger for the food they barely touched. Charles noticed nothing of the sort, of course!

After supper, Georg and Laura receded to their rooms. They told they were tired. They explained they had done some sightseeing among the Meuse River. They had not been happy, not joyous company this evening. They were tired.

In her room, Laura was interrogating herself.

‘What should I do?’ she was thinking. ‘He is a German aristocrat, Georg. He will be more of a reticent gentleman than a London banker. He will not come to my room and knock on my door, tonight. If he did such a thing, I would devour him alive in my bed! I’d better start taking my contraceptive pills again. But no, he won’t come. Should I, then go to him? He’ll not say no! We are tired. Would it not be too soon to show up in his room? He might think I’m a whore. He might think I wanted to entrap him. He might think I lured him to the castle. He might think I have something to do with Robchem, after all. He may remain a little suspicious. He might think I’m an easy, and a hot woman. It is too soon! A night should pass over what we did in the pasture on the hill. We need some relief from the passion invoked by the kisses everywhere during the day. Tomorrow, we’ll think clearer. Thinking rationally is what we need. Yes, but the passion? What about our feelings? Take a very cold shower, girl, to cool you down. Don’t lose your head altogether. You shouldn’t throw yourself into the arms of the first German you ever really met. Let another day pass. Fine, but a day passing may turn into a love lost. Can you afford that? You are getting older. What about kids?’

Finally, Laura chose for the cold shower. Georg would not get a very hot girl in his bed tonight. The old walls of Trieteignes would not shake with her moaning. Yet, both Laura and Georg slept badly that night. They turned and tousled in their bed, alone.

3.2. The new life

Véronique Dupas felt quite satisfied with her new life. She lived in a cosy apartment with a fine view over the River Meuse. The sun shone into her rooms for the greatest part of the day, warming her with its rays and basking her in the brilliant light. She had a balcony, but rarely stayed for a long time sitting in the open air or looking out over the splendid view. She hoped on passing the winter in the apartment block, protected from the cold and from the rain. She wondered where her luck had so unexpectedly come from, but knew retribution must also be paid one day. The apartment had a fine bathroom, which she used twice a day for hot baths. She felt clean for the first time since long. Phil brought her food. She kept Italian pasta in her fridge, rice, cans of vegetables, and fruit. A bag of potatoes stood on a shelf in the pantry. She had become used to the cooking plates. She prepared her own lunch, and often also supper for her and for Phil. He liked her cooking, he told her.

Véronique left the apartment regularly to rent books in the Namur library. She always returned. Phil began to send her on errands. He trusted her. She read a lot, always took also one or two books written by the great French classical authors. She read Proust, Voltaire and Rousseau, Yourcenar and Troyat. She had started reading her first novels of Zola and Balzac and Hugo.

Véronique did not have much to do in return for her living in the fine apartment. Her function was merely and only to serve as a testing person, as a guinea-pig. Phil brought her pills, which she had to take in prescribed quantities and according to a predefined timetable. Phil usually brought the pills in the evening. She took the pills in the early afternoon, so that she could describe the effects to Phil in the evening, while they ate together, or the day after. Phil had also asked her to write down the effects, which she did on sheets of blank A4 paper. The effects of the pills turned out to be very different.

Some of the pills merely wiped away all gloom from her head, all apprehensions and suspicions, made her spirit and her mood light as a feather. She could even read or look at television programs at full, clear attention with these pills. They were softer and harder than ecstasy, but provided the same sensation. She enjoyed almost the same reaction as with ecstasy.

Some pills merely made her sick, and provided no agreeable and soothing effect at all. She had to retch and vomit for the rest of the afternoon. Those pills induced in her no hallucinatory visions either. She kept always a few ecstasy pills in reserve to keep her on drugs, to avoid the pains of withdrawal.

Other pills yet provided alarmingly strong hallucinatory effects. The visions she experienced were close to and even more powerful than those caused by the LSD drugs she had taken a few times before. Weird, fantastic images, very colourful and moving, came to her mind then. They numbed her senses, so she could only lay on the couch the whole afternoon, mostly lost in fantastic, alien worlds. Sometimes she had to dance around in her living-room. Other pills gave her images of horror and fright. Finely coloured pills called entire stories to her mind, worthy of fantasy novels. Still other pills made her simply joyful, happy and light for the rest of the day. She liked those products most.

Véronique only never found out what kinds of substances she took. Phil said the formulas were mixtures of substances with too complex names. Yet other pills made her feel terribly depressed. She cried and wept throughout the evening and the next morning. Some pills worked instantly, to effects that did not last for longer than half an hour, other provided effects that lasted all night.

Except for the occasional product that made her sick or brought horror images in her mind, Véronique quite liked taking the pills and tasting, experiencing the various effects. She told Phil of her reserves with a kind of pills she took for four days in a row, and which aroused her sexually. With the first of those pills, she almost experienced no change in mood or vision, but she threw herself on Phil as soon as he entered the apartment. She could not stop until she had him spread on the bed, and she had violent, wild sex with him. The pills of the next days all brought the same need, but in ever softer effect.

Phil brought her condoms as contraceptives, but not the contraceptive pill to avoid pregnancy. Contraceptive pills might interfere with the drugs, he claimed. When they had sex, they used condoms or a diaphragm. With some of the drugs she experienced thus a violent urge to have sex. It happened she did not force Phil to use his condoms. She satisfied herself. Other pills turned her off.

Véronique lived day by day, convinced at first she would worry about the way she lived when the time for worries would realise. She didn't think anymore at that time about going to the police, or of going to ask for help from social workers of the town administration. She did hold in a corner of her mind the nagging awareness she was throwing her life away to drugs and to Phil's experiments. She missed the power of will to change her life. Still, she understood more and more one day this easy life would end, and it could end each day and hour.

Véronique began to formulate what she really expected of life. First came to mind she wanted no drugs anymore. Then, she wanted to study and gain diplomas of nice titles, if possible even university titles. When she still lived in her attic room near the River Sambre, she had strolled sometimes into university halls to avoid the rain outside. She had been astonished at how easily she could grasp what the professor was saying to a hundred or more students. She knew she had a good memory. She guessed she was quite capable of following university courses and pass exams. She did not have to be a hairdresser or something like that. To succeed in studies, she would, of course, need a proper family. Maybe she could ask to be placed in a true home with foster parents, with a man and woman with sufficient means to let her study. She thought long about the matter, and concluded she would need to give something back. She could aid an elderly couple by doing errands for them, for instance. She would not dislike living in a true, nice family with other children. She could care for the children. She definitely did not want to return to her mother and her stepfather. She longed for a real family with decent people, people with values. Véronique even once made up a list of the values she appreciated, but she threw away the paper with the contents of her dustbin afterwards, and she remained depressive for a few days. Still, the desire for a better life, a more normal life, remained strong with her, despite the drugs.

Véronique discovered she was not the only girl Phil provided drugs to in the apartment block. Phil's own apartment was situated on a lower floor. Two doors to the left on her own floor, was another apartment managed or owned by Phil. She had seen him enter those rooms one day, when she brought her dustbin downstairs. She interrogated him about that other apartment. He refused to tell her much. She noticed two girls in the apartment on the balcony, a few days later. Phil then told her these girls too took the drug pills and described the effects. One of the girls, Phil said, occasionally sold drugs herself. Véro mentioned she could do that too, but Phil never took her up on that assertion.

Phil was a drug dealer, and he must have been rich, too, but he refused to talk about how much he earned with his illegal trade. He became quickly very nasty when Véro breached that subject. Véro thought that if Phil owned at least three apartments in this chic neighbourhood, he would have been very rich indeed. But did Phil really own the apartments himself?

Phil did not want to talk about these subjects. He told her not to worry about these things. Was she not better here than on the street? There hung a dark threat in Phil's answers, so Véronique did not dare to probe further. She feared being expelled from her apartment if she antagonised him too much. With time, however, she found out Phil regularly met another man in an apartment on the lowest floor.

Véronique never actually saw this man. She merely found out when, on which day of the week. Phil came up with new sorts of drugs, with a scheme for taking them and with paper sheets on which she had to write her effects. The day was usually a Friday or a Saturday morning. On these days, Phil paid her no visit, but the next day he explained her a new scheme. She also knew Phil went to the ground floor, for she had seen him disappear in the elevator once, and the elevator stopped on the lowest floor. From the corridor of the apartments, she saw him not leaving the building. At another day, she had run down the stairs, cautiously opened the door at the ground level, and seen Phil enter an apartment there. Her discovery made her sad. She knew instinctively Phil was not the man in charge. He could not be the dream master. Her fate ultimately did not depend from Phil, but rather from whoever lived or came to the rooms on the ground floor. It meant she could not place a name on who decided upon her fate, on whether she had a roof over her head, or not. And what might happen if Phil was taken by the police and put in prison for dealing in drugs?

Véronique felt much disturbed and worried about these realisations. She began to think more and more seriously about how she could make her dreams come true, her own, personal dreams, not the ones induced by the drugs. She wanted a foster family and being able to study now with all her remaining force of mind! She decided she could survive and endure her present life for not much longer. It was very agreeable at the moment, but sooner or later she must leave it! Before the summer of next year, she decided firmly, she would give herself up to the police or to the *Commission Publique d'Assistance Sociale*, to the city's CPAS, to the city's public welfare organisation, as was organised in all Belgian towns. Véronique plotted her exit.

She would need money to live decently after her Jambes apartment experiment. Véronique therefore began to hoard some of the softer drugs, ecstasy pills and similar ones, a little

cocaine and heroin. These she might sell, and live on for the first days or weeks she might be taken off drugs, when she was thrown out of the building. She convinced herself she would be given in the care of doctors if she went to the police. The doctors might help her get off drugs, but she felt more assured to have her hands on a small stock of products in case she would suffer the pains of withdrawal.

Her only issue was where to hide the drugs. She could not do that in the apartment, for sooner or later Phil might find out, and she might quite rapidly be refused entry to the apartment. She didn't have to worry too much about that problem, though. She knew plenty of places along the river where she could hide a plastic bag or two!

Véronique did not share her apprehensions, her plans, her aspirations, her own dreams, with Phil. She gradually realised she was living two lives, now.

One life was the one she passed while consuming all kinds of drugs. It was a wild and often very nice life! She experienced wonderful, happy dreams of various natures. She felt more often happy and light than depressive. Her mind could be excited to such fantastic dreams, almost at the will of somebody she didn't know, but who mixed the ingredients. She realised Phil was not that person. She, and Phil too, were in the power of somebody else who provided Phil with the drugs that had different effects on her. That man or woman was a dream master, a puppet master of part of her life.

However powerful the sensation of the pills could be, however strong the impressions the dream master evoked in her, Véro always kept to the spark of her own dream, of the dream about her second life. In this life, she lived happily in a home where a man and a woman cared for her, allowed her to study until she reached the courses of the university, so that she herself could become a professor or a teacher or a lawyer, and be a respectable woman. Then she also saw herself with a husband and two children in a nice house in the countryside. Véro knew this image to be utterly unrealistic, unattainable, but wasn't her drug life also totally unreal? She was the champion of fictive lives, she thought, and laughed at the realisation.

Véronique scowled herself for nurturing such unrealistic illusions. Had she not wanted to go to the police when she had arrived in Namur, and also thereafter? Had she not refrained afterwards from doing what she had to do, always postponing her decision? Had her will not been broken when she lived alone? She instinctively felt some of the pills Phil had given her had strengthened her will power, instead of numbing it. She knew very well the early drugs had gnawed at her determination. She was used to the drugs, now, and she told herself her only and one most important decision, the decision to make her new life not last longer than the next summer, she should hold on by all means, whatever happened to her.

She fixed a date: the first of August of next year was the ultimate date! However dulled her senses could become, on that first of August of next year, she should just walk into the Namur police station, and give her up to whatever might follow. If she was to have a life worth living, she should leave by then.

Many other people lived in the apartment block. Véronique met some of them briefly, at the rare moments, often in the early evening, when she left the apartment. Once, she helped an old man – he must have been around sixty – with his garbage. The man was grateful when Véronique heaved the garbage bags and threw them in the larger containers at the ground floor. He tried to engage in a conversation with her. He said he lived on her floor, for he had

noticed her before, sometimes, on the balcony. He appreciated she was a nice, quiet girl. When he asked how a young girl like she was living on her own, Véronique answered with a fictive story. Her parents didn't like her much. They were rich, though. They let her live on her own, but paid for the expenses. The man seemed disappointed. She gave him her name, but only her first name, of Véronique. She politely added she had all the means necessary to live in peace and quiet, and the situation might only last a while. The man nodded, and added his name was Jacques. He was a judge, he told. Véronique was startled by the information. The man noticed how amazed she suddenly looked at him. He was used to such reactions. 'Don't be afraid,' he responded to her awe. 'Judges are normal people too, you know. I'm a Judge of the Peace, merely a local judge. My wife is a lawyer. We are getting old, though!' They took the elevator up together, to their floor. The judge did not force his presence any further on her.

When the elevator stopped, he merely said, 'it was nice to have met you, Miss Véronique. If ever I can help you with some pressing law issue, don't hesitate to call on us. My wife is often at home, and I too!'

He smiled at her, and left her standing in the corridor while he opened the door of his apartment with a key. Then only did he look back, and saw Véronique still standing where they had arrived. He made a last sign of goodbye with his hand, and stepped into his entry hall. Véronique then entered her own apartment. She thought she had found someone who indeed might help her one day.

Véronique often told herself she merely nurtured illusions about her escaping from her life as a drug addict. The drugs Phil brought her became stranger, stronger in effects by the day. They began to have a debilitating effect on her. She knew her resolve melted. For many hours of the day, she lay in a stupor on her bed or on the sofa, unable to stand, dizzy and her mind dull. Once, in a deep daze, and as in a horror dream, she sensed a panting Phil above her, abusing of her without having asked her permission to have sex. He was abusing of her without she even being aware he had started to have sex with her. She was vaguely aware he was actually raping her and enjoying it, though that was not the word he would have used for what he was doing to her. Was she not a kind of slave at that moment? Nevertheless, she was grateful he didn't bring his friends in to use her. Maybe Phil didn't have friends!

After that incident, she was not being nice anymore to Phil. She grudged, complained about matters, seldom laughed and smiled and flirted. Phil slammed the door on her more than once. Go ahead, she shouted, you have two more whores down the corridor! She was afraid he might yet throw her in the street, but he never did.

The drug experiments increased. The difference and intensity of the effects of the drugs contrasted more than before. With some of the pills she now fell into deep depressions, to be cheered up the next day by other heavy drugs, exploding from joy and sending her running and dancing in the streets of Namur for pure joy.

Then, a lot changed in Véronique's new life.

Phil brought another man with him to her apartment. They entered her rooms without knocking, on a warm afternoon. Véronique was very surprised to see Phil accompanied. She was also surprised at the hour, for in the afternoon, Phil ought to be at his trade of selling

drugs in Namur. He usually came to her apartment only much later. Her heart beat strongly, for she felt she would finally meet the man who had her fate in his hands, being Phil's handler too. The man Phil arrived with was much older. At first, Véronique also feared Phil had sold her as a prostitute to the older man, but sex was not on the mind of the two men, she soon noticed. Phil started by introducing the older man politely.

The man soon interrupted Phil by saying in a louder voice, which then lowered almost to whispers, 'just call me Phantasus. I want no other name.'

'Phantasus it will be, I suppose,' Véronique repeated, very unsettled by the man's demeanour.

Véronique understood she had come to meet at last the man who controlled Phil and the experiments with the new drugs, the man who paid for the apartments, the puppet master, the master of dreams. The man she was to call Phantasus and who didn't want his real name to be known, was small, thin, weasel-like in face, a dried-out kind of man with a cadaverous face on which almost no flesh was drawn over skull-bones. She thought he was sick, dying maybe. He could also simply be a man to whom food meant nothing, and who therefore ate little, not even the greasy fast food. He was thin but energetic, and commanding always. He resembled an elderly professor of the university, a man of near sixty years of age. His arms and hands were agile, quick to turn and form broad gestures. He was impeccably dressed in a dark grey suit and black shoes. He wore no glasses and was clean shaven. His hair waved nicely, dark brown. He would not lose his hair with age. It was greying at the temples, though. The man's eyes shone cold, but intelligently. He did not impress Véronique much. She thought she could handle him. He would not be her master.

He addressed Véronique with warmth, taking even one of her hands in his while he spoke. His hands felt warm, compassionate, and it was his grip which reassured Véronique most. He began, 'I appreciated your notes on some of the drugs you tried, young lady. I found it particularly interesting how you almost seemed able to double your personality despite the drug effects, one consciousness submitting to the wanderings enforced by the chemicals, the other observing. You have a strong mind of your own, young Véro, a mind that survives and comes to the surface despite the drugs. This makes you uniquely valuable to me as an observer, to assert the influence of the drugs on the human brain.'

Véronique blemished, for was that not her most intimate secret? Yes, she had a conscience, a brain she had preserved, strengthened even, which should allow her ever to break loose from whatever life men tried to impose on her. What if this Phantasus targeted that ability to think?

The man Phantasus continued, 'I prefer in general female brains for my experiments. They seem to be so much stronger, more stable, more reliable than young male brains! So, my dear, I have chosen you to provide me with true and precise information on my latest means to induce dreams in people's heads, to make them feel better, happier, more joyous still, more confident, or more depressed, at will and choice. You must now think I would not be able to bring this to people, but, believe me, I found the way. My new means will not make you sick. They will have no after-effects, except the status of your brain. I hope they will be efficient in creating nice, desired sensations in your spirit. You want love, I can procure love. You want physical sexual desire? I think I know how to give you what you desire. I can create, I think,

any craved-for feeling in your brain, at the turn of a button. You smile? I must prove you I can! My means are not chemical products anymore, very crude instruments to realise what I named. I can't explain you all.

In short, chemical drugs augment certain substances in your body which affect your head. These substances interfere with the neurons of your brain to bring images of peace, of rest, and tranquillity. According to their nature, they make your neurons produce wonderful images to your consciousness. But they act indirectly, very crudely, and essentially untargeted. The drugs have to pass your digestive system, sneak into your bloodstream to work their magic. Some of them alter not only the production of desired chemicals for your head. They may also harm your other cells, other chemicals, and even the bacteria you need in your body. The after-effects are sometimes harmful, as I'm afraid you experienced with a few of my drugs. So, I started wondering.'

Phantassus shifted in his seat. His eyes began to shine. He spoke now with a fire of enthusiasm.

'Instead of searching for yet new chemical products to stimulate your body into producing chemicals which interact with the neurons of your brain, why could I not directly target the neurons, and excite them to the feelings produced by the chemicals? Could I not by other than chemical means produce the feelings and images you and most of the people on earth like so much? Why not stimulate directly the neurons by electrical and electromagnetic means? I wondered whether such a method might work. I had heard of similar experiments in United States laboratories. I decided to try by myself. So, I devised a method of transcranial magnetic stimulation, a TMS method, to induce into the human spirit the same experiences chemical drugs could provide. My new method is much finer, though, much more targeted, much more specific, and what is more important, it does away with the chemical after-effects. No violent shocks are needed to such aims! Low voltage, low power, various frequencies, undulating signals of a certain kind suffice. That is what I have found out. I developed a means, which at first needed implants of electrodes and strong electromagnetic fields. Now, my research has evolved to much softer means.'

Phantassus held a silence. He asked Phil for water, waited until the young man returned, and drank slowly. Only then did he continue his tale to Véronique.

'My research evolved into a simple helmet which holds the electric circuits that can affect your brain. The helmet also holds computer chips and memory cells. The helmet targets certain zones of neurons at will, and more directly than the best chemicals. I have used other men and women before you, of course, to refine my methods. I too have been the guinea pig for my own experiments. In fact, I use several methods in my helmet, and I can combine them. So many possibilities opened up, that I need added tests, on other persons but myself. I survived well enough the latest model of my helmet. Now, I would like to test and refine the workings of my final apparatus. It consists merely of a light helmet to be placed on the head, and all one has to do is to plug in the helmet to a wall electric socket. A small device lets you control what happens inside the helmet, and thus what feelings one can induce in a brain. You need not fear. I tried the helmet on myself numerous times already, convinced of its total safety. I devised various means of controlling the intensity and the nature of the stimulations. I assure you, I have tested them on myself. What I now would like to find out is how a certain

setting of intensity and nature has effects on other people, and of course, primordially on the brain parts of the other sex that produce hallucinatory images.’

Phantasmus waited a little, drank, and then said, ‘that is where you come in, dear Véro. What I propose to do is slow and cumbersome, but essential. I propose two tests per day for you, not more, not less. Each test will have another effect and another intensity of effect. I shall come to you each evening to install these two parameters into the helmet’s controlling device. I would like you for each experiment to note your feelings, sensations, and the kind of images that appear to your mind. I need you to note meticulously what you eat in the morning and what at noon, before the experiments. I need you to note what happens to you during the experiment. How do you feel? Do you feel nauseous or not at all? I need you to take note of exactly what you feel during the experiment, while the helmet is active, and how you feel afterwards, and for how long. I prepared a few pre-printed sheets, so that you do not forget these categories. There is one set of five pages per experiment. At the end is a special entry, allowing you to note any remarkable effect or event outside the other, pre-printed descriptions. All this is in the form of questions and answers. You can fill in the answers in your own words, as spontaneously as possible. Each kind of experiment lasts three days, during which you cannot take any chemical drugs. I am not sure whether the helmet can suppress also the craving of your body for chemical drugs. We can talk about that possible issue in the evenings. I will help you, of course. I do not want you to live in pains of withdrawal. We shall assess whether you need additional chemical methods to satisfy your body. The great benefit of my new method is precisely the desintoxication, you see. It offers freedom, liberty from drug pills or from chemical substances in any form.’

The dream master stopped talking for a few moments. He asked of Véronique whether she could follow his reasoning. He seemed satisfied when she nodded. She kept her silence. Phantasmus looked at Phil and continued.

‘The experiments are part of my research and part of my deliberate settings in the helmet. I can therefore offer you money. Quite a lot of money, actually, if you work well together with me and Phil. I am allowed to offer you two hundred Euros per three days of experimentation, but we will only use the helmet three days a week. In one month, you can earn up to eight hundred Euros. The experiment can last many months yet. My aim will be to devise various helmets for various sensations. I will bring in new parameters to produce a broad scale of feelings and images. I know already this method can bring you to heights of rare and fine experiences, and to a kind of peace of mind as you never experienced before. In the rare event the helmet might seem dangerous, the images or sensations too strong, you can stop it at will with a button, or simply rip it off your head. The effects will stop as soon as the transcranial stimulation with stop. The effects will disappear, I believe, instantly. That is another advantage of the helmet. Nevertheless, I assure you the helmet is quite harmless. I merely have to fine-tune it by the information you can provide. I explain all this to you in a quite friendly way, because what you can tell me is of prime importance to me. I suppose the main reason, if you desire to know one, for my wishing you no harm at all, is because you are so special, so precious to me, so important for the tuning of the signals in the helmet. My experiment would be useless without your help. Now, would you be willing to help me?’

Véronique Dupas' mind raced. Phantassus saw her eyes move from right to left. He knew she was thinking, considering, weighing the proposal. Véronique was afraid of somebody tampering with her mind. She was suspicious, and believed not for one instant the helmet was totally harmless. It was untested. Phantassus would drive it to unheard-of, unexplored territory. How well would she survive? She was attracted by it, because the explanation of her dream master sounded like a means to call a halt to her dependency on chemical drugs. Once she would be off drugs, she thought, she could escape her newest life and enter another one, the life that corresponded to her true dream, her own dream, her aims for life. She would also have money. With the money, she could pay for better support and for studies, and possibly for renting a small studio of her own. She would be off the streets for months. At about one thousand Euros a month, she could earn six thousand Euros in six months, ten thousand in the year. One year separated her from her established date of the first of August of next year, when she definitely wanted to break with her current kind of life, come what may. She did not think the experiments would last for more than six months. The man who called himself Phantassus would want to sell his apparatus as soon as possible.

Véro nodded to the dream master.

She said, 'I have good faith in you, Master Phantassus. I believe you will not hurt me. I agree with the experiments. When do we start?'

Phantassus and Phil looked enchanted, cheerful even. They shook hands with Véronique, and said she would not regret her collaboration to the project.

3.3. At Trioteignes

Evening had fallen over Robois, but not yet all the light of the summer day had faded. It was about nine o'clock, and one of those moments when everybody regretted another day passed, yet still enjoyed the last dim light of the warming sun, and expected the veil of darkness to start sinking over the land soon. Count Charles de Trioteignes pushed the set of buttons that would flood with very bright, very white light, the castle grounds, the bridge, the courtyard and the path that led from the village street to the castle. In ancient times, flaming torches would have welcomed the visitors to the front door of Castle Trioteignes. Now, a series of sodium and mercury lamps threw their cones of light on the cars that rode up to the manor of the Trioteignes family. All cars had to be abandoned in front of the bridge, but the weather was calm and dry. It did not rain, the stones sent their accumulated warmth in the air, inviting to a short, agreeable walk. Fragrances of young, new leaves and new flowers filled the air. Count de Trioteignes had invited some of his closest friends to have supper at nine at the castle. His wife, Monique Ghijsen, was preparing the simple but tasty dishes for which she was famous. Charles had helped her a little, until she chased him out of her kitchen to prepare the aperitif.

Diego de Trioteignes and his wife Deniz Sürkoglou would come. This was the real reason for the supper, as Charles wanted Diego to meet his old friend's son Georg Stratten, Count von Schillersberg. Charles hoped the young people would take up relations again. Charles's daughter Laura would present Georg Stratten.

Two other couples had been invited only, the best friends of the house. First there would be the *Commissaire* of Police Joseph Bikri with his wife Samia Bennani, and then also the mayor of Robois, Robert Jacquet and his wife Simone Ash. Simone was equally real family to the Trioteignes, coming from an English branch. Samia Bennani was a successful lawyer in Brussels.

Robert Jacquet led his own construction company in Robois, and also another construction firm in partnership with the Trioteignes in the Middle-East Arabic Emirates.

Simone Ash was a medical doctor. She combined a practice in general medicine in Robois with a part-time job in a radiologist association in Brussels. The Jacquets were linked to the Trioteignes of old, as members of their family had served the Trioteignes well for longer than one hundred years and through two World Wars. Those particular relations had evolved in tight loyalty and in partnerships.

Joseph Bikri was a particularly good friend also of Charles and Diego de Trioteignes. He was born in Belgium, his wife in Morocco, and both originated in the past waves of immigrations from out of Morocco. Their connections with the Trioteignes and the Jacquets had evolved naturally and strongly.

The invited families were all tough and resilient men and women. They had overcome hardships together, and they were bound by common events they would not have conquered without each other's support. They were very honest, very intelligent, hard-working and warm-feeling people. They possessed natural talents each for management and organisation, and they faced their problems squarely and with courage, as well as the issues of their community of Robois.

As usual, for this was but one of regular gatherings of the friends, the guests assembled first in the Trioteignes living-room, the former main hall of the castle. The living-room led immediately to the dining-room. Still, by taciturn agreement, in respect for Count Charles de Trioteignes, who insisted on some formality, all the men wore suits, though no evening smokings. Only simple day-suits sufficed these days for Count Charles, and the suits could be opened. In the hot evenings, as this one might be, the jackets could be discarded on chairs after the aperitif. The women were nicely dressed in silk pants, or in flowered shirts and blouses. Traditionally, Charles served Champagne bubbles to his guests. This evening, in a sign of frivolity, he served a pink Champagne, bought from another of his friends, an independent vine-grower from near the town of Troyes in France.

Most of the guests had arrived. They waited, glasses in hand, for the last two persons to enter the large room, Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten.

‘The proverb says the ones who live closest to the place of invitation are invariably the last to come,’ Charles began to mutter.

Monique Ghijzen, who had left her kitchen an instant to drink with the guests, made large eyes at him not to spoil her evening with formalities. Charles smiled agreeably back. This time, he had meant no offence, merely formulating an excuse for his daughter. The more so, because the door to the living-room once more opened, and in strode Georg, with Laura at his arm.

For a moment, Charles was astonished, thinking his daughter and Georg made a fine couple, a man and woman who seemed to belong together. He was always the kind of man who studied his children thoroughly to notice whether they were worried about something, or happy or unhappy. This evening, Diego and now also Laura, looked particularly radiant. This was quite the normal state of Diego, but surprising for the very serious, stern Laura, his beloved daughter. Charles found his daughter a very beautiful woman this evening. Maybe he still saw her as the little girl who had sat on his lap so often. Laura looked spectacularly marvellous and radiant this evening, at Georg’s side. Her robe was simple, but the sumptuous silk fitted her like a glove, accentuating her female curves. Georg too made a fine figure of the dignified German count’s son. He entered with eyes only for Laura, which surprised Laura’s mother not a little. His attitude became more formal when he advanced, but he let go of Laura’s arm unwillingly.

The two saluted everybody, shook hands and embraced, then came to sit in seats far from each other, Laura near the women really, and Georg near Charles de Trioteignes and Joseph Bikri. The chatting thereafter was cheerful. Georg had to recall in detail the family ties between the German and the Belgian families. He had to give account of the health of his parents. He had to enumerate how many family members still lived in their manor, of which Georg’s father was the lord and master. The conversation then continued on how well Germany was doing in the European economy, and why.

Georg remained a long time in the centre of all attention. He managed to comment without shocking someone, without excessive pride, and by refraining from hurting feelings by the apparent resounding success of the German industry and businesses. He talked with modesty, which Laura considered was a fine, tactful attitude. He was more outright and direct with her.

But then, Laura thought, this was a society gathering. Georg knew well how to remain level with everyone. Had he not been educated to do so?

The Champagne did its job of warming up the conversation, which evolved in exchanges accompanied by exclamations and laughter. Georg did not yet know this was an assembly in which any true feelings could be stated out loudly, if honestly felt. Anyone could be criticised for opinions or statements, in the best of meanings. He stayed a little more formal than even Count Charles.

Georg was also quite surprised when Charles de Trioteignes blurted out rather soon, ‘Laura and Georg, how went your investigation today? Have you found out anything useful about the drug trade between Namur and Basel?’

Joseph Bikri’s head jumped up. He thought he had understood right. His eyes went from one to the other. Georg was so surprised he forgot to answer. He thought the moment and the audience particularly badly chosen to start discussing this subject. He had heard of Charles de Trioteignes being the smartest man on earth. So why breaking this delicate subject to their families, in front of a *commissaire* of police? What crossed the mind of Charles to do such a thing?

Laura stepped in before he could react.

‘No drug trade, father, just strange dealings and shipments of chemical products that might be transformed to drugs. Explain it all, Georg. After all, we are all concerned, here, and the *commissaire* is a dear friend. He certainly will hear our story with interest.’

Georg swallowed a mouthful of Champagne, hesitated still, and then started on a brief account on why he had travelled to Robois with Laura. He explained what he and Laura had found, which was not much, he claimed.

‘Both of our families,’ he began, ‘own shares in a chemical and pharmaceutical company based in Basel. At the last assembly of administrators, Laura and I voted against a participation in the company offered by a Colombian investment fund. The Swiss directors wanted a raise of capital. Our shares would have become diluted, so that we would have lost control over the company. Moreover, I had discovered considerable amounts of ephedrine were being sent by ship from Antwerp to a neighbouring country of Colombia. Other quantities were sent by truck to Namur in Belgium. Ephedrine is a basic product for pharmaceuticals, with a structure close to that of amphetamines. Many hallucinatory drugs, such as ecstasy, can be derived from ephedrine in a rather straightforward, simple production process. I obtained the address in Namur to which the ephedrine had been transported. When Laura and I arrived there, the address proved to be fake. We only found a plaque with the name of the company, Oneiro SA, no warehouse and no plant. The address was in the middle of the city, by the way. Laura found at the city hall the building belonged to a company called Robchem. We also could obtain the name of a man who was the manager of the building. His address was here, in Robois.’

Georg sipped from his glass to emphasize some the suspense. He looked at Laura. She nodded encouragingly.

He continued, ‘we first rode to the man’s villa, remarked nothing special, and then we rode on to Robchem. We noticed nothing special there, either. Then, we followed one of the last men to leave the Robchem premises, and we tracked his car to Namur. We arrived at an

apartment block in which the man might live. So far, nothing of interest there too. However, we saw a strange coming and going of young men at the building. The block in the suburb of Namur, in Jambes, seemed to us some sort of distribution point of a drug traffic. We saw young men, which we presumed were dealers, come in and out. I also believe the building lays under the surveillance of the police. We saw a car with two men watching the building. The car must be of the police, the men police officers. That is about all we discovered. We would like to search for some more information on the company Robchem. We propose to dig deeper in part of the information we need, such as who are the owners and administrators and maybe the direction board. We will do that tomorrow, out of the Internet databases accessible to us. If indeed the Basel firm is involved in drug trafficking, though merely with the basic ingredients, we intend to intervene and stop the company from producing ephedrine, come what may for the financial results of the firm. That is about it!’

Georg sipped again at his Champagne. He had not looked once to his neighbour, Joseph Bikri, the policeman. He thought he knew how the mind of the *commissaire* would be whirling like a machine of logic in overdrive.

Joseph Bikri indeed reacted immediately.

He said, ‘when hallucinatory drugs are involved, this becomes police matter, of course. I don’t think the Belgian police can touch a Swiss company that produces not drugs, but merely the basic products for pharmaceuticals, even though those products can also be diverted to the production of drugs. Proof must be delivered about all allegations. For instance, how do you know the apartment block of Jambes is used as a basis for drug trade?’ Georg tapped on his nose, ‘a hunch! We saw three young men enter the building and come out again a little later. The young men wore the same kind of plastic bag when they left. The building definitely was under surveillance by two men in a normal car, but the men were watching the apartment block, all right. I know this is no proof, only gut feeling.’

Joseph Bikri smiled. ‘I understand. You would be surprised to know how much I apply gut feeling too in my criminal cases. Let’s suppose you guessed right. But the men in the car might also be competition, you know. Industrial espionage is also widely applied, these days. Would you say the drug trade is important or small?’

‘I would call it considerable, even for a small country such as Belgium. With the amounts of ephedrine shipped, and with those quantities being transformed into methamphetamines, more than ninety percent of the generated products would have to be exported out of the country. Only a small fraction could be distributed in Namur. By the way, if I were them, one of the men responsible for the illegal drug production, I would absolutely not sell the stuff near my manufacturing facilities. The transport of drugs by Robchem, if indeed there is such a production, would have to be shipped or transported out of Belgium. Transport might have been organised to places all over Europe. A country such as France could be flooded with drugs from out of Robois. You don’t need a large plant to produce thousands of ecstasy pills or the like. And the shipments out of Antwerp would be many times higher still. If drug trafficking is truly happening, it has to happen on a worldwide scale, a truly exceedingly important and completely illegal trade.’

His words caused an awkward, embarrassed silence to reign in the hall for a few moments.

Joseph Bikri heard what Georg told. He hesitated a long while.

‘Fine, fine,’ Bikri said, though he didn’t find the issue fine at all. ‘I can tell you the police force knows a little about an intensification of drug dealing in Namur. This must remain very confidential, what I am telling you now. We do have a building under surveillance in Namur, but I don’t know the exact address. I may get to that information by tomorrow, but I too will have to remain discreet. I don’t want to involve you immediately in a man hunt. In any case, this is very serious matter, even though you only formulated hunches and have no proof. Here is what you will have to do. I am going to need a written and signed statement about your findings, as soon as possible. This is in your own interest. In this kind of business, violence happens often, and more often than you might think. The police may intervene suddenly and grab you, suspecting you two might also be involved in the drug trade. I promise I will remain totally discreet with your statements. I will only produce them when you run any danger. If nothing comes from our investigation or from your involvement, your statements will disappear in the archives. Otherwise, they can be a guarantee for your freedom.’

Laura and Georg nodded, but Georg did not at all seem happy about the procedure, nor with this sort of involvement of the Robois police. He was not used yet to the ways such matters were handled in Robois and in the Trioteignes family.

All criminal matters of more than pure personal interest, were discussed and treated by an informal council in the town he had arrived in. The council was very informal. It consisted of the people present at the Trioteignes supper, plus the representatives of the religious communities, and a few more. These were the dean of the priests of the Catholic Church, the imam of the Islam mosque of Robois, the informal head of the Muslim community – who was Karim Khedis, the former gardener of the Hotel Bayard, and also sometimes Monsieur François of the same hotel. Not all these persons knew always all details, but *Commissaire* Bikri discussed with them the implications of the cases, gathered information from them, asked for advice and support, and could count on their absolute discretion. These men had access to wide-reaching, totally informal networks of information provisioning. The system was now at work also with Laura and Georg’s information on the possible drug trade. *Commissaire* Bikri could not provide the most sensitive data of his police work, but some information was needed to be shared to have the community of Robois work efficiently.

Joseph Bikri now asked, ‘what was the name of the man you traced back to Robois and to Robchem?’

Laura answered, ‘his name was Bernard Gorelle!’

Several faces straightened when that name fell in the Trioteignes living-room. Charles de Trioteignes was particularly startled. He suppressed a curse.

He exclaimed, ‘Bernard Gorelle was one of Count Gauthier de Buisseyre’s directors in the Aeolus case, the case of the electrical generators, of the modern windmills he wanted to impose on Robois and make a fortune with. Gorelle was never sentenced in the court trial, because he could prove he was not in the country during the assignment of the intimidation team that was sent to Robois. When Gorelle is involved, the Black Count Buisseyre won’t be far off! Gorelle must be only one man of a basket of money-grabbing, unscrupulous, criminal crabs!’

‘The premises of Robchem are situated right behind Recycfast,’ Laura remarked.

That detail brought more shock on Charles de Trioteignes’ face.

‘Recycfast was a subsidiary of Buisseyre’s company Aeolfast,’ he explained. ‘Recycfast was sold after the affair, but not all the terrains the company owned in the neighbourhood. You can be certain, then, the count is involved.’

‘Who is this count?’ Georg wanted to know.

‘A psychopath,’ Charles de Trioteignes spat out immediately, ‘a true criminal. He is a man who wants to make money, very much, much, very much money, by any means, the quick and dirty way. I wouldn’t be surprised he is financing the setup. I would never have thought this still possible in Belgium. If the count is involved, the trafficking by definition must be going on in a grand scale!’

‘Gorelle has been involved in petty crime too,’ Joseph Bikri could add. ‘If I remember well, he had a criminal record even before he arrived in Robois. I knew he worked at Robchem, but I did not suspect he might be involved in criminal activities here. He plays the very respectable businessman in Robois. He is a member of several dignified service associations. In those, he can meet his potential partners in business. He turns up at almost all of the local festivities and events. He always walks very well dressed. His wife, who resembles a fashion model, follows him in tow. He is a loud-mouthed man, a force of nature, who talks with wide gestures, is always the centre of attention, and – I dare add - who enjoys the admiration of the Robois women. He displays an imposing personality.

I will keep an eye on the company now, and on Gorelle. I can have the company papers controlled by my officers, and more tightly control the papers of the trucks that enter his warehouse. I can try to get a list of Robchem personnel, maybe by our captain of the fire brigade. If drugs are involved, Gorelle must have a Head Chemist. He must have laboratory personnel. They may be family of people of Robois we know. I cannot search the building officially without serious, quite supported suspicions, or better, proof of wrongdoing. And I must not hamper a possible investigation of the police of Namur. But a lot can be done discreetly. This can get complex, my friends!’

At that moment, Deniz dropped another small grenade in the living-room.

‘Gorelle has been at the farm a few days ago. He asked for Monique Ghijsen, as the owner of the farm, but he didn’t know of our and her connections with the Trioteignes family. I guess the clerks at the Town Hall had a good laugh with him and held back that crucial piece of information. Good people! He wanted to buy some land we own on the other side of the National Road. He said he wanted to build a villa on the piece of land he desired. Why would he do that, when he already lives in a villa of Robois? My guess is he aims to build a new factory. He is expanding his business! I didn’t take his attitude gladly.’

Diego frowned.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

He suspected somebody who was not in the good graces of Deniz could not leave his house unscathed.

‘Not much happened,’ Deniz reddened. ‘He slipped while he made a pass at me. He hit his head a little on our blue stone stairs in front of the door. He lost some blood and his wits. You know how easily a head bleeds. He passed out. He came by when I poured a bucket of cold water over his head. He was dazed when he rode out of our yard. He accelerated too quickly and scraped his fine, black Mercedes at our gate-stones. I’m afraid that is going to cost him an entire new side-chassis, for he scraped wide and long.’

Deniz remained sitting in her leather seat, sipping again of her Champagne. Everybody looked at her in astonishment, then the room exploded in laughter. They all knew Deniz was not a kitten to handle without thick gloves.

While her guests talked about Bernard Gorelle, Monique Ghijsen had stayed in her kitchen. She entered the living-room at that moment, surprised but happy her guests were having such a good time. They had to explain. Monique shrugged. She announced she was going to serve supper. The women stood and joined her in the kitchen to help her.

Quite late in the night, the party broke up. The subject of Gorelle and Robchem was not brought up further at the table. The couples that didn't live in Castle Trioteignes rode home. Diego de Trioteignes drove his car over the smaller countryside roads to the farm. His wife, Deniz Sürkoglou, felt tired and a little tipsy. She stayed silent while Diego drove in the darkness.

Her mind wasn't dulled, though.

Suddenly, she whispered, 'there is something funny about this Georg Stratten!'

Diego smiled. 'You felt it too, then! I should have thought so. BND?'

The BND was the abbreviation for the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, of which departments of the German secret services were part.

'If he truly is a German, then yes,' Deniz confirmed, turning to her husband. 'He smelled drug dealers and police inspectors. Only other police inspectors do that! I would say he belongs to an international drug combating department. If he is one of us, one of the good guys. If not, he can be anything. He must be a good guy! Your father is sharp. He allows nothing else but good guys in his home. I bet he knows all about Georg, and more! And I bet Joseph Bikri has understood, too.'

Diego was appalled, 'yes, my father knows more than we do. He always knows more than we. He must have run scared, though. He brought the investigation of Georg wide in the open. He literally begged for the implication of Joseph Bikri. I thought Georg was going to have an apoplexy when Charles asked him to tell about what he and Laura had done in the afternoon. I bet Charles already knows. But Laura doesn't!'

'She doesn't,' Deniz confirmed again. 'And she's in love with Georg.'

'What?' Diego exclaimed, and he had to correct his driving, for he almost drove into a pasture from sheer shock.

'I can tell, darling, I'm a woman, you know! Yes, your sweet little sister, the eternal spinster, is hopelessly in love with her German fighter. A soldier or a policeman he is, I can tell too! He walks like a soldier, he speaks like a soldier, he smells like a soldier. Or police, or secret service. He must be an officer, like you were when you came to fetch me in Istanbul. I think he's in love with her, too, though I'm not one hundred percent sure about him and his feelings. He's a cold fish, that one! They threw each other those greedy looks! She was eating him raw, I tell you, and he was ogling her over Monique's soup terrine. His glances were definitely more tender. Those Germans are all romantics at heart! I got all warm inside when I noticed the looks they exchanged!'

'Well I ever,' Diego exclaimed. 'My sister in love! Who would have thought such a thing possible? I'm glad for her. But we must tell her what we suspect about Georg. I can't allow my sister getting hurt!'

‘Oh, who says she’ll be hurt, finding out by herself what he is? If he loves her, he’ll confess, eventually, sooner or later. These are affairs of the heart, darling. Better not interfere! Let nature do its work, I would say.’

‘No thing comes between me and my sister, would sing Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye’ Diego vowed.

‘Don’t be silly!’ was all the reactions he received from Deniz.

‘By the way,’ she said a little later, correcting him, ‘it were more Rosemary Clooney, George’s aunt, and Vera-Ellen who finally sang in the same song something like: and lord help the sister who comes between me and my man. That counts for brothers too.’

Diego smiled. He never won an argument from Deniz. They held a silence until they rode near to their farm.

‘Do you get warm inside when I throw you nice, furtive glances?’ Diego dared asking flirtingly.

‘No, definitely not,’ Deniz whispered, smiling at him once more. ‘I get very hot, very, very hot inside, so hurry up, darling!’

Diego laughed, and pushed on the accelerator pedal. The car jerked forward. Their night was not over yet.

3.4. Phantasus

Véronique Dupas followed the instructions of the man who wanted to be called Phantasus to the letter. She called him her Dream Master in private. Phantasus came briefly each evening before a day's experiments to adjust the settings of the helmet Véro had to place on her head for the next set of tests. He entered the settings from out of a small, portable personal computer, loading them into the computer chip of the helmet via a long, flexible cable. He also had left her a set of papers on which she had to note her feelings and sensations, and on which she had to answer in writing a list of questions. The papers took her never more than five minutes. She wrote succinctly and to the point, often in telegraphic style. Phantasus didn't ask more, but he nevertheless interrogated her on each experiment. The Dream Master checked on what she had written, tested it for consistency, and used the information to define other settings. He took notes for himself on his computer. Véronique was sure he was also checking on her, for the experiments differed very much, so that she could not cheat on the results. Véronique did as she was told, and Phantasus seemed pleased with her.

For her experiments, Véronique went to sit in her sofa. She put on the helmet, plugged it in the electrical socket, and activated the manual button to put the electrical circuits to work. The first time, she had been truly scared to push that button. After the initial experiment, which she knew now had been particularly smooth, she was delighted. The helmet reproduced practically the same feelings as ecstasy pills. She left light-headed, almost euphoric. The thoughts and voices in her head receded as if they had been wiped away, and she felt happy. Her experience lasted no more than ten minutes, until she heard the clicking sound the Dream Master had told her marked the end of the experiment. The effect then lasted almost an entire morning before it petered out. Other experiments lasted much longer, up to an hour under the helmet, and sometimes the effects disappeared at the end of the helmet program. Along with other settings for the afternoon and for the following days, Véro would have to endure side-effects. Those, she had to take note of with special care. The side-effects seemed not to bother her Dream Master too much, and Véronique had to admit they remained limited, compared to the effects of some of the chemical drugs she had taken before. Still, she considered them a major nuisance, and she commented on them in the strongest terms to the man who wanted to be called Phantasus.

During one of the experiments, Véronique actually fainted. She passed out and stayed unconscious only for a few minutes, but she got scared about what Phantasus could do to her brain after that incident. She realised the experiments gradually became much stronger and varied, until the helmet reproduced the strong hallucinatory effects of large doses of heroin. Colours and images came very vividly and rapidly to her mind, until she was left once more on the brink of fainting. During such moments, she became totally disconnected from reality. Her eyes turned blank, and afterwards she remained lying a long time in a stupor on the sofa. During other experiments, she convulsed in slight seizures, as if a strong electrical current had stirred up her nerves and moved her body. She could not control her limbs anymore. At other times, she suffered from mild headaches, and from pains at her scalp. She felt various discomforts, such as temporary hearing loss, loss of memory for periods of several days. Phantasus modified the settings, but repeated the same experience without the side effects.

Véro became moody. Even without the helmet, and after the three days of experiments, she felt sad and depressed. But suddenly, her mood could swing back to outright euphoria and happiness.

After the first two days of the electrical helmet experiments, Véronique began to feel the pains and moods of drug withdrawal, of withdrawal from the chemical drugs she had received before. Phantassus and Phil then gave her pills, which she suspected were methamphetamines of some kind, to counter these issues. She noticed Phil and Phantassus gradually lowered the doses of substitutes, so that she ended in a much clearer state of mind. She was glad to conclude she would soon be independent from the need for chemical drugs. Her personal aspirations stayed firmly in her mind. She feared also the addiction of the effects of the helmet, but she learned to manage the hours she passed without the helmet. During her long weekends, when she had to try no new experiments, she realised to her great satisfaction she felt no special longing for the helmet's effects, other than the lightness of head which consoled her for the way she was living. She went out for long walks in Namur, ate in small but fine restaurants, and went to see movies. She had the illusion she was living as any other girl her age in Namur. She liked to stroll along the stream. She felt strangely better and better, more self-conscious than ever. She was able to read, also difficult and long novels, and she enjoyed interesting television programs. She assured herself she had increasingly more control over her own mind and over her moods. She could think more clearly, with more awareness about her current situation. She realised she had to get out of this kind of life, the sooner the better, but she stayed on. She scolded herself for being lazy. The truth was, she was afraid of what would happen to her outside the apartment, when she would become the prey of society again. Her only pain was the pain of loneliness. She had at first enjoyed her privacy. Lately, the loneliness began to weigh on her. She felt empty in soul and being.

On one of the afternoons, while she was discussing the effects of the experiences of the days before to the Dream Master, they both heard shouts and a great commotion in the corridor. Phantassus dropped his notebook computer on his seat. He hurried out of Véronique's rooms. He didn't close the door. Véronique remained sitting stiff on her sofa for a while. Then she followed the Dream Master. She too wanted to find out what was happening. She still heard strong voices and screams from out of the apartment of the two girls that Phil visited regularly. She cautiously went up to the apartment, without making any noise. She noticed the door had been left ajar. She opened the door a little more. Véronique looked inside. She saw a young man, younger than she, lying on the floor of the living-room of the apartment. The young man shook with strong convulsions, much stronger than Véronique had experienced during her helmet experiments. The boy was foaming at the mouth and slightly screaming. Foam dripped on the carpet, until Phil pushed a large handkerchief in his mouth. The screams stopped to muffled sounds, which also did not last long. Phil leaned over the young man on one side, the Dream Master on the other. They looked at the body, oblivious of the open door. The two men talked to each other, rather calmly.

'He must have had a history of epilepsy, which he didn't mention to us, hid from us,' Véronique heard Phantassus say. 'I have no idea how to handle this crisis. It never happened

to me so far. I suppose the best we can do is to let him convulse until the crisis ends, like in real epilepsy crisis situations.'

The two men held the boy down for only another short while. The young man's convulsions seemed to diminish, and then they stopped. Phil stood up.

'The crisis seems to be over,' he said to the man called Phantásus.

'The damned girls,' Phantásus answered, 'the pills next to his body were not destined for him, not now, in not such a strong dose. He was not prepared and not used to them. The girls were not supposed to hoard them! Damn!'

'The girls must have given them to him, because they have such a strong effect,' Phil murmured.

'I don't think so,' Phantásus was of a different opinion. 'He may have found the pills in a drawer, for the girls are out of the apartment. He took them on his own, not knowing what they contained. He knew the girls were on drugs! The word for drugs is written on the box.'

'Damn, damn, damn,' Véronique heard the Dream Master exclaim, again and again.

She saw how Phantásus was now very nervous and affected by the incident. He clearly could not cope well with the situation. Phil was calmer. Phantásus took the wrist of the drugged young man in his hands. His fingers probed. He urged Phil to silence.

'I feel no heart pulse anymore,' the Dream Master exclaimed.

Phil went on his knees and felt at the young man's neck. He sought the carotid.

'No, no pulse here, either,' Phil noted. 'Could he have died?'

The Dream Master put his hand under the nose of the boy, then at his mouth.

'He doesn't breathe anymore,' the Dream Master told. 'We lost him! We lost him! He is dead!'

'Maybe we should apply artificial breathing,' Phil suggested, 'do mouth-to-mouth breathing.'

'No use,' Phantásus told. 'He is dead. His heart must have broken during the convulsions.'

He stood.

'He is dead,' Phantásus again declared.

Phil brought his hands to his hair, 'what are we going to do with him?'

Phantásus answered sharply, 'the same as with the first one. Put him in a bag, bring him to your car in the basement, then dispose of the body far from Namur. You did well last time. You can drive the body to France, tomorrow. Find a quiet, abandoned place far from the Belgian border. Drop him in the stream, dressed as he is. Burn his identity card. The police will suspect he died from an overdose, which will be the truth. Nobody will trace him to Namur and to us.'

'If I leave around five o'clock today, nobody will bother me,' Phil continued. 'The police won't stop cars in the main traffic hour of the day. I'll drop the body in the Meuse around nine o'clock in the evening. I know quiet spots. I can be back by midnight.'

'We should be more careful in the future,' Phantásus added. 'We shouldn't have put the boy together with the girls. We have been negligent. We should have known he would have searched for anything, money, drugs, in the girls' cupboards.'

'We didn't have more apartments. It was a temporary necessity. We couldn't put him with Véro, and show him her experiments,' Phil whispered.

At that moment, the elevator hummed and people would soon come into the corridor. Véronique sped back to her own apartment. She remained standing in her door opening, but inside her apartment, her hand against the panel. Her heart beat quickly and very strongly. She could hear the thumping of her heart. Phil must have heard the people arriving. He put his head out of the open door, but he only saw a woman and two small children step out of the elevator. He shut the door the Dream Master had forgotten to close entirely. He had not seen Véronique.

At that moment, Véronique too had drawn her door closed. She ran to the bathroom and vomited violently. She realised she had just seen a young man die of an overdose of drugs! Phil and Phantasus had committed murder! Murder by negligence, but still murder!

Inside the other apartment, Phil and the man called Phantasus sat down on the sofa for a few moments. They wiped the transpiration from their foreheads. They discussed how to dispose of the body. Phil didn't expect the girls to return to their apartment for a few hours. They decided to act immediately. They would have to transfer the dead boy to the basement, to Phil's car. They enveloped the boy in dark blue garbage bags, and rolled him in the floor carpet. They took the elevator, hoping nobody would enter or call it from another floor. They encountered nobody in the corridor and in the elevator. In the basement, they threw the body in Phil's car trunk. Phil could drive to France, following the road near the Meuse, a very touristic route, up to Givet in France, and then farther down the Meuse valley.

The Dream Master wanted to leave the apartment block as soon as possible. He first went back to Véro's apartment to fetch his notebook and other things, his raincoat. He didn't give more to Véro than a quick goodbye, and she merely nodded back, not turning her face to him. The Dream Master took the elevator and stepped out of the building. He went to his car, parked a little farther in the street. He rode back home, to the industrial zone of Turgoux in Robois, to Robchem.

At Robchem, Phantasus first went to his apartment on the first floor of the building. Three small apartments had been arranged to the rear, above his laboratory. He occupied one of these. From his rooms, he only had to descend a few stairs to directly enter his chemistry lab. He went down to it. His lab was a typical chemists' lab, with long, white tables and glass cupboards, lots of glass appliances, and several electrical instruments sitting on a narrow table along the walls. He had a large, very modern, sophisticated chromatograph there. Phantasus did not embark on new chemical reactions immediately. He still felt nervous from the incident in Namur. He entered the information he had gathered from Véronique and from the girls in the other apartment in his notebook computer. He deleted all the information he had assembled already about the deceased young man. He made new backup discs. Then, he read and compared his notes. He found which products the young man must have taken, and nodded. They were too heavy for him, indeed. He made annotations. He activated his special software to draw chemical molecules with complex 3D-structures. He worked.

Satisfied, and oddly calmed, the man called Phantasus went to his working table. He put on a long, white apron. He filled various glass test tubes with different liquid substances and checked the grams of a powder he mixed on a balance, continuing all the time making annotations. He poured the liquids into the powders. He placed the test tubes in a centrifuge

to mix the substances well, and then he placed them in an electric dryer. He let the liquid in the test tubes coagulate to a milky substance.

He had to wait for two hours to dry his products to a powder. He added two other powders to the test tubes in carefully weighted doses. When all was done, he took small doses from each test tube and placed the result of his chemical mixtures in the chromatograph, one sample after the other. Each time he read the results of the chromatographic analysis, and could decide on which products were present in the tubes. He was quite satisfied with the result. One by one, he placed the powders in a manually operated small machine to press pills. His hands didn't shake. When he had the pills, he looked for a set of small cardboard boxes and wrote names on them with a ballpoint. He slid the pills in the boxes. He had four boxes in all, with four different sorts of pills in them. He took up the boxes, and placed them carefully in his personal safe in the lab.

Phantasmus had finished his day's work near midnight. He was alone in the building of Robchem. A guard only patrolled in the plant, not in the part of the building in which the lab had been organised. He sighed. He went back, upstairs to his apartment. He drew off his apron and took a seat near a window. He smiled.

He slid a small disc in his CD-player. Metallica music sounded loud in his room. Later, he switched to a CD of baroque opera music. The music soothed his nerves. He went to the fridge in his kitchen, and poured a glass of Champagne from an opened bottle. He grunted, when he saw and tasted the sparkling wine was stale, without many bubbles. He drank the wine nevertheless. He now cheered to himself, holding the glass high.

He had survived the incident. Nobody would trace the young man to him. He thought it was time to start planning his vacation. Why not go on a vacation early? To where could he go this year? He didn't like the beaches, he didn't particularly like the sun. He didn't like to visit churches and castles. Museums didn't attract him. He liked the calmness of the sea, and the loneliness of the mountain lakes. To where would he drive this year? To the Algarve in Portugal? Too far! He settled for Brittany, with its dramatic coastline. He hadn't been in Brittany for years. The Finisterre could answer to his mood of this night. Yes, he would drive to the coast of Brittany, drive from town to village, from hotel to hotel, drive along the sea shores. He would find peace of mind and start anew after the vacations.

3.5. Gorelle returns

Diego de Trioteignes held about fifty cows in his farm. The price of milk was very low. He would have lost much money selling milk. This part of Diego's farming business would mean an almost constant catastrophe. It had already been the case when his mother managed the farm. The dire state of the dairy production in Belgium was not new. Monique Ghijssen had already started to transform her cows' milk into yoghurt, cheese and other products such as butter, which she sold to local shops. Later, in one of her former barns, she had opened her own shop for direct selling. The concept worked so well, and took on to great success. Her entire production went to the shop, and people came from far to buy the results of her biological agriculture. Diego continued this aspect of the work of his mother. He had now two girls and a man from the village of Trioteignes to make his cheese and hold accounts. Another woman held the shop open at all times. He had begun holding a herd of goats and produced extraordinary goat cheeses, which were in great demand, to broaden his spectrum of products. He also sold meat, from his own cattle and from the production of friendly farmers in the environs. Deniz helped him where she could and when she was needed.

The climate in Belgium and in Wallony had changed. It was getting warmer. It hardly ever froze in winter, and when it did, the frost remained low to the ground and stayed mild and short. It rained less.

Diego thought it interesting to try growing vines for wine-making. After all, in times long past, Wallony had been known as a vine-growing country. Had not Walloons in the Middle Ages helped growing Tokay grapes in Hungary?

Diego planted French vines for sparkling and white wines. He used German vines in an experimental way to produce sweeter white wines, and had started in a modest way to produce Merlot red wines. For that, he had to hire two agricultural workers to help in the vineyards and in the rest of the farm. A young, female oenologist had joined his team to mix the grapes and control the wine-making process. He hired in for a few months a German oenologist to help the first production of white wine from the German vines. He had invested much. He was now in his first year of making a modest profit from his vine-growing experiment. He was thinking of expanding his vineyard. Some of the farmers in the environs thought he was stark mad, but he was particularly proud of having transformed his traditional farm into entirely new directions. His new views were being successful, too. He kept the farm profitable, whereas all around him farmers stopped traditional farming and closed their enterprises.

One morning, Diego strode in boots, green loose shirt and dirty jeans into his courtyard, returning to the manor to have breakfast with his wife, when a splendid, black, large Mercedes stopped in front of his gate. The car did not ride through the gate into the yard. Diego was puzzled by what the Mercedes was doing so near to his farm. A tall, well-dressed, sun-burnt man stepped out. From the description given at his father's supper, Diego surmised the man had to be Bernard Gorelle.

'Here is a guy who doesn't take no for an answer,' Diego smiled inwardly.

He grinned. Gorelle didn't risk anymore driving into the farm's courtyard. Diego wondered what Bernard Gorelle wanted this time. Surely, he had not just come to repeat his proposal. Had Deniz not been clear enough?

Gorelle came on foot through the gate to say hello.

He called out, 'hi there! You must be Diego Trioteignes, if I'm not mistaken. My name is Bernard Gorelle. I am the General Manager of the company Robchem, situated at Turgoux. I've been here before, on business. A good morning to you, sir!'

'A good morning to you equally,' Diego said jovially. 'What can I do for you? Our dairy products are on sale in the shop, but we open only at ten.'

'Oh, well,' Gorelle hesitated, 'I'm not here to buy from your shop. I'm here to buy something altogether different. I wanted to talk to you about a project I would like to realise. As I said, I've been here before, but only found your wife, as you surely know. I have set my mind on a piece of land you or your mother owns near the National Road, straight on the other side of our plant of Robchem. I would like to buy this land to build me a villa, and so live closer to my work.'

'Oh, you don't like your villa of Robois anymore, the Bazaine villa? I'm sorry, no land of ours is for sale,' Diego answered.

He thus told Gorelle he knew the man already owned a villa in town.

Diego continued his way, as if his decision was final, the affair closed, and further discussion unnecessary. He was ignoring Gorelle's presence. The man insisted. Diego stopped in his tracks.

'Wait, wait!' Gorelle exclaimed. 'Think this through! I am willing to pay a very good price indeed for the land. I like that piece of land, which lays so conveniently close to my premises. I am willing to pay more for it than the usual price of agricultural land. I may pay you the price of construction terrain. We all know these are hard times for farmers. I've noticed your vines. Quite an investment! You will need new machines to work the vines. Some extra money for a piece of land lying far from your other property, laying fallow anyway, could be a useful addition to your yearly result. That land must be a burden to you. It cannot be used to grow grains, wheat and the like, for it is too wet, there. It is almost swampland! It won't be worth much to you as pasture, for too far from your stables, and the grass must be sour there. Other farmers confirmed this to me. Transport costs for bringing your cows to there are high. And the land is situated near the National Road, so it may be polluted by the car and truck traffic nearby. Since it lies so far from your farm, you won't be bothered at all by a new villa. The land is quite useless to you! Like I said, I can make it worth your while. Come on, Monsieur Trioteignes, you can get a nice stack of banknotes without turning your little finger the least. Your parents don't have to know about it. Does the count really know how risky profits are from farming?'

'You didn't quite understand me, didn't you?' Diego repeated. 'We don't sell land anymore. No land of ours, land of the Trioteignes, is on sale. That is final!'

Diego truly didn't want to be troubled again by Gorelle.

'Please leave my property,' Diego added then, 'and don't bother to come back pleading for a sale. A good day to you!'

Diego once more wanted to go his way to Deniz and breakfast. He was starving for a hot coffee, but Gorelle kept insisting.

‘Look,’ Gorelle came forward, stepping up to closer still to Diego. ‘I have set my mind on that piece of land! I want it. I know I have to pay a higher price. I can afford so much. I’ve been asking you politely, so far. That may change, you know! All kinds of misfortunes can happen to your business, so that you may well regret not having sold that piece of land to me. I won’t ever repeat my offer.’

Diego didn’t believe his ears.

‘What do you mean by misfortunes?’ Diego asked, also stepping forward and frowning his forehead.

He stood practically face to face with Gorelle. ‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Nothing serious,’ Gorelle smiled. ‘Your cows can be injured in the fields. They may get a sickness, so that they have to be slaughtered. Your shop may suddenly get a bad reputation, rumours may spread about your so-called biological agriculture. Your grain fields can be flattened, your potato fields may grow sour on fungi, and so on. So many bad things can happen to a farmer. You might want to protect yourself with a little reserve of funds! Better not make enemies in Robois, no?’

Diego decided Bernard Gorelle definitely had come to threaten him if he didn’t sell.

‘Monsieur Gorelle,’ Diego hissed through his teeth, ‘the most stupid thing in the world for you might be to try to threaten me in any way possible, however small. Far worse things might happen to you and your business than you could possibly wish for mine. Your business is much more vulnerable than mine to all sorts of catastrophes. Now, for your presence here, know I keep some fine German shepherd dogs in my stables. Should I set them loose in the courtyard? This is my property you’re on and I don’t feel responsible for what may happen to strangers on my property. I repeat a last time. Our land is not for sale. If the least of your so-called misfortunes happen to my farm, I swear to you that you will be the first to hear about it. I will know the cause of my misfortunes, and I will retaliate immediately, and harshly. A lot of misfortunes will then happen to you too.’

Bernard Gorelle’s grin disappeared. He reddened from anger in the face.

Diego didn’t give Gorelle time to answer.

He continued, ‘so, now, get out of my yard, for I’m bound to let my dogs run free in the yard, which is my perfect right. My dogs particularly hate strangers roaming in and about my property!’

Diego had not shouted his own threats. In the same way as Gorelle, he had spoken calmly, but his face and eyes had altered to a determination of steel. Bernard Gorelle shrunk away from Diego’s glance.

He stammered, ‘as you wish, Monsieur Trioteignes. Have it your way. I warned you. You’ll be hearing from me yet. This affair is not over, as far as I’m concerned.’

‘For me it is,’ Diego snarled. ‘I’m going to unleash my dogs now, Gorelle. You’d better be out of here fast. You’re trespassing on my property and I’ve ordered you twice to leave.’

Diego left Gorelle standing in the middle of his yard. He stepped resolutely to his stables. He took five steps, then looked around. Gorelle was walking to the gate. By the time Diego had reached the door of his stable, Bernard Gorelle was back at his car. Gorelle had run out of the

yard. He was opening the door of his Mercedes, his sole protection from the dogs. Diego waited a few seconds by the door of his goats' stable, watching still the car. Bernard Gorelle drove away with shrieking tyres.

Diego laughed heartily. He held no dogs in his farm. Deniz, his wife, didn't like dogs. Diego continued smiling when he went up to his manor. Deniz stood at a window looking into the yard. She too was smiling. She knew the trick Diego worked on unwanted visitors.

In the late morning of the same day, Bernard Gorelle phoned to the Town Hall of Robois. He called the office of the *bourgemestre* in the Abbey. A nice voice answered. Gorelle asked for and received a meeting with Robert Jacquet in the early afternoon.

By two in the afternoon, Bernard Gorelle rode to the centre of Haut-Robois. He rode to the former abbey. The various buildings of the Abbey were now used for the town's administration offices. The Town Hall was installed in the most imposing building, the abbot's halls. At the reception desk of the Town Hall, the lady behind the counter acknowledged Bernard Gorelle's meeting with the *bourgemestre*. She accompanied him to Robert Jacquet's office. Gorelle produced his nicest smile. The lady opened the door for Gorelle. Robert Jacquet sat behind his desk in the very large former abbot's reception room. He beckoned Gorelle to come forward, and to take a seat on the other side of his working table.

Jacquet stood and offered his hand, 'Monsieur Gorelle, how nice to meet you. I'm Robert Jacquet. What can I do for you?'

Gorelle shook hands, and sat. He continued to look around for a few moments, a little under the impression by the splendid wood-panelled walls and the old, oak ceiling.

Gorelle scraped his throat, and then began, 'Monsieur le *Bourgemestre*, I have come to bring you very good news for the town of Robois! As you may know, I am the owner and General Manager of the Robchem pharmaceutical factories, situated in the industrial area of Robois. We are a small, but particularly dynamic enterprise, and we are set on expansion.'

'I know who you are, Monsieur Gorelle,' Robert Jacquet interrupted him.

He held a solemn face, but leaned back in his seat.

'Fine, fine,' Gorelle continued. 'Well, the good news is I am glad and proud to announce Robchem is out for expansion. We are developing new products and we would like to expand our activities here, in Robois. We may soon start hiring at least ten and probably more workers of all sorts of qualification. Our growing business will prove a boost for the economy of the town and significantly lower unemployment in the region.'

Bernard Gorelle waited for a reaction, but none came.

Finally, Robert Jacquet mentioned, 'excellent news indeed, Monsieur Gorelle.'

Jacquet waited for more.

'Fine,' Gorelle continued after a while. 'We have one major issue, though. You see, Robchem exerts its highly-valued activities in plants we cannot expand for our needed extensions. We cannot afford serving two factories far from each other, as you can easily understand. We have to transport our basic products from one site to the other, and back. Now, a piece of agricultural land laying fallow, dirty and ugly, lies right on the other side of the National Road. That land would suit us ideally to build our second factory on. It would

need to be declared part of the industrial zone, of course, and possibly be expropriated by the town of Robois in the general interest, for us to build on.'

Robert Jacquet did as if he was reflecting on Bernard Gorelle's proposal.

He said, drawing a sad face, 'I see. Yes, I seem to know the location. Doesn't the property you covet and would like to acquire belong to the Trioteignes family? That land is not for sale.'

'Indeed, *Monsieur le Bourgemestre*. But the land can be expropriated in the interests of the town. The Trioteignes are counts. They don't seem to hold the interests of the town high in their banner. Is it not the duty of the father of the community to serve the economy and the welfare of the city? Such are not the concerns of old counts.'

'Monsieur Gorelle,' Jacquet told patiently, 'we have many fine pieces of land, open and unsold just a little farther down the National Road, and still in the industrial zone of Robois. That land would be quite cheaper than the land you would want to occupy from the Trioteignes family. The industrial zone has been excellently equipped with all necessary resources of electrical power, water, sewage disposal, roads, telecommunication optic fibre cables, servers for Internet access, and so on. These provisions aim to make life quite easier for new factories. You could build a new plant in our industrial zone nearby, probably even with the help of nice subsidies from the Walloon Region's administration. We might help you of course with the negotiations. I assure you the lands in the industrial zone are far better suited to your needs than the lands on the other side of the National Road.'

'I am aware of all you say,' Bernard Gorelle assured, shifting in his seat, and losing some of his patience.

The conversation with the Robois *bourgemestre* was not exactly proceeding as Bernard Gorelle had hoped. 'As I explained, we want to build close to our current implantation. We will be glad to take into account all expenses necessary to connect our new factory to the roads, electricity network, water, and so on. The terrain on the other side of the National Road suits us best. I would like to ask you to expropriate, in the name of the welfare of the city of Robois!'

'I'm very sorry, Monsieur Gorelle. Please be reasonable. I cannot propose the expropriation of lands merely at your pleasure. The more so, since the Trioteignes family are esteemed members of our community. I cannot propose expropriation, when perfectly fine industrial constructions sites are free, so near.'

'Must I understand you refuse my very reasonable but urgent demand?'

'I most definitely do so,' Robert Jacquet resolutely concluded.

'And what if I appeal to the Walloon Region to order the expropriation?'

'Monsieur Gorelle,' Jacquet pleaded, making a soothing face, 'you must know the expropriation demand addressed to the Region will be sent first and foremost to various committees of this town, and it will also be sent to this office for agreement. I tell you plainly we will refuse your demand, for the very good reasons I presented to you. You must also know an expropriation procedure takes a very long time, years even. The status of the land on that side of the road must be changed, a very complex procedure indeed! If you have an urgent need to expand, you would do much better and far more reasonably, to look at the lands just a little farther along the Road. We will be very happy to assist you in your search for the most appropriate terrains.'

‘No, I want that land!’ Gorelle shouted. His face contorted, ‘and I shall have it!’
‘Monsieur Gorelle, you forget yourself. I must confess I don’t understand why you are so focused on that particular piece of fallow and swampy land, as you yourself called it.’

Bernard Gorelle seemed to calm his nerves.

He whispered, ‘I can make it for you personally very much worth your while, you know, to help me get that land.’

‘Monsieur Gorelle, I hope I misunderstood you. I hope you are not trying to bribe me now, with such a proposal. Such is not the way I work and serve the good people of the town of Robois!’

‘No, no, assuredly not, that was not what I meant,’ Gorelle hastily added.

Gorelle held a silence, looked at his hands, fidgeted with his fingers and hesitated about his next question.

‘By the way, the owner of the land, presumably one Diego Trioteignes, is married to a woman called Deniz Sürkoglou. Could you inform me of what nationality this Mrs. Sürkoglou might be?’

‘I’m sorry once more, providing you with such information could mean to encroach on the privacy laws of our country. I am not allowed to offer you such information. Now, I have other work, Monsieur Gorelle, our time is up.’

‘Yes. I understand. You see, Monsieur Jacquet, if Mrs. Sürkoglou is not Belgian, maybe her papers are not quite in order as they should be. Is she truly married to Monsieur Trioteignes? Maybe it could be necessary to expel her out of the country as an illegal immigrant?’

‘One thing I can tell you, Monsieur Gorelle. Mrs. Sürkoglou is in all due order married to a Belgian citizen, namely to Monsieur Diego de Trioteignes. I can know. I married them myself. I told you, Monsieur Gorelle, our time is up. Please leave my office.’

‘I have powerful friends among the leading politicians of this country and region, *Monsieur le Bourgemestre*. I could support your position in Robois, or withdraw my support. Without my support, you would have a hard time being re-elected as *bourgemestre* in the next elections. You need friends, as we all do. You might turn out of friends in the political establishment!’

‘I only need the support and the votes of the people of Robois,’ Robert Jacquet answered. He stood up from his seat.

He shouted in a high-pitched voice, ‘Monsieur Gorelle, out, I tell you! I will never cede to blackmail and threats. And don’t come here again, unless you have very serious business with me. Do you walk out of here peacefully, or do I have to call in the help of the police next doors to have you accompanied out of my office? Out, I tell you!’

Robert Jacquet stretched his arm, his hand, and he pointed to the door with his long finger. Bernard Gorelle stood, and left, slowly, in all dignity.

When Gorelle had closed the door behind him, Robert Jacquet exclaimed out loudly, to himself alone, ‘well I ever! Threats and blackmail! I would have thought nobody in Robois would have dared to talk to me like that. Who does this guy Gorelle think he is?’

The next half hour, Robert Jacquet spent at the telephone. He talked to Diego Trioteignes, to Charles Trioteignes, and to Joseph Bikri. Gorelle’s reputation in the administration of the town of Robois was made that afternoon. Not for the better!

Chapter 4. Commissaire Bikri's intervention

4.1. The Robois Police Force

The day after the supper at Castle Trioteignes to which he had been invited, quite early, even before breakfast, Georg Stratten rode in a car given to him by Charles de Trioteignes, to the police station of Robois. He had told nothing about this visit to Laura. He had also not phoned the Abbey for a meeting with *Commissaire* Bikri. Georg rode to the Abbey in haste, hoping to find the *commissaire* in his office. He had heard mentioning at the supper the former abbey of Robois was the place where also Bikri, among other town administrations, held his office. He was lucky, for just as he arrived, Joseph Bikri walked into the police station.

Commissaire Bikri was on foot. His home lay not far from the Abbey, so he often thus went to his office, sniffing in the air and greeting so many people he knew in his town. Joseph Bikri noticed Georg stepping out of a car, coming towards him. He took Georg with him to his rooms. While entering, they met the *commissaire*'s assistant, Dominique Bussy. Joseph Bikri introduced Georg Stratten. Bikri had been a little surprised to see Georg riding into the Abbey, coming to greet him. What might a German aristocrat have to say to him? Had he come so soon to give a written report of what he had been up to doing in Robois and Namur? Why did Laura not accompany him?

Georg Stratten sat in front of Joseph Bikri's desk.

He said, 'I owe you an explanation, *Commissaire*.'

Bikri nodded, but he had no idea what might come next.

'I am a policeman, like you. I am on a special mission in Belgium,' Georg continued. 'I actually am a colleague of yours, a member of the German Police Forces, member also of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, or BND, and on a special mission for Europol. You must have heard of Europol. My work, since a few years now, is with that service. My office with Europol is at its headquarters of The Hague in the Netherlands. I am rarely in my office, though! My bosses send me on special missions, such as this one, in all countries of the Union. I also confess I am in my last days or weeks at Europol. My father wants me to take up more responsibilities in his, our family businesses. I met Laura de Trioteignes only a few days ago at a Board Meeting of the Swiss company of Pharmtelia in which our families have shareholder stakes, as we told you yesterday evening.

Here are my cards of the German Police, of the BND, and of the Europol organisation. These are my credentials. Here also is a letter of Europol stating my present mission. The Belgian Ministry of Justice knows about my presence in Belgium. I have another note acknowledging that fact, and a note of Europol asking the Belgian Police to cooperate with me in my work. I wish, at the moment, to remain rather incognito in Belgium. I hope you can respect the secrecy of my work.'

Joseph Bikri carefully looked through the documents. Georg Stratten did not think Joseph Bikri understood the three languages the documents were written in, English, German and Dutch, but Bikri read the cards and the letters meticulously, and then handed them back to

Georg Stratten. Very few things could surprise Joseph Bikri anymore in his life as a policeman. He smiled to Georg. He warmed up to the young German.

Bikri said, rather gladly, ‘so then, Stratten, you are family! Your credentials are quite remarkable, the first of that kind I see in Robois. It is not every day I get such cards in my hands at the Abbey! I understand better than yesterday evening what brought you here. What can I do for you?’

Georg returned the smile. ‘After our conversation, yesterday evening, I thought it necessary to explain to you why we were investigating on Robchem. This was all very new. We, Laura and I, only heard about the existence of Robchem yesterday. We believe the company is involved in a network of drug trafficking and fraud, encompassing Switzerland, South-American countries, Belgium, and probably also other countries of the European Union, for if Robchem manufactures drugs, it must be on a grand scale indeed.

Europol is the international law enforcement agency of the European Union. Our headquarters are at The Hague, as I mentioned. Europol is accountable at the European Union to the Council of the Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs of the Union. I work in a department designated as O2, the European Serious Organised Crime Centre or ESOC. But I should not overwhelm you with too many details on our organisation. Suffice me to tell we are a young agency. Europol has only been founded in 2010! We are about one thousand employees of different nationalities. We are also about one hundred analysts and operational researchers, like me. We investigate all kinds of organised fraud, money laundering, terrorism, and of course also international drug trafficking, which has been my domain lately. Analysis and research on crime is at the centre of our activities. We have held investigations and enjoyed nice successes in cybercrime. We arrested counterfeiters of Euro banknotes, disrupted networks transporting illegal immigrants, intercepted illicit weapons and explosives, and also seized considerable amounts of hallucinatory drugs. This last is my domain. I thought it had become very necessary to explain my task. I also must ask for your discretion and cooperation. Please call me Georg.’

Joseph Bikri leaned back in his swivel chair. He hesitated.

‘Fine, Georg,’ Joseph Bikri said. ‘You may be assured, then, of our full support. You can also count on my discretion.’

Bikri paused, reflected some more, wanted to say something, hesitated, and then blurted out, ‘you have all of that and I appreciate your openness. Last evening, I wondered what to do with you. That issue is solved. I will not demand any written statement of you, knowing what you just told me, and also not from Laura de Trioteignes. I have another issue, however, which is not a professional one. Do the Trioteignes know in what quality you are in Belgium and in Robois? Laura de Trioteignes is particularly dear to our hearts. I would consider her almost a daughter of mine. How about my friends, Robert Jacquet and Charles de Trioteignes? Do they know who you are?’

‘Charles does, of sorts,’ Georg replied. ‘As for Laura, I have some explaining to do, I grant you. I shall come to that soon. However, I don’t want too many people to know what I do and why I am here. We are people who work best in the shadows.’

‘Don’t forget to tell Laura,’ Joseph Bikri added yet, and the phrase sounded like a warning Georg could not misunderstand.

Joseph Bikri continued, ‘you can phone me whenever needed. I’ll give you my cell phone number. I’ll also give you the number of my assistant. You can trust her. I will have to tell her who you are, but she’ll know to trust you and give you instantly the help you need in case I’m not available. I will also have to tell about you to my boss, to Paolo Timario, to the *Commissaire* of the Zone of Police of Namur. He is a friend. He too will keep your secret. I need no report. But I’ll need the address of the apartment block you thought was under police surveillance. I’ll check that address with Paolo. How can I help you on?’

‘For the moment, there is not much to do, *Commissaire*. I’d like you to contact me when you have new information, when you hear or see anything special at Robchem. Some surveillance of Robchem, occasional controls of trucks entering or leaving the compound may be useful. If you find drugs, you can immediately intervene, of course. In the meantime, please be discreet. We cannot have Robchem becoming suspicious of what you would be doing. I don’t want Robchem at this stadium be alerted.’

‘That can be done,’ Joseph Bikri smiled.

They shook hands, still smiling. Georg left the building and went back to his car. He left the Abbey, and rode back to Trioteignes.

When Georg had left, Joseph Bikri needed a strong coffee. He sat with his legs and feet outstretched on a low drawer of his desk, and reflected on Georg Stratten.

Then, he called in Dominique Bussy, his assistant. He explained to her in a few words who Georg Stratten was, and for which kind of affair he had appeared in Robois. Dominique Bussy showed no surprise. She too was used to far worse and more surprising matters, far more dangerous and complex.

She did surprise the *commissaire*, her boss, when she exclaimed, ‘that indeed explains some to me!’

‘What then?’ Joseph Bikri asked, suddenly all ears.

‘Two days ago, we caught two new drug dealers in Robois. Small fish, boss. We let them run along. They hadn’t enough ecstasy in their pockets to do much harm, and we are having them followed to find out more about their network. One of them did state the drugs he sold came from an organisation called Oneiro.’

I looked up that name on the Internet. Oneiro is a company with two addresses, one in Namur, another in Robois. The address of Namur must be the same as the one your secret Europol agent discovered to be dummy, in the centre of Namur. The other address was the same as the address of Robchem.

The interesting about the name, boss was that Oneiroi is a Greek word. In Greek mythology, the Oneiroi were the gods and demigods that ruled over dreams and nightmares. They were sons of Hypnos, the pagan god of sleep. The Oneiroi were Morpheus, a god of dreams who mimics human forms in dreams, Phobetor, equally a god of dreams and the personification of nightmares, and lastly and most interesting, Phantasos, who was the god of surreal dreams. Phantasos represents inanimate objects and images in dreams. He represents earth, rocks and water, wood and so on. If that has nothing to do with drugs, I might be Pasithea herself, one of the Graces, the personification of relaxation and hallucinations.’

Joseph Bikri grinned, ‘I can imagine you well as one of the Greek Graces, Inspector Bussy, but please, don’t overplay your hand. Yes, somebody is taking us for fools to use so blatantly that name! I’m glad we have at least one intellectual in our squad. You come in handy, at all

times. Now, could you get back to that guy who mentioned Oneiro, and press him somewhat further?’

‘We know where he hangs out, boss. We wanted to ask you at today’s briefing of what to do about the dealers.’

‘Don’t do much at all about them, for the moment. Just press that one guy. What does he know about Oneiro? We have to find out who gave him the drugs. I know, I know, he will remain as silent as a grave, but try him out, nevertheless. Describe to him in all detail how gruesome prisons can be.’

‘I’ll try, boss. Procedures like that don’t work well, though, these days. These guys come to interrogations, immediately accompanied by their lawyers. They know their rights better than we do. Our best tricks don’t work anymore. When we press, the lawyers start screaming. But we’ll keep trying.’

Dominique sighed.

‘Good!’ was Joseph Bikri’s only comment. ‘See what you can do. This is important. Now, to continue, I’ll need a list of the people who work in that company. The man Georg will provide us with a list of the managers and the administrators of Robchem. He and Laura Trioteignes will trace the majority shareholders. Could you get the names of personnel? The fire brigade may have such a list.’

Dominique Bussy smiled mysteriously. She got out of her chair, and went to her desk.

Commissaire Bikri could follow her with yet some astonishment in his eyes, looking through the glass windows of his office. He saw Dominique coming back to him with a piece of paper in her hand. She presented the one sheet to the *commissaire*.

Joseph Bikri glanced at the paper, threw it on his desk, and asked, ‘Dominique, how the hell did you know what I was going to ask before I had even thought about it myself?’

Dominique grinned and pointed to the paper.

‘Pure coincidence, *commissaire*,’ she admitted. ‘When I sought for Oneiro, I was sure you were going to ask for the list of the people who worked there. I rode to Robchem in plain clothes, pretended to be a National Social Security inspector, and asked for the list, as well as Robchem’s last payments to the National Social Security. I showed my card in a flash, and the three colours of our dear country on my card flabbergasted the girl at the reception desk. I hoped she would give me the list herself. She called her boss, so I thought the matter was busted, but I stayed on. The boss turned out to be a boy I had been at school with in Robois. I remembered he had some crush on me, so I played the mysterious beauty, and I got the list in no time. He didn’t know I worked with the police.’

‘All right, Pasithea, you earned your fancy name,’ Bikri nodded. ‘Does your inspector-husband know you are flirting about in Robois?’

Dominique preferred not to respond to that question, which would encroach on her privacy. She was already reading out loud the names. They all sounded like common Walloon names, and delivered nothing as useful information. Joseph Bikri only heard and recognised the name of Bernard Gorelle as the General Manager.

‘Bernard Gorelle,’ Bikri mused. ‘Do you have anything on him?’

Dominique Bussy drew a nasty face.

‘He is a dirty pig,’ she said, which made Joseph Bikri look up once more.

His assistant was not usually so negatively outspoken.

‘I met him a few times at local feasts,’ she continued. ‘He tried to flirt with me, the very enterprising way. He had almost his arm around my waist and all. I told him I was a Police Inspector. He backed off, reluctantly. I learnt only men with something on their conscience react thus. Most of the true machos don’t care! Horrible man! The kind of guy who must have a permanent subscription to a sun-bank shop and to superiority complex therapy. I hope he gets skin cancer someday. Nowadays, he avoids me like the pestilence. I think he is scared of police officers, but he bullies everybody around at feasts. He has the best opinions, forces everybody to agree with him, and he is always at the centre of attention of the more well-to-do mob, who swear with loud-mouthed, rich people like him. Whether he is truly rich, I don’t know, but he bought the large Bazaine villa in Bas-Robois. His wife is a tart. Bah! A greasy, slimy, kissing-your-arse guy. I pity the people who have to work under this guy. Worth not a dime.’

Joseph Bikri had to laugh at the faces Dominique made. He was very surprised, for he knew his assistant as the politest woman he had ever met. He was not used at all to her strong words.

The subject of Gorelle fixed, Joseph Bikri asked, ‘does this name of Teilo Merthyn mean anything to you?’

‘Nothing, sir. Never met the man in Robois. He would be the Chief Scientist, the chemical engineer of Robchem. That is his title in management. There is also an electronics engineer at Robchem, with a quite common name, though. I checked on the Internet. I found out nothing about the man called Merthyn’s career, except he got diplomas in chemical engineering, several of them, of the University of Wales. He is a Welshman. What a Welshman is doing here, I have no idea.’

‘Can we ask the UK Police whether they have anything on him?’ Joseph Bikri wondered.

‘I phoned yesterday, boss. Nothing!’

‘All right,’ Bikri smiled.

Dominique Bussy could definitely read his thoughts. He had to be careful with that!

Bikri asked on, ‘the qualification of electronics engineer on your list is annotated in your own writing. The other names are not annotated thus.’

‘I checked on everyone on the list,’ Dominique Bussy explained. ‘I found nothing special on most of the names, except for that one. Why would a pharmaceutical company have need of an electronics engineer? And what would electronics have to do with drugs?’

‘Repairs of devices?’ Bikri tried.

‘Pharmaceutical and chemical companies have only very sophisticated electronic instruments. When those are out of order, you cannot repair them yourself. You have to send them back to where they came from and beg for quick repair. Besides, you have maintenance contracts and insurance clauses for such devices. Why would they need an electronics engineer in a chemical company? A mystery to me! Maybe the guy walked into the wrong company and stayed on.’

‘You haven’t annotated the names of the directors or team leaders,’ Bikri remarked.

‘Their function in the management team is indicated in the list itself. Again, nothing special. They have a General Manager, a Finance Director who also must hold the accounts, a Chief Scientist and a Personnel Director, who probably is also the head of the general services. There is no Production or Operations Officer. My guess is that function is either covered by

the General Manager, Bernard Gorelle, or by the Chief Scientist. This makes me believe the company is smaller than one might think.’

‘Fine,’ Joseph Bikri sighed, and placed the list in his drawer. ‘You have a double, I presume.’ ‘I have, boss.’

Joseph Bikri thanked his assistant. He sat at his desk, thinking. Somewhat later, he called together his inspectors, including Bussy. *Commissaire* Bikri had them sit all around his desk. He explained, ‘we have a drug issue in Robois. Drugs may be produced in the Robchem company. Robchem is also the headquarters of a company bearing the name of Oneiro. What the difference is between the two firms is not clear. From now on, we are going to watch the Robchem plant. We have to do that extremely discreetly. I emphasize the secrecy. I want absolutely no suspicions by Robchem personnel of increased surveillance. Is that clear? To the aim of discretion, I have to ask you to increasingly keep an eye on what happens around the Robchem site. I’m not forming a team to perform the surveillance systematically. I just want you to pass by Robchem whenever you can, more often using our banalised cars, and also in the evening. Walk on foot in the industrial zone nearby, ride on bicycle if you want, and by car. I don’t care how you do it. Nobody can claim more than two hours extra per week, however. Our budget is low. No surveillance at night for the moment. Just look at what is happening there, watch the activity in the environs, and report. Do not intervene. Not, unless, of course, something tragic, violent or dangerous is threatening to happen there. Then you can intervene, as you would otherwise. You can check on trucks and lorries entering or leaving, but first I would prefer you to merely watch and report when exactly trucks come and leave. Is there any regularity in such traffic?’

We’ll only set up controls in the area, and then merely casual controls, when we know well the days and hours truck traffic increases at Robchem in the week. Controls will be ordered and coordinated by Inspector Bussy, and by her alone. The controls must seem not to target Robchem in particular, but several companies in the industrial zone. So, it must then become a major operation. We’ll carefully plan for such controls, so no initiative can be started on your own, however eager you are.

You may follow suspect people, presumed drug dealers preferably. You can only follow these in the territory of Robois, and to Namur, not out of the province. No action of intervention, no arrest unless ordered by me or by Inspector Bussy, can be made. Of course, in case of blatantly illicit actions, or openly violent actions, should it be your duty to intervene. ‘

Bikri’s officers grumbled, but they obeyed. They were the Police Force of Robois. They preferred some action, however limited, to sitting behind a desk or riding aimlessly around in the town and the countryside.

After only one week, the officers of the Robois Police Force placed two addresses in Namur on *Commissaire* Bikri’s desk, plus addresses in Liège, Charleroi and Brussels, the nearest large cities of Belgium. They had followed trucks and cars farther than the *commissaire* had allowed, but Bikri was pleased with the findings.

White plastic bags filled with small boxes had been delivered there by people who didn’t work at Robchem. Many people ostensibly came at the addresses to pick up the bags. The addresses the bags were brought to were of no pharmaceutical shops or distribution centres of pharmaceutical products. Delivery to these last sites happened by trucks hired by Robchem

from respectable transport firms. The addresses given by the teams were of common houses in suburb streets of the towns. The number plates of the cars or small vans that rode in and out of Robchem with the drugs had been noted down, the names of the proprietors of the vehicles listed.

The policemen and -women knew the plastic bags contained drugs all right, because one officer had sneaked in Robchem while the bags were being loaded. He grabbed a small box, returned running to his car, and the box contained ecstasy pills. Joseph Bikri should have scolded his men, but he couldn't. He felicitated his officers.

For Namur, the two addresses discovered were those mentioned by Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten. It was the so-manieth confirmation of drug trafficking happening between these places. Joseph Bikri told Georg everything he had discovered.

Bikri had only told Dominique Bussy a Europol agent was working on the case in Robois. He now gave her the name of Georg Stratten, and told her where Georg stayed. Despite her experience, Bussy was surprised.

Joseph Bikri also asked an urgent meeting with Paolo Timario. To his boss also, Joseph Bikri told who Georg Stratten was, and what he and Georg had discovered so far. The findings of Georg and of the Robois Police Force coincided. Timario seemed pleased. He confirmed to Joseph he had the first address of Jambes, the apartment block, under surveillance by his men. He also acknowledged the address in the centre of Namur held an apartment where the man called Teilo Merthyn sometimes stayed.

Divisional *Commissaire* Timario was working on a plan to have the special intervention brigade of Namur arrest the Namur drug dealers. Joseph Bikri and Paolo Timario now decided a joint action would have to be organised. The addresses at Namur and at Robois would have to be raided together, same time, same hour. Also, the addresses in the other cities would have to be taken on at the same time. In view of the information Timario heard from Joseph Bikri, he called for a meeting between himself, Joseph Bikri and Georg Stratten, to discuss concerted action under the strategic leadership of Europol, of Georg. The meeting was scheduled for a week later.

4.2. At Pharmtelia in Basel

On a sunny Saturday of the clear, early Swiss summer in the city of Basel, a secret and tense meeting was taking place at the headquarter building of Pharmtelia. The main address of Pharmtelia was of a distinguished, ancient house in the centre of the town. Pharmtelia had been founded here, a very long time ago. Few people knew several houses in the same street had been connected, and imposing rooms formed behind the dignified façades. Inside, the halls and meeting rooms were modern, equipped with the latest technology of computers, telecom equipment, and presentation means. Posh kitchens had been installed, for the building also held at least two restaurants where the higher and middle management could take their meals. On this Saturday, the building was almost deserted of employees, except for a woman at the reception desk, two hostesses, and the sous-chef of one of the restaurants. The meeting was being held on a room on the top floor, reserved for the higher management of the firm.

Present in the room were only four men. Two of them were Johann Haller, the CEO or Chief Executive Officer of Pharmtelia, the General Manager, and Arnold Felsing, the President of the Board. Both men were Swiss nationals and nearing sixty.

The other two were distinguished, elegantly dressed South-American businessmen. They had flown in to Zürich International Airport of Kloten from Colombia. Their names were Andres López Parejo and Mateo Dias Orosco. They were partners in the López-Orosco International Investment Fund or LOIF, headquartered in Colombia's capital of Bogota.

The South-Americans had demanded the meeting by telephone. They wanted to hear why their offer of participation in Pharmtelia had been refused, despite earlier assurances received from Haller and Felsing. Something had obviously gone very wrong, and they desired to look the Swiss in the eyes during their account of the disaster. López Parejo and Dias Orosco also wanted to know what Haller and Felsing proposed to have the transaction yet go through, even though the Board of Pharmtelia had rejected it.

The two South-Americans were squat and stout men, the indigenous blood visible in their broad faces. They were clean-shaven, elegant businessmen with brown faces and fiery, dark eyes. They had been received with the due respect for important negotiators by the woman at the reception desk, and accompanied by a tall hostess in company uniform to the luxurious meeting-room. Another hostess was preparing coffee, tea and sandwiches for breakfast. The two South-Americans declared they had arrived the day before. They refused breakfast, for they had already feasted this morning on Swiss hospitality in their five-star hotel. They still agreed on coffee. Haller and Felsing welcomed them with a few words. Felsing asked them where they stayed. The South-Americans gave the name of a distinguished hotel, the finest of its kind in Basel. López Parejo and Dias Orosco had barely sat down in a deep, comfortable seat at the table, when their anger showed. They resented having had to fly in to Switzerland. They addressed especially Felsing dryly for not having delivered on his promises.

Arnold Felsing spoke, truly embarrassed. He stammered a few times, telling matters did not proceed as quickly in Switzerland and Europe as in Colombia. He expressed his surprise at the collusion of the two major shareholders to block the deal. The Trioteignes of Belgium and

the Strattens of Germany had voted against the proposal. The representatives of the two families, Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten voted together against the Pharmtelia capital raise. Haller and Felsing stated the Trioteignes and the Strattens apparently did not want to have their majority shares be diluted. The families rarely came to Board Meetings, had never voted or conspired together, had not even been expected to be present at the Board Meeting. They had put their feet down on the proposal.

The South-Americans nodded, and then asked how these shareholders could be persuaded to change opinions. Haller and Felsing looked at each other. They thought immediately the South-Americans were talking of more violent, drastic means to have the vote modified. Haller answered he would contact the father of Laura de Trioteignes and the father of Georg Stratten, the real strong men behind the refusal, and try to have the families change their views.

Mateo Dias Orosco drank his coffee. He told the two Swiss managers his firm wanted full control of Pharmtelia. Their investment fund wished to buy yet more shares on the public offerings, slowly but surely. He asked who the real owners of the Trioteignes and Stratten shares were. Did the fathers of the two voters own the shares or who else? Haller answered the question. The shares had been transferred at the last moment to the two voters, to Laura de Trioteignes and to Georg Stratten. Apparently, some concertation had taken place between these two, to vote together against the participation of the South-American investment fund. Haller explained the fathers of these Laura and Georg were still the real and actual family heads, who continued to pull the strings.

The South-Americans then asked why Haller and Felsing hadn't contacted the Trioteignes and the Strattens before the vote, to make sure the outcome of the voting would happen as desired. The question further embarrassed Haller and Felsing, but they reiterated their arguments the two families had almost never come together to a Board Meeting. Why awaken sleeping dogs? The majority shareholders had never before voted against a proposal of the Pharmtelia management, had usually not even bothered to come to Switzerland. They had conspired suddenly, and unexpectedly.

The two South-Americans frowned and looked at each other in their turn. The Swiss noticed contempt over such incompetence of their handling the matter. Haller and Felsing understood all too clearly the South-Americans regarded them as careless, negligent businessmen, which in some way they had indeed proven themselves to be in this case. Andres López Parejo changed subjects after an awkward silence. He had looked at the addresses of the Trioteignes and Stratten headquarters. To Haller and Felsing it seemed the Colombians were not aware the majority shareholders were independent, aristocratic families, whose headquarter addresses were in fact the addresses of their ancestral castles. They said so. They told a while about what such families meant in Europe. Andres López Parejo listened carefully, but also a little impatiently. He told he had noticed the Trioteignes address was in the same town as their major producer for Western Europe and part organiser of the transport of the ephedrine chemical out of the port of Antwerp.

True, Arnold Felsing granted, but that was pure coincidence. There was no connection between the two. The town of Robois was small, could be regarded as a suburb of the capital of the Walloon Region, Namur, one of the two regional capitals of Belgium, also lying close

to the country's true capital of Belgium. Robois had been chosen for its strategic position between major cities and because it was a small, quiet provincial town of Belgium. Felsing added the Trioteignes did not know about the connections of Pharmtelia with the Oneiro Company. He and Haller emphasized the production of Oneiro SA was small, compared to what their South-American clients no doubt produced in Colombia and elsewhere. Oneiro had only a small effect on the transport from out of Antwerp, as that was directed in a straightforward, totally legal way, mostly out of Basel.

The South-Americans then stressed one of their most distinguished scientists was working at Oneiro SA in Belgium. The research and formulas of some of their more successful products had originated in this man's work in Europe, and in particular their more powerful products. They expressed their intention of taking matters of Oneiro equally in their own hands.

After this exchange, the South-Americans asked what leverage the Swiss had on the Trioteignes and on the Strattens. Did the Colombians need to intervene? On that question, the Swiss managers could not answer. They mentioned not more persuasive means than merely talking with the men and making it their worth to change their views, were the only plausible interventions possible. Other means would not work in Europe. The South-Americans grinned at the hint. Johann Haller repeated he would contact and talk with the family heads. The South-Americans drew a sceptic face. They did not insist.

López Parejo and Dias Orosco stood up from their seats as quickly as they had arrived. They esteemed there was not much more to discuss. The Swiss remained very surprised. They had prepared a long presentation of the state of the finances of the company and of their part and importance in the Basel industry. The meeting had not even lasted for one hour! The South-Americans explained they knew all about Pharmtelia figures. They stood, gave a polite goodbye, shook hands without looking the Swiss in the eyes, and left the building without further ado. Haller and Felsing remained sitting at the table, stunned by the quick development. Why had the South-Americans left so soon? Had they wanted to go on sight-seeing in Basel? Felsing proposed to invite the South-Americans to supper, and to entertain them afterwards. The South-Americans said politely no thanks.

'That went not too badly,' Haller afterward sighed. 'For a moment, I thought they would get up a pistol out of their suits. They stayed cool and dry.'

'You under-estimate the Colombians,' Felsing answered. 'They are not anymore Indians running in jungle, shooting arrows at European men. I have been in Bogota, though only once. It is a modern, high-rise city, bustling with businessmen like them. The law of the jungle still counts, though, the law of the strongest. I would rather say their silence was ominous. Their ways have changed, not their ruthlessness.'

Felsing drew a very worried face. He had more experience than Haller with executives of shareholder funds, and with some of the South-American businessmen.

'Damn, damn, damn,' he exclaimed suddenly. 'This is only the beginning, Haller. The Colombians are now going to confer. Then, they will take quick, irremediable action. They are going to consider which pressure they can apply from their side to the Trioteignes and Stratten shareholders. That may involve blackmail and violence. They will put their detectives at work. We will not hear from them for a week or so. They seem to be careful

men, though. And I don't believe they have the normal means to have the families change their ideas. Their violent means will most probably not work. These ancient families are tough. They have connections in government and in finances. They know how to take on a vendetta. They have all the means to do so! The Colombians may then simply look for other producers of ephedrine in Switzerland or Europe, and break down their entire operation of Pharmtelia and Oneiro, to start elsewhere anew. This last is what we should envisage too. We should not start any initiative on our own for now. Our initiatives might disturb the Colombians, and then we might find ourselves in the middle of a war and finally, in a coffin. We must let the South-Americans decide on actions and lay cool. I'm not going to call the patriarchs of the Trioteignes and of the Strattens soon! Let's see how the Colombians react first. Also, they seem to hold on rather much to the Chief Scientist of Oneiro. It would be better not to touch in any way the Belgian outfit. Better not burn our hands on something we are not really involved in. We must play the innocent! The only danger we run would be when the Colombians talk of their secret payments. They will not do that, for it will end their transactions overall. We run no risk.'

'What we must continue to do,' Haller added, 'is to stick to our only involvement in this case by the production of ephedrine. We know only about our production of that product, not about what it is used for.'

'Right,' Felsing concluded. 'My feeling is, this case is going to end our deposits of money by the Colombians in the Cayman Islands. The Colombian secret payments to both of us will be stopped. All that is going to end soon. We had better clear out those accounts, leave only a little money in them, and hid the amounts elsewhere. I'm going to transfer my money to an account in Panama. You?'

'You are right, but our position may come to far worse. My money, I'll hide mine in Hong Kong first, for the time being. I'm going to ask my private banker for another account in the Caribbean afterwards, maybe even in the United States or in Swiss accounts. I want to buy a few investments funds to have the money bring up more.'

Felsing looked back at Haller.

He warned Haller on, 'we are not only going to lose our contributions from out of Colombia, I'm afraid, my friend. Our days at Pharmtelia are numbered, I'm sure of that! The Trioteignes and the Strattens will not forgive us for our capital raise, which almost succeeded. At the next General Assembly, they will go for our jugular, and have us voted out of management. We can, and will bring up a fight, and work on some of the other shareholders to speak for us, but ultimately those efforts will be in vain. They can wield majority shares! It is as simple as that. Also, if the South-Americans by some chance can win majority shares, they too will oust us out. Have you heard they seek complete control over Pharmtelia? They must rather think us incompetent, now. They will replace us by international managers they can have confidence in. Both ways, we lose our job. True, we have excellent contracts, and golden parachutes have been built in those. So, in the end, we may be winning money in the confrontation, though everybody will regard us as losers. We should start looking for new employers, now. Luckily, there are enough of those at hand in Switzerland!'

Felsing agreed. 'I'll pocket my severance pay with a sour face, and find another job soon. I have friends in other Boards and enterprises. I doubt I can earn more in another company, though.'

‘Our fat years are over,’ Haller said. ‘We won fine money the last years. We will start all over. Nothing to be worried about. Such is the game of modern times. The only thing I’m worried about is not to end in prison.’

‘Oh, a little optimism we can manage. I too have friends in other Boards of the industry. I’ll get along. Time for me to stop adventures. Believe me, my friend, you’ll be winning more than I from this affair. The only things we must fear for is for our reputation, and to go to prison. But aren’t we totally innocent concerning the misuse of our products? The contrary would shake the industry! Luckily, no such thing as end-user certificates exist in the chemical industry and the pharmaceutical business. The industry and the banks are not going to let us be touched! Switzerland is not going to let that happen.’

The two men discussed their options, agreed on common standpoints, and on which documents to destroy. They swore to protect and cover each other. After lunch, they stayed for another hour at their Pharmtelia offices with a brandy in their hands and smoking expensive cigars. They left in the best of moods, thanked the personnel that had stayed on, and told the night security guards they could now close the building.

The two Colombian financiers left the Pharmtelia offices hurriedly and silently. They only spoke to each other when they arrived back at their hotel. They conferred in the lobby over a brandy.

‘Fools!’ Andres López Parejo exclaimed, finally venting his anger.

He shouted a little too loudly for the lobby, but at this hour of the day nobody else had found refuge here.

‘Nobody is going to escape unscathed from this messy affair!’ he added.

‘I agree. But they know this as well as we do,’ Mateo Dias Orosco sighed. ‘I have a bad feeling about all of this. We need more information about the majority shareholders. I didn’t even know just two European families owned majority shares in Pharmtelia. We did not do our homework well. But then, we inherited the affair only recently. So now, we are in dearth of information about our opponents.

I say we set our intelligence people to work. We must know what the Trioteignes and the Strattens are thinking about. What is their strategy for Pharmtelia? We need to know who this Laura Trioteignes and Georg Stratten are. Why have all family shares been transmitted to them right before the vote? What lays at the basis of that transfer? How can we persuade those families to accept the capital raise? Will they sell the rest of their shares in Pharmtelia or not? If we can’t get a majority in the company, we might as well quit, get our ephedrine from somewhere else, or start producing it elsewhere ourselves. We stand before major decisions. I say we roll up our activities here, certainly at the least danger of conflict with European police forces or with the finance world over here. We need to know what these Laura and Georg are busy at.’

‘We should do so, yes,’ López Parejo concurred. ‘I wouldn’t give up so soon, though. We’ll decide after the information comes. We might yet intervene with some force. I’ll organise an intervention team, four men should do. A little show of power always comes in handy. The team must prepare to fly over within two days.’

‘Agreed,’ Dias Orosco nodded. ‘Start making arrangements. I don’t think our presence is still necessary here, in Basel. We can check and decide out of our home base. We should not take risks to our safety in Europe. We can return to our country.’

‘Oh, we will not be apprehended so soon,’ Dias Orosco temporised. ‘We are in Europe now. Relax! We could stay a few days in Paris and enjoy ourselves!’
Dias Orosco laughed. He drank his brandy with relish. He once more nodded in agreement. As long as they left Basel behind.

Only five days later, the Colombian intelligence team returned with the first information to the Colombian financiers. The first report told no way had been found so far to put pressure on the Trioteignes and on the Stratten families. Both had formed respected investment firms, all over Europe and in the Middle-East. The families had not been involved in scandals of embezzlements. Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten had been traced to Belgium, where they seemed both to stay at Castle Trioteignes in Robois, having a good time together. Laura de Trioteignes was a business woman and the manager of a large part of the Trioteignes funds and participations. The report listed a long annex of the participations in financial ventures of Count Charles de Trioteignes. The list contained the names of investment banks, private banks, investment funds, insurance companies, as well as large corporations over the continents. López Parejo and Dias Orosco whistled through their teeth when they scanned the list. They were up against a powerful man and woman. Mention was made of several other families the Trioteignes were linked with.

The list of the Stratten participations proved to be as long and as powerful. They had stakes in a large part of the German economy. Georg Stratten proved an even more interesting person than Laura and Charles de Trioteignes. Georg’s curriculum vitae mentioned several university degree diplomas, a quick career as a police officer, membership of the BND, and lastly, of a leading position in drug crime suppression at Europol.

The two South-Americans received and read the report at a five-star hotel in Paris. They read also it seemed Laura Trioteignes and Georg Stratten had been sniffing around in Namur. They had probably discovered the addresses of Oneiro and Robchem in Robois, and involved the police. The South-Americans blemished. They stayed silent when they read the apartment block used by the Chief Scientist of Oneiro as his test base for the drug experiences was under police surveillance, as was the Robchem factory of Robois.

Dias Orosco and López Parejo felt their business in Europe was at jeopardy. They thought strongly their Swiss partners had been negligent to the extreme.

They phoned Haller and Felsing, to hear the two Swiss managers didn’t know at all about Georg Stratten’s profile. The South-Americans did not shout in the telephone. They hung up rather quickly. Later, they conferred about what they should do next. They talked quietly, not in panic. They considered Georg Stratten the most immediate, and greatest danger. The use of some violence, disguised as an accident, might delay his actions, and thus of the police in Europe. A team of experts would be called in from Bogota.

The South-Americans chose not to alert the drug dealers in Namur and in Robois, and not to order instantly to stop the production at Robchem. In fact, they had already written off the operation at Robchem. Their financial implication in Robchem had already provided five times its value in direct profits. Their decision was to gradually, over a period of two months at the most, slow down the import of finished drugs out of Robchem. They would have to devise a new strategy for the production of hallucinatory drugs in Western Europe. That

would not be too difficult. They could count on three other production sites in Eastern Europe. The drug consumption in Western Europe could be covered by these sites. Their most important asset, they considered, might still be the Chief Scientist of Robchem, the man called Teilo Merthyn. The man didn't know much about their network in Europe, so he was also no liability to their organisation. The South-Americans decided to get Merthyn out of Belgium quickly, and have him disappear to South-America. A vacation in Brazil or Argentina might do him some good. Merthyn was also not that important, though, as other very intelligent chemists could be found and bought elsewhere.

As a precautionary measure, the two South-American businessmen left France and Europe in a hurry. While their plane flew over the Atlantic Ocean to Bogota, the team of Colombian hitmen sat in another plane flying over the Atlantic bound from Bogota to Madrid, Spain, to Europe.

4.3. Laura and Georg

After his discovery of Robchem, Georg Stratten had stayed at Castle Trioteignes. He had remained there, invited by Count Charles de Trioteignes, for three weeks now. He could not abuse of the count's hospitality for much longer without serious explanations. But he had not advanced much in his investigation. The only piece of new information concerned the ownership list of Robchem. It was Charles de Trioteignes, not Laura, who came up with the details. They were not spectacular. Only two shareholders had invested in Robchem. Bernard Gorelle owned eighty percent of the company, and ninety-five of Oneiro. Count Buisseyre held the other shares. Gorelle indeed owned Robchem and Oneiro, practically on his own. Charles de Trioteignes seemed not to be surprised at reading the name of the Black Count. He pronounced the name in disgust and literally threw the single paper at Georg and Laura. Those were the official accounts. Charles wondered where Gorelle's money had come from. Dark loans? Dark partners?

So, why did Georg not return to Germany? He had envisaged breaking into Robchem one night to find evidence of drug production, but he rejected that solution rapidly. Robchem would be secured by sophisticated alarm systems and a night watch. He couldn't risk the Robois police finding him inside the Robchem premises. He had no right and no mandate to break into the firm. He could not compromise Europol. Escaping in the open terrain around the plant was practically impossible. Georg also knew *Commissaire* Bikri had installed some form of human surveillance of the premises.

One reason for his delay was his expecting actions from the Belgian police force.

Commissaire Joseph Bikri had told him his boss, the *Commissaire de Division* Paolo Timario was organising a raid on the apartment block where the drug dealers of Namur gathered. For such a raid, to be executed at the moment one and hopefully several drug dealers were inside the block, permission had to be obtained from the *Procureur du Roi* of Namur and from the Investigating Judge. The negotiations over the necessary official permits took more time than Georg had expected. He understood the police had few tangible proofs. Still, Joseph Bikri had promised Georg the raid was imminent, and would be executed as soon as possible.

Georg had also given some time to reflect on his objectives. He decided on two aims, his duties as a Europol agent.

First, he would have to stop the production and export of ephedrine out of Pharmtelia in Switzerland. He could do that by calling together a general assembly of all Pharmtelia shareholders to oust out the current managers of the company. The majority shareholders could then put their feet down to stop the production of the product. Georg thought Laura would follow him in that initiative, even though he still lacked proof of what was being produced with the exported ephedrine. With the help of Laura de Trioteignes, at the next Board Meeting, he could force these decisions.

His second aim was to stop Robchem from producing hallucinatory drugs. Everybody in the firm, involved in the production of drugs, was to be arrested as criminals. The drug production had to be stopped. This was his ultimate aim for Europol. For this last aim, he was working with the Belgian police and with *Commissaire* Bikri. The issue was the slowness of the procedure leading to a raid on the plant.

Georg was desperately waiting for this last action.

Georg had to admit to himself he did not much care, after all, for the waiting imposed on him in Belgium. This would be his last mission for Europol. He had time. Even if he might be blamed for the slowness, this would not affect a career already ended.

And his second reason for staying on at Castle Trioteignes in Robois was of course Laura de Trioteignes! He needed to know more about her, to spend time with her, to hear who she was, what she liked and disliked. Of course.

Laura had her work. She too stayed in the castle, and worked out of her own apartments. Laura had warned Georg she would probably have to travel soon, take part in other Board Meetings. In the few weeks Georg stayed at Trioteignes, she nevertheless tried to see Georg as much as she could. She worked out of her office at Castle Trioteignes. Not much had come from her wish to go on a vacation! Georg usually saw her at breakfast, though not always, at noon for dinner, and generally from two or three in the afternoon until late in the evening. They spent much time together in Namur, not to be seen embracing and kissing each other in the castle. Georg knew, of course, their behaviour was untypical for Laura. Her parents must be suspecting they had become involved with each other, but nothing definitely had been announced or been asked for in way of explanation for their absences. As well Georg as Laura intended to keep matters this way some more time.

Georg learned to know the many small, cosy, quite fine restaurants in the old centre of the town, and especially the ones near the Sambre in the *Rue des Brasseurs*, in the same environment Véronique Dupas had found refuge for some time. Laura and Georg often dined together in these establishments in the evening. They walked hand in hand along the rivers Meuse and Sambre, window-shopped in the streets, or lingered in brasseries and cafés in town.

Laura told Georg much about herself, about how she had spent her years of childhood in perfect harmony and happiness, and how already at a young age she had become known as an excellent organiser. She told Georg about her friends in Robois, how she had managed the election campaigns of Robert Jacquet, the *bourgemestre* of her town. She told about her friendship with *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri and his wife. She had studied law and economics at the nearby university of Louvain-la-Neuve.

Laura did not speak of lovers. She did not speak of boyfriends. Georg suspected she had not been truly involved with men before him. He believed she was still a virgin. If she had been involved with men, he preferred not to hear about it.

Georg was surprised she spoke so freely, first, of herself. She was a shrewd businesswoman. He rather expected her to mistrust everyone she met. He was maybe the first man she felt comfortable with, the first to whom she granted utter confidence. He felt flattered and proud. He did not mock her for her candidness. She was not ridiculous in telling him her feelings of an adolescent girl, and then how she now could and dared to face the tougher businessmen around her.

Later still, Laura asked Georg about his childhood too. He told her about his life in the ancestral castle, his years of studies and loneliness. He had been to university in Heidelberg, had picked up a few diplomas and special courses. Recently, his father had asked him for

help in his growing, expanding business. Trade and the economy in Germany were booming. The family business had expanded much even the last twenty years. Laura remarked to him she had followed the same course of career.

Laura did not really notice there remained a gap of many years in what Georg told her. Laura assumed Georg had spent those years in idleness, in travelling the world. He told her about the many places he had seen in Europe and abroad. Maybe he had been a dandy, a rich boy living in a world of luxury and pleasures.

Georg held back from her he had actually passed those years in working very hard in the police forces of his country and Europe. Georg worried and held back from telling her about those years, believing she would think him a fool, a man incapable of being more than a hulk of muscles and little brains, of lesser intelligence than the men she met in her high finance circles. Laura talked and met the General Managers and Presidents of the Boards of the largest banks and other financial institutes of the world. She had participated in the G20 meetings, discussions and conferences at Davos in Switzerland. She knew the most expensive luxury hotels, all over the five continents. She wore the finest robes made by the best know fashion houses of Paris and Milan, though she wore those not with the natural elegance of the prettiest models. She was used to the life of the wealthy. She looked modest enough in her day-to-day living at Castle Trioteignes. She was not arrogant in the little restaurants and shops of Namur. She laughed as a child when he kissed her. Nevertheless, in which of those two worlds did she feel most at home? Georg hesitated a few days.

Georg Stratten was convinced of the strength of his feelings. He wanted to marry Laura. He didn't think he would want to spend a life with any other woman next to him. He longed to live with her. He kept worrying only about how she might react when he confessed to her he was merely a policeman, not a business tycoon. He also worried about how Charles de Trioteignes, well known for his Belgian patriotism, would think of a German son-in-law. He worried about how his own family would react when he presented to them, his arm around her waist, a French-speaking woman of another culture, of another language and another style than his chic, sophisticated mother.

After a few weeks of brooding over doubts and over the strength of his feelings for Laura, he decided to throw his worries behind him and to come to resolutions. He wanted to marry Laura de Trioteignes. But he had to tell her first who he really was, and how much he felt for her. Still, although he was known in his police services to always insisting on advance and decisions, he hesitated. He called himself the Hamlet of Europol, and cursed himself for it.

Laura de Trioteignes did not really notice Georg had not told her everything that had happened in his life. She did not think it important. There were subjects she did not dare to breach, and also, she did not really wish to have answers on. Had he travelled alone or with other women? Had he lived together with women? Had he been engaged before? Had he spent his wild years as a playboy?

What he actually told her on his own, and what he answered, pleased her. She was convinced he was a man who disliked all forms of injustice. He was a man with strong feelings of empathy with the poorest, even though she sometimes estimated this as too naïve. He was oddly enthusiastic about beauty and goodness in people. He hated intrigues, sarcasm, negative arguments, and wrong-doers of every kind. She thought Georg as honest and

straightforward as her father. He had told her he still felt guilty for what Nazi-Germany had done to the world in the last, devastating world war. He talked very seriously with her about art and beauty. He spoke more about engineering, about technology, and showed a keen interest in the latest advancements of many domains of science. He had strong ideas about management, and he proved to her he possessed sound notions of finance, of the working of the stock markets and of international money-flows. He was keenly interested in German, Russian and European politics. He seldom challenged and disputed about these subjects with her father, though. He did so, probably out of respect and politeness, as all gentlemen of the world would have done. He knew a lot about law and law enforcement. He had read many books on diverse subjects. He was nice with kids, and always very courteous, polite and gentle with her in restaurants and shops. Georg seemed to admire what she had accomplished. He said so, but told little about what he had realised himself. He displayed the manners of a nineteenth century romantic German aristocrat, combined with the easy confidence of modern, young grace. He could be funny, was seldom sarcastic in his answers, and never cynical.

Georg was handsome, of course, a real lady-killer, charming, very male, but he was not a Latin macho. She felt him a little too modest about himself.

Laura considered Georg would make a splendid, warm-hearted, though strict father. Only the thought of having babies together made her blush. She was filled with admiration for him, even if she had to consider he had not accomplished much in his life until now. She therefore answered his questions warmly, with respect. She did not realise immediately how he craved for her sympathy.

Laura thought of herself as not particularly pretty, and certainly not as dazzlingly brilliant of beauty as some of the tall, blonde German women ladies she had met. Why had Georg taken up with her? She hoped fate and destiny had forced them together, and were on her side. Did he really love her? Was he merely and for this short time infatuated with her? Was she merely a pastime? For sure, she was not a blinding beauty. Why then, would a man like Georg want to walk hand-in-hand with her, suddenly stop and kiss her passionately?

Laura refused to let the doubts and uncertainty of such questions darken her mind. She would accept this love and respect for as long as it lasted, and these feelings too, she truly thought to discern sometimes in his eyes. In time, she would ask him, of course, how he loved her, and why he continued to seek her out so often. For the moment, she decided to grab what she could get, and that included going to bed with Georg. Still, they were no lovers at Castle Trioteignes! Georg had remained the gentleman in the sexual aspect, too. He had taken no advantage of her.

Georg would not stay for long still at Trioteignes. Laura had known him now for three weeks, and she felt him impatient. Impatient for what? To end the issue about Robchem and Pharmtelia, or impatient simply to return to Germany? Laura decided she would have to talk seriously with Georg one of these days. They did not yet want to worry about the future. They took what they could get today. Sometimes, she longed for the contrary.

Laura and Georg had both written and signed a letter, addressed at Pharmtelia management, demanding a General Assembly of the firm's shareholders at the earliest possible time. They had the right to call for such a meeting, as majority shareholders together. They wanted one

specific point to be placed on the agenda, the status of the Board of the company and the status of the Chief Executive Officer. The intention was clear. Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten were out to force a change of higher management and of the Board. Laura had been looking with her father and with Georg's father for alternative names for these positions. She had contacted several men and women over the telephone, and exchanged mails. She had put together a list of names of men and women who had already agreed to take on the highest positions of management in the firm. Laura wanted to propose a new Board and a new CEO at the General Assembly. She and Georg together could impose those names. Georg and Laura agreed to ruthlessly push through the change, even if high severance pays had to be granted by Pharmtelia.

Laura felt certain about her feelings for Georg. She would have married him in the small church of Trioteignes tomorrow, and have dragged him before the *Bourgemestre* Robert Jacquet to conclude the civil marriage. Laura was in love, and she adored. She desired a home, a husband, children, the presence of a dear friend at her side. The loneliness had eaten long enough at her heart. She wanted to escape the void of useless existence in space and time.

Laura's only worry was about her role as a wife. Would she have to abandon her work as a businesswoman? Was this still demanded of wives in Georg's class? Would her father transfer the management of his participations in firms to her brother Diego? Would she be reduced to a housewife, much like her mother? She would refuse to abandon her freedom of action and will. She thought Diego was ready for the work she did. He was intelligent. He had absorbed his past and come to terms with his former life - and especially with his earlier involvement with a woman -, during his period as a farmer and husband of Deniz. Maybe her father thought not so well of his son. She would have to defend Diego.

Laura decided she would not let Georg return to Germany without a promise. She had her hooks in him, and she would not let him go without a strong fight. She wanted an official engagement, and a ring, before he left. And a date or a period of dates for the organisation of the wedding ceremony and feast to take place at Trioteignes or in Germany. The ultimate end date she set for herself at three months from today. She would refuse waiting any longer. They were both young, determined, adult, and intelligent. They knew what they were doing, and they recognised the risks. They had to make a success of their marriage, also in the long run.

What if Georg hesitated? Then she told herself, she might have to renounce to him. She disliked lack of decision in anybody. She was on her knees for Georg, but when she couldn't be sure about his feelings, then better split and start forgetting. Her heart tore to pieces when she thought of that eventuality. The knife of doubt and possible separation hit her strongly, and kept slicing.

Chapter 5. Denouement

5.1. Véronique Dupas

At that moment, Véronique had served as the willing subject of the Dream Master's magnetic wave experiments for a few weeks already. She had lost count of the number of times she had placed the heavy plastic helmet on her head and switched on one of Phantásus's programs. She didn't know anymore exactly which time of the year it was. She knew the summer was waning, for the leaves on the trees along the Meuse river became of a deeper, darker green. She still turned on her television set, but then only very late in the evenings, when the films and the shows were scheduled. She watched those programs out of boredom, for she was not interested in what happened on the screen. She took in the images, but didn't follow the scenarios. She had become vaguely aware the helmet's programs of waves had a stronger and stronger effect on her mind and mood. Nevertheless, she could still force herself to reason, and to realise the effect could grow more powerfully because Phantásus's signals also grew stronger, or because the prolonged use of the helmet's electronic influence had lingered and cumulated their impression to numb her spirit. She thought it more probable the Dream Master was intensifying his program effects, trying to probe the limits of his invention, and to lengthen the impact of his magnetic waves on her brain.

Her headaches became more intense and lasted longer. When she placed the helmet on her head, the images she saw with closed eyes also became far more hallucinatory and fantastic in nature, so much as to turn to horrifying, bloody and terrifying experiences. Véronique had never liked horror films. Soon, she began to dislike the last experiments. They resembled ugly, scary nightmares, and the same dreams returned to her at night. That was one of the reasons she turned on her TV set very late, and stayed awake until deep in the night, until she could be sure she became so tired she would sleep very profoundly at least for some time. Still, the nightmares re-appeared early in the morning, when she remained in a state of being half awake and half dozing on, at a time when she had some grip on the images and changed them to sweeter stories. The control over her dreams in those moments helped.

Véronique also did not succeed anymore in quieting her mind. She felt as if a hundred persons told her stories at the same time. The stories her brain invented returned massively together, even in broad daylight, to haunt her. She tried to reject the memories and scenes, to less and less avail. The peace of mind ecstasy pills had granted her, didn't seem to realise anymore with the helmet. The last weeks passed as a torture for her brain. Véronique fought the stories, fought inside her head against the prevalence of the horror images as opposed to the sweeter memories. She experienced fits of panic, of deep sadness and depression. Thoughts of suicide, of death emerged. These thoughts came forcefully, and persisted.

At the rare moments she could still control her thoughts, Véronique began to wonder what Phantásus and Phil were doing to her. Phil seemed to avoid her the last two weeks. He didn't come to her apartment any more in the evenings, in want of sex. Véronique didn't care for that. She welcomed Phil's neglect of her. She had never really liked him, though she still felt

grateful to him for having given her the apartment. She was astonished she was left alone in her rooms more often than before. Phil didn't place other girls or other young men with her. Maybe she was the only one on whom Phantasus was experimenting with the helmet.

The helmet was also no real helmet anymore. Véronique had to use other models of headwear. One was a thin film of plastic, of opaque, white plastic, into which the copper coils and the electronic circuits had been melted into. This model was far more comfortable than the heavy helmet of the first experiments. Another model looked like a large headphone set. It was merely a broad band of soft plastic, which only partially covered her head and let her hair free. These sets were much lighter than the earlier helmet. The effects were quite similar, and the signals continued to strengthen. Véronique found it more difficult at times to control the movements of her eyes. She felt dozed often, and remained longer and longer numbed, sitting like a zombie on her sofa. She then sat for hours, just staring in front of her, trying not to think, occupied at chasing the chaos out of her mind.

Another strong voice was still present in her head. This voice told her she was losing her own self, her will to escape from the apartment and to give herself up to the outside authorities, to social assistants, to policemen, as long as she did not have to return to her family. She feared the destruction of her own will, of her soul, of the thoughts that made her Véronique Dupas. How could she make this ordeal stop? How long before she would have her mind entirely numbed, sitting unaware of her own self the entire day? She was already unable now to write down her experiences, unable to put the effects of the helmets in written words. She told Phantasus almost automatically what she had seen and felt during the programs. Phantasus's visits shortened also. During the last experiments, Véronique had been unable to turn on herself the switch for the beginning of the experiment. Phantasus then placed the helmet on her head, told her to leave it on, and then a program of waves would start every so many minutes or hours. The helmet decided when to bring her the new hallucinations to life. Véronique was vaguely aware of her apathy, only as if all this was happening to someone else.

Véronique had not eaten for the last three days. She only found the energy to drink some water, late in the evenings. She didn't feel herself capable to look for food. She hadn't changed clothes for days. She slept in the same blouse and jeans on top of the sheets on her bed. She moved very, very slowly from one room to the other. She had not been out of her apartment for many days.

Then, Véronique came in the grip of the worst nightmare of all. She still wanted to escape from her present life, from the life she had led since she had arrived in Namur. She feared very much she would now never succeed in escaping from what she had led herself into. The nightmare became overwhelming, to a numb background noise that ever remained present. It was a returning obsession, whenever the helmet stopped sending signals in her head. Her worst panic was generated by the sad feeling the helmet was killing off the last remnants of her own self. Her self was crying out in panic in her head! She keenly realised one day that when this happened, the entity called Véronique Dupas would cease existing. Her spirit would be killed, and she would become an empty shell. She would be dead, have been killed as a living, thinking human being, murdered by Phil and Phantasus. Hadn't Phil and

Phantasmus physically killed other young people before her, with their chemical experiments? How many had died from overdoses? How many had their brains withered by Phantasmus's experiments? Could also the helmet lead to overdoses of hallucinations? Would she die in her fantastic dreams?

One day, when the helmet turned on active, sending its waves, humming nicely, Véronique ripped the helmet from her head. This had needed extraordinary energy, but she had been able to gather her last forces. She threw the device in a corner of her living-room, hating it, hating what it seemed to be doing to her. She didn't pick it up.

Véronique knew instinctively Phil was not in the apartment block so early in the day. Phantasmus would only return a few hours later to interrogate her about what she had felt. She knew she was very dirty. She hadn't cared for her body for several days. She stood from the sofa. Her limbs weighed tons. She staggered. The first, powerful effects of the helmet had forced her to close her eyes. The light of the room blinded her. She drew her body along with her arms. She forced her to stand and move her feet. She crept forward, leaning with her arms and hands on the cupboard in the living-room. She took the box in which she had placed her saved money. She reached the door of the room after a time that seemed an eternity. She went through the door opening to her small entry hall, and then to the front door. The door was not locked. She opened it, opened her eyes to the corridor. She went on, and drew the door closed behind her. She stood in the corrido, her money-box clutched to her chest. She still had the sense to get out of her pocket the key to the door of the apartment. She closed the door, but dropped the key. When she stooped, the corridor whirled around her. She lost balance, staggered backwards, then forwards. She fell, and lost conscience. She slid to the floor.

Véronique didn't realise somebody had been standing in the corridor not far from her. The man looked at her in chilling amazement. He was old, and he lived a few apartments farther, on the same floor. He saw Véronique move as if she became unwell. He saw her flailing with her arms, and fall down. A metal box fell, opened, and a stack of banknotes spilled out on the floor.

The old man ran up to her, held her head in his hands, but was unable to make her open her eyes. He was shouting at that time. He noticed how pale she looked, how thin compared to how he had known her earlier on, and she smelled badly. He ran to his apartment, opened his door with a key, and called very loudly the name of his wife. She came on, immediately, running up to him. She realised instantly something bad had happened. She though he might have suffered a stroke, but he called her on, into the corridor, to the fallen girl.

The man was the judge Véronique had once helped with his dustbin. The man pushed against the door of Véro's rooms, but he found the door closed. He didn't see the key that had slipped from her hands, lying a few feet down the corridor. The key had slid under the plinth of the wall. The man put his feet on the banknotes, ignoring them.

The man and his wife carried, dragged Véronique on to their own apartment. They placed her on their sofa in the living-room, and tried to bring her to life. The man and woman possessed some notions of first help, but they didn't know what more to do. They clearly saw the girl was still alive, but without conscience, apathic. Her heart still beat, though slowly and then raged, and she breathed irregularly. The girl had fallen into a catatonic state. The wife called an ambulance. She shouted in the phone to hurry, and explained who her husband was. The

old man returned to the corridor, picked up the metal box of Véronique and the money. Nobody could then have told something unusual might have happened in the corridor. Ten minutes later, the ambulance arrived at the building.

The policemen surveying the apartment block wondered what had happened. They looked at each other, wondering what to do. They had some explaining to do to their boss. They groped for their mobile phones.

The ambulance driver, a male nurse and an orderly hurried inside the block. They ran to the apartment of the judge. There, they tried to revive Véronique, but they didn't succeed. The male nurse concluded she had been drugged. It was not the first time he had seen states of overdose. He wasn't sure the girl would emerge from out of that state! He hesitated to apply the usual medicines, for no drugs had been found on the girl, and he didn't know whether he would be using the right product. Unknowingly, he made the right decision.

The male nurses placed Véronique on a stretcher, and moved her to the ambulance. The judge and his wife insisted on accompanying them to the hospital. They stayed beside the young woman, holding her head. The ambulance drove on high speed, but the hospital was very near. When nurses rolled the stretcher into the urgency services of the hospital, a female nurse asked for Véronique's name. The judge had forgotten Véronique's first name. He estimated discussing at this moment about details such as names would only slow the process of admittance. The girl had no wallet on her, no identity card to prove who she was. The judge gave the nurse the name of Claire Lacroix. Lacroix was his own name, Claire his mother's first name. The judge's wife nodded. Rectification would happen later! Other nurses hurried the stretcher to higher floors.

5.2. The accident

Laura de Trioteignes rode with Georg to her mother's farm, to the farm now of her brother Diego and her sister-in-law Deniz. Diego and Deniz had invited them to lunch. It would be a simple dinner, more dedicated to talk than to gastronomy. Laura and Georg drove around noon over the smaller roads of Trioteignes. Laura avoided the faster way by the National Road. She always found the landscape of Trioteignes wonderful. The weather had remained fine, sunny and warm all morning. Laura drove at ease, to show Georg how fine Robois could be in late summer. She drove with all the self-confidence of one who had known these roads her entire life, and who was, moreover, an excellent car driver. She could direct her large BMW with one finger.

Laura and Georg took the many turns of the country roads. They remained silent during the short trip, although they had arrived at a point in their relationship where much untold had to be brought into the open. Decisions had to be made, solid promises to be made. Georg had still not declared his love in a more formal way. This came not really as a surprise to Laura. They had met only recently. They knew each other for only a few weeks. Nevertheless, Laura felt a little disappointed. They were both adult and decisive people. They knew what to say and how to act in every circumstance. Laura suspected Georg could not and would not stay much longer at Trioteignes. He would leave soon, and return to Germany. Was the moment of goodbye the time for Georg to reveal something of his true feelings, or would he leave with a kiss and an embrace and a promise of more meetings, a promise of return, which might remain empty and unfulfilled? Was Georg hesitating about his feelings? Had he made binding promises to someone else? Laura shook her head and her blonde curls. Georg had shown many times these last days he was in love with her. Some words definitely would come. She had to grant him time!

Laura finally began to tell small stories of her childhood to Georg, images of people and events that came into her mind while they rode. The farms, woods, pond they passed by car, triggered Laura's memories. Georg smiled at her funnier stories. She knew the people living in every house, in every farm of Robois, and she had been everywhere in this, her domain.

Laura finally drove into the courtyard of Diego's farm. Deniz appeared in the doorway to the manor with a broad smile on her face. She had always liked Laura, and was curious on how the German aristocrat would behave in the intimate circle of closest family. Deniz was always dressed elegantly, fine and beautiful like any woman of the world.

Georg stepped out of the car. He wondered where and how Diego had met his oriental beauty. Deniz mixed Middle-East exotics with Parisian chique!

Deniz drew them into the living-room. She began with an apology. She was not an excellent cook, she admitted. So, she had asked a restaurant chef of Robois to bring a series of dishes of French cooking, and she had hired a woman to keep the dishes warm for them. She told she would serve, so the conversation remained confident.

Diego opened a bottle of Champagne and Deniz served warm zakouskis as openers. He announced the following wines, served with the dishes, would be all Belgian, Walloon, as well the white as the red wines. He told he wanted to introduce Georg to Walloon wines.

The two couples engaged in a lively conversation, in which they changed subjects every minute. Georg reacted and talked as much as Diego, but Laura kept a reserved silence, which astounded Deniz. This was not the Laura she knew so well! Lively Laura was more often than not the centre of all attention at parties, receptions and family reunions. She had strong convictions on everything, and never held back on giving her opinions or comments. She was something of an intellectual in their circles, recognised as such, and the intellectual more dedicated to ideas and opinions than to real people. That was why she seemed so cool, detached - but also very knowledgeable - in conversations. Laura didn't ask where Diego and Deniz's children were, although she had formed strong links with them. The children had been brought early in the day to Castle Trioteignes, for a long walk and picnic with their grandparents in the woods of the domain.

After a while of nonconsequential chatting, Deniz opted for a frontal attack, desiring all cards to be laid open on the table. Diego had feared for that! The bubbles in the sparkling white wine may have led her to dare speak out about what lay hidden between them and had not been revealed so far. In fact, it was Georg who offered a fine occasion for Deniz to breach the subject.

Georg asked from which country Deniz's family originated, and how she had met her husband.

'To tell you the truth,' Deniz answered, 'Diego was in the army when I first met him. I guess he was trying desperately to prove he was not daddy's boy and not mama's baby. He was an officer in the Belgian secret services. We don't proclaim loud and clear over fields and pastures what we did before we got married, but I was a Turkish secret services agent, sent to Belgium on a mission. I am of Turkish and French descent.'

Deniz laughed, 'I am a very, very dangerous woman with a gun! Anyway, we met, because we worked together on an operation in Belgium directed against Islamic terrorism. It was a concerted Belgian-Turkish-Israelite operation. After the mission, matters between the two of us were left unsaid, so I returned to Istanbul and Ankara. Diego came after me. He declared his passion, and brought me back to Belgium. I wanted nothing better than to return to Europe. Turkey had done with me, and I with Turkey. I never returned to Anatolia, and I am very happy I made that decision. We married right after my return.'

When he heard about the professions of Diego and Deniz, Georg reddened in the face, but he also seemed oddly relieved. Diego threw supplicating eyes at Deniz not to proceed farther on this path, but Deniz dropped her unpinned attack grenade on the table.

She continued by asking innocently, 'and you, Georg, you must be a secret agent too! We can tell! You look like us, like Diego and me. You walk like us, you talk like us. What exactly are you? I would say you are BND. Am I right?'

Laura looked up. Her head shot straight up, and then she sought Georg's eyes open-mouthed. What was this?

Georg sipped from his Champagne, eased the beating of his heart before he answered.

'I should have told you earlier, and I wanted to tell you sooner or later,' he started with an excuse. 'I just couldn't find the appropriate moment to explain. I should have told you all earlier. I'm sorry. Yes, I have been a police officer for the German Police Force first, and then a BND member. The BND, Laura is the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, the intelligence branch of the German police, and so much more. I have worked as an undercover agent in the

drug combating division of the BND. Later, I accepted a job at Europol. The BND wanted me to take service at Europol. I was dispatched, one might say, to Europol by Germany. I am currently still on a mission for Europol.'

Georg explained in a few words he had wanted recently to resign from Europol to assist his father in the family businesses. He had yet accepted a self-inaugurated Europol mission, as it coincided with an issue his father had detected at Pharmtelia. His mission was to check on the ephedrine traffic over European roads to Antwerp, and possibly to Belgian drug factories. He was investigating the Belgian connection in the drug trade based on Swiss primary products. He revealed the only person knowing of his mission in Robois was *Commissaire* Bikri of the Robois police, with the possible exception of Count Charles de Trioteignes. That was, if Georg's father had warned Charles and provided him with details of Georg's own findings. 'I haven't interrogated my father about how much your father may know,' Georg said, aimed specifically at Laura, 'but I suppose he knows the jest of what is happening. I am certain my father only phoned Charles about the drug issue when you were already on your way to Basel, but the passing of shares to both of us had been arranged before between our fathers.'

Georg ended by addressing Laura, 'I'm sorry, Laura. So sorry! I wanted to tell you earlier. I feared a little you would have thought of me as a second-rate man, not a man of your circles. I have not been playing the rich dandy these last years, as you might wonder. I worked! I worked hard! I wanted to prove myself capable of being a man, and I wanted to help my country. Maybe I am too proud about the country I was born in. Call it chauvinism if you want. I hope I have remained modest notwithstanding my enthusiasm for my country. I have merely been a policeman, not one of the powerful businessmen you constantly meet! I've been walking on red-hot coals these last days, wondering whether I should tell you or not about my mission, despite it being secret. I did not just come to Trioteignes because of the mission, though! I would have come to Trioteignes anyway. I had met you. I could not have stayed away far from you.'

Diego and Deniz looked at each other, and then back to Laura, with as much amazement as fun in their eyes. Surprise showed on Laura's face. Laura had heard Georg's confession with increasing stupefaction. She remained silent for a while, puzzling Georg.

Diego exclaimed, laughing, breaking the tension, 'oh, oh, little sis, what is going on, here? Are you two being a couple?'

Laura still didn't answer. She was trying to cope with the new information of Georg.

Georg continued, 'I don't know yet, Diego and Deniz, whether Laura and I are a couple. But I do confess I love your sister dearly, and would like to marry her, at least if she esteems me worthy of her.'

Georg laughed suddenly, seeing the astonished faces around him. 'This is everything but a conventional proposal of marriage, Laura! I know. I should get on my knees, now, and open a jewel box lined with red velvet and with an engagement ring in it. That will come, I promise. I truly would like to marry you, as soon as possible. I want to live with you as my wife. I am no businessman. Not yet, that is. I'm but a policeman. I'm going to take over the management of some assets of my family, participations in German and European industry. I have hoped

you might help me in that. I would like to have you at my side, and to present you as my bespoken to my family.’

Laura still didn’t answer.

Deniz clapped in her hands, exclaiming, ‘we’re going to have a secret agent as brother-in-law! Who would have thought such a thing possible? I knew it! I sensed it! I can smell secret agents from far. Welcome, welcome, brother! We are going to have such great fun together. We will share our cloak-and-dagger memoirs! I’m so happy we are going to be family! Laura, say something! Don’t be so flabbergasted! You only have to say yes, now, you know!’

Georg had been watching Laura. He saw her redden and then grow pale. He feared she didn’t like at all him being a secret agent, and also not his having failed to declare earlier.

He remarked, ‘nothing is decided yet, Deniz. I have not yet heard Laura’s answer! Maybe I am just deluding myself. I am not all sure Laura wants of me.’

Deniz shouted, ‘oh, men are so silly! Like my Diego, you are so shy and oddly romantic. My Diego was not different. I had to tell him he was welcome with me. Otherwise, he would never have declared. Why do you think we invited you? I know I am indiscreet. Sometimes it is better to be indiscreet, than lose a love. Of course, Laura wants you, Georg! Do you think we had our eyes hidden in our back pockets? Of course, she’s in love with you! Aren’t you, Laura? Say something, dear!’

Laura reddened deeper. She laughed and looked shyly at Diego and Deniz. Tears welled up in her eyes. She was puzzled and ashamed. Why had she let her friends state the obvious? She nodded and opened her arms.

Georg stood, went up to her, hugged her, kissed her lightly on the lips, and returned to his seat. He kept staring with sweet, admiring and loving eyes at Laura. Laura wiped at the corners of her eyes with a white, lace handkerchief. She too laughed, then.

She explained, ‘we love each other. I love you, Georg. We haven’t declared yet. We probably needed someone else to drive us truly together. Deniz told the truth. She made it all so much easier. Of course, I want to marry you. And I won’t wait any longer. We both know what we want, it seems. There, it is said! Can I have some more Champagne, now, please? I drank all of mine from sheer anxiety. I am getting tipsy!’

‘Ha, ha,’ Diego shouted in his turn, ‘not only can you have some more Champagne now, sis, you are going to have my very best Champagne for the rest of the day, and all through dinner. We’ll leave the Walloon wines for later. We are going to have a Champagne lunch! I cannot but add my happiness, Georg, to Deniz’s joy for having another policeman and secret agent in our family! Excuse me, I have to go to the cellar, fetch a few bottles and put them in the cold! This must be celebrated properly!’

By the time Diego had finished these words, Georg and Laura were embracing passionately in Diego’s living-room. Deniz had rapidly disappeared into the kitchen for a while. Laura and Georg talked.

Later on, Deniz reappeared, announcing the table had been set in the dining-room, and lunch was ready. The four talked on. Georg explained how his mission for Europol had started. His father had told him about his apprehensions on some of the products Pharmtelia had been producing. It had only been a hunch of an old man, but of a man with age-old experience. Georg had checked on the data. He found out about the ephedrine traffic between the Swiss

firm and South-America. Georg's father had phoned his friend, Charles de Trioteignes, and the current story of Laura and Georg began for real.

'I was bound to keep my Europol mission a secret,' Georg confirmed. 'But all of Robois seems to be a force to be reckoned with. You, people of Robois, only leave a man alone when he has brought his knowledge and feelings wide in the open. That is the magic, I believe, at work in this little town. And, of course, I fell in love. Things got complicated. How could I breach the secrets and come unscathed out of it? I was afraid too. I am not afraid of entering a fray with a gun in my hand, but declaring my true love to a woman is something entirely different!'

Diego and Deniz laughed.

'Of course,' Deniz commented. 'Men! I can tell you all about them, Laura!'

The lunch in the Ghijsen farm lasted a long time. The four young people enjoyed themselves. The two couples stopped speaking about the past, and also didn't want to think far ahead. They enjoyed the happiness of the moment. The food was simple, but excellent. The bottles of Champagne Diego had brought got emptied. Laura drank little. She would have to drive her car back to Trioteignes. The second announcement of the day would have to be made there.

After several goodbyes, Laura and George left the farm. Laura drove her large BMW out of the farm's courtyard. She took the easier, broader roads this time, not the smaller country paths. A soft, but persistent rain drizzled since the late afternoon, and the darkness of the evening fell. When the car almost reached the National Road, the rain fell in heavy showers. Laura drove slowly through open pastures.

Georg said, 'I like your brother and your sister-in-law. We are almost comrades-in-arms, you know. Such knowledge creates bonds. Policemen and secret-service men and women from many friendly countries form one, big family in Europe. I feel at home with you and with Diego and Deniz. Yes, I think I've finally come home, but home will only mean you. Loneliness has always been one of my worse enemies. I've not lived like a monk, but I've not lied to you. There have been, truly, no other women before you. I've frolicked around, but never engaged my soul, nor my body.'

Laura looked sideways at Georg. In doing so, she also looked past him, through the right side window of her car. That glance became a matter of life and death.

Laura saw an enormous truck jump at high speed out of a small country road to her right, not slowing down, and almost crushing into them. The truck's cabin towered over her BMW. The metal shock absorbers came at the height of her eyes. She saw a man crouched over the large steering wheel, as if deliberately taking aim on them with an intense and cruel grin on his face.

The last, instinctive reaction of Laura was to push with all her weight and energy on the accelerator. The BMW shot forward in full power. The fraction of a second probably saved their lives. The truck crushed into the rear of the BMW, but not in the full length of the car's chassis. The impact threw Laura's car around. Her car did not lose its momentum, and slammed onto the National Road Laura was about to engage.

Her car slipped. She tried to push hard on the breaks. This only sent her more slipping on the rain-soaked road. A small van arriving at about fifty miles per hour gripped the BMW in the

rear. The BMW was struck on the left side, but less powerfully. The van took the BMW from behind, pushed it into the middle of the road. A car, coming from the opposite direction also slammed in the BMW, with screeching tyres and blazing horn, as that driver desperately tried to bring his car to a stop. On both sides of the road, cars, vans and trucks, screeched to a forced halt. Two cars crashed into each other. Chaos began on the National. Laura's BMW ended its course on the other side of the road. The car was once more spun around as its tyres dug into the softer ground of a green pasture. The car turned over, though only once, and came to lie on its back like a wounded animal.

Laura found herself somewhat dazed, hanging upside down in her safety belt. She had been stunned by the explosion of the air bags. She tried to breathe better by pushing the air bags away from her, but the bags resisted her efforts. All the airbags in the car had opened. Laura felt exhausted. She saw Georg hanging in his belt, like she. She remained inactive only a few moments. Panic made her move. She thought of only one thing: to get out of the wreck of the car. She began to feel with her hands for the clip of her safety belt. She tugged at it, trying to open the clip, even though that meant she might fall deeper in the car. Suddenly, a face appeared near the car's window, next to her. It was a dark, brown man's face. Laura took hope, expecting help, but the man only cried with a heavy Spanish accent a few simple words in English. He repeated twice, pronouncing the words slowly, 'warning! Warning! Do not touch Robchem. Do not touch Pharmtelia!'

The face disappeared quickly. Other men approached, then. Laura remained hanging for a while in her safety belt, stiffened by fear. Her heart banged. She managed to untie the belt and she struggled to open the door. Other faces appeared near her window. Two men called, 'wait, miss, we'll draw you out! Open the door!'

Laura could only push the mechanism for opening the door upwards. Three men tore with all their might at the door. Hands groped for the handle through the broken window. Laura pushed from her side. The car door swung open slowly, slowly, scraping in the soft ground of the pasture. Then, more hands grabbed her, and began to draw at her shoulders. 'Careful!' one of the men cried. 'Miss, are you hurt? Do you feel pain somewhere? In the legs?'

Laura managed to whisper, 'no, no, my legs are free. I'm fine. I think I hit my head. I feel blood from a cut. Pull me out of here, please, please, be quick!'

A strong, bulky man pushed the others aside. He pulled Laura at the shoulders and got her out of the car. He drew her gently but steadily, until she laid in the grass, at some distance from the car. Laura saw only a wreck of torn iron, but with the inner space intact. 'Draw her a little farther, away from the car,' she heard a man shout. 'The gasoline tank may take fire and explode.'

Laura felt another panic grip her. 'Get my friend out of the car, please,' she yelled. She feared fire and an explosion. 'Other men are doing just that, miss,' a man told her. 'I can see they are getting him out. You were quite lucky! How you survived such a crash is close to a miracle! You were hit by three vehicles, and yet you came out almost unwounded. Hey, where is that truck going? It must stay here! The truck crashed into the car. Stop that truck! The driver is riding away!'

Laura stayed in the grass. She did not try yet to sit. Her head spun. The shock of the accident only now overwhelmed her senses. She was lying in the grass, and getting soaked entirely by the pouring rain. A man, who looked like another trucker, came running to her with a large, heavy tarpaulin in his hands. Four men held the tarpaulin above her, so that the rain could not reach her anymore. She nodded in thanks. She looked carefully around, and noticed the chaos had not finished. The traffic of cars and trucks on the National Road had come to a halt. More and more people came running to her. At least a dozen men and women stood and moved around her. Several of the men had a mobile telephone in their hand. Laura had a terrible headache, now. She cried out Georg's name several times. Then, she fainted.

Laura did not lose conscience for a long time. Less than a few minutes later, she became once more aware of her opened eyes and of the reality around her. She regained conscience to find her lying on a stretcher and the stretcher being rolled into an ambulance. At her side, holding her hand lovingly, sat *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri. Laura was happy to have a familiar face near her. She was not alone. Somebody familiar was taking care of her. Joseph Bikri and two of his police officers had arrived only a few minutes after the crash, having been called to the scene by the emergency services.

As Bikri was the first face Laura recognised, she smiled at him.

Joseph Bikri smiled back, and consoled her. He gave her the words she needed.

'You'll be all right, Laura. You had a very solid car. The car turned over. You hit your head some. The attendants of the ambulance assured me they only take you to the hospital as a precautionary measure, and to get you away from the scene. You will need rest. Georg is all right, too. He has received a more severe shock on his head. He is alive and well. He keeps shouting he wants to see you. He hurt his leg, but he is in one piece.'

Bikri grinned, 'the male nurses have given him a sedative, for he was too excited about you and the accident. He is being tended to. He will be brought to the same hospital in another ambulance. I'm accompanying you, and I'll see to it you are treated with all due care. We phoned Castle Trioteignes. Your family will soon join you at the hospital. Now, do you feel strong enough to tell me a few words about what happened?'

Laura told, 'we had lunch at my brother's. We rode back to Trioteignes, but towards the National Road. It was raining heavily, and then I prefer the wider roads. A large truck hit us from the right, just before the National. I pushed on the accelerator to make the car jump forward, but the truck hit us behind, behind Georg, on his side. The car turned and turned. We were thrown on the National, and a van coming from the left crashed into us. That brought us on the other side of the road, where yet another car crashed into us. These two vehicles could not avoid us. We turned two or three times on our wheels, until the car coming from the other direction hit us. I lost control of my BMW, the car turned over, and we plunged into the fields. Oh God! It was awful!'

'You couldn't possibly control anything anymore, Laura, not in the soft ground. The entire rear part of your car was crushed and destroyed. The rear tyres exploded. Your car ended in the pastures. Nobody could then still have controlled the trajectory of your car. The truck made a hit and run. We'll find it. We have its number plate.'

‘This was no accident, Joseph! I saw the face of the truck driver. He was fully intent on crashing into us. He was grinning! He wanted to murder us! After the accident, when I was hanging upside down, a man came to the window. He told me this was a warning. He twice repeated to leave Robchem and Pharmtelia alone! That man was not the driver. It was somebody else, but there was only one man in the truck’s cabin.’

‘The truck drove off immediately, Laura. The man who caused the crash, the attempted murder I would say, must have had accomplices in a car waiting somewhere nearby on the National. I’ll find out whether the eye witnesses saw a car waiting somewhere. I don’t need to have more from you for the moment, Laura, unless you would want to add something important. Don’t worry about your safety. I’ll post two police officers near your room and also near Georg’s room in the hospital. I’ll arrange for rooms close to one another.’

‘I have nothing to add, Joseph. I think you had it all in a nutshell. I don’t have anything else to say for now. Oh yes! The man spoke English to me, with a heavy Spanish accent.’

‘Fine. I shouldn’t tell this to you, but I would want to calm you, and reassure you. There has been some development in the Robchem case coming from Namur. A girl was found in the apartment block the Namur police had under surveillance, the block you and Georg discovered the first day. We have sound evidence now of crimes committed. Tomorrow morning early, the Namur police is going to launch a raid on the apartment block and the Oneiro office. At the same time, we, the police of Robois, are going to raid Robchem in Robois. Please, don’t tell anybody but Georg about this. You must understand I tell you this to reassure you. There can only be some danger to you and Georg this evening and night. Tomorrow morning, the Robchem and Oneiro case will be closed in a massive police operation in Namur and Robois. Until then, we keep it a secret where our main witness, the girl, is being held.’

Laura nodded. She rested her head.

The ambulance arrived at the Robois hospital. *Commissaire* Bikri jumped out of the van. The male nurse and the driver rolled Laura’s stretcher into the emergency rooms. Joseph Bikri went to the entry hall of the hospital to make arrangements for Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten. He gave several phone calls to his assistant.

A little later, two female nurses pushed Laura’s stretcher into the hospital, and into a room in another wing. Doctors and nurses entered to take care of her. Laura fainted again from the movement.

Much later, Laura woke up lying in a bed under very white sheets in a white room. The light too was brilliant and hurt her eyes a little. She remembered. She realised she had been brought to the hospital of Robois. She was alone, but no medical instruments stood or hung around her, which she regarded as a very good sign. A female nurse or a doctor entered her room, drawing the sheets better around her. Only then did the nurse notice Laura had her eyes wide open.

‘Ah, you are back among us, miss,’ the nurse smiled. ‘Are you feeling well? Any headache?’ Laura moved. She wanted to sit higher, but the nurse pushed her down.

‘No, no,’ she hushed, ‘lay still for another moment. You are fine. You are in our hospital. You have a slight concussion, but nothing to worry about. You must not move too quickly with your head. You are not really injured, but for a slice on your scalp, nothing more than a scratch, really. The scratch is under your hair. The doctor closed the wound. You will be able

to walk and leave the hospital by tomorrow morning. We would only like to hold you in observation this night. You drove a very fine, strong car. It saved you from more injuries. No, don't sit up either! Tell me how you feel. Can you talk?'

'Of course, I can talk,' Laura snapped, somewhat irritated, but otherwise in her normal, abrupt voice. 'How is Georg? Georg Stratten, where is he?'

The nurse smiled, 'he too is fine, miss! Georg is the name of the man who sat next to you, isn't it?'

'Yes, Georg! How is he?'

'Your friend is fine too, miss,' the nurse continued. 'He was hurt a little more than you. He has got a broken leg. The doctors assured me the fracture was clean and simple. He was also hit a little more than you on the head. I can tell you he has regained conscience a few moments ago. We held him a while under sedatives. He has been screaming your name ever since he woke up! He lies in a room down the corridor. Don't worry, you are both hurt some, but you'll be fine in a day or two. Isn't that good news?'

Laura nodded, speechless.

The nurse then announced, 'several people are waiting for you in the corridor. I know who you are. Your father and mother are here, in the waiting-room, and also your brother and sister-in-law. Deniz and Diego are far neighbours. I know them quite well. Also, our *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri would like to talk to you again, if only for a minute, but after you said hello to your family. Are you up to receiving them? They seem very worried, despite all we told them, but that is quite understandable. I can let them in first, for ten minutes, and then the *commissaire*. Do you think you can manage them all together in the room?'

'Sure, yes, please, let them in,' Laura nodded.

The nurse went out of the room without further ado. She ushered in Laura's family. Monique Ghijssen ran to the bed to embrace her daughter. She brought a leather bag with clothes and other things for Laura, everything her daughter might need in the hospital. Charles de Trioteignes was sorry he had involved Laura in a dangerous venture. He kept holding Laura's hand, and wouldn't release it. Diego and Deniz said little, but were glad to see Laura. They all stood around the bed. They talked for a long time. Laura had to tell the story of the accident anew. She remembered more details. She felt good, talking about the accident. She didn't tell she thought the accident was an attempt at murder. Maybe Joseph Bikri had explained all, but her family didn't tell her they knew. Laura wept a little. She said she felt fine.

When her family left, *Commissaire* Bikri showed his head in the door opening. He had papers in his hand he wanted Laura to sign. Laura waved him in.

Bikri said, 'I wanted you to sign this summary of your first declaration, Laura. I heard you were fine.'

Joseph Bikri repeated what he had told her before, in the ambulance. He merely added the truck that had caused the accident had disappeared. A similar truck with another number plate had been stolen a day earlier in a depot of another village, not far from Robois. And yes, witnesses had noticed a black Renault car waiting on a side road of the industrial zone of Robois. People had seen one man get out of that car, talk to Laura in her damaged car, without helping her, and then returning to his own car. The car left immediately after. One witness had watched this scene in surprise. He had mentioned it to one of Bikri's officers.

The witness had offered his opinion of the strange behaviour of that man, who gave no help at all, as odd and scandalous. The witness could also give a description of the man who came up to Laura's car, only to walk coolly away a few seconds later. A drawing of the man's face was being made. *Commissaire* Bikri asked Laura to read and sign the papers. He did not stay long at Laura's bed. He had to prepare the major operation of tomorrow. He gave her the best wishes on a speedy recovery form his wife, Samia Bennani. He left the room.

A little later, Laura tried to sit up, and succeeded well in that. She did not feel dizzy. She got out of her bed. She stood barefooted. She put on a pair of slippers her mother had brought her, and a bath-wrap. She opened the door, and went down the corridor. A policeman ran after her, telling her she had to stay in her room. Laura waved the man away, said she only wanted to go to the room of her friend.

The police officer smiled, 'the other way, miss! You see that police woman, over there? That is the room of your friend. He has been cursing the nurses and us, police officers, for not allowing him out of his room. The doctors forbade him. Please use my arm. I'll take you there. You can't escape from me, you know! *Commissaire* Bikri would make my life very, very hard for the rest of my service, if we didn't care for you.'

Laura smiled at so much courtesy. She accepted the arm, and the officer brought her to the room. He smiled at his colleague and made a consoling gesture, allowing Laura into the room.

Georg was still in bed, one leg in heavy plaster lay over the sheets. He had his eyes open, but he seemed angry. The nurses had forbidden him to go out of this room this evening. Laura threw herself on the bed, and in his arms.

5.3. The police interventions

The day after the accident of Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten, *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri, his assistant Chief Inspector Dominique Bussy and two cars of police officers rode to the premises of Robchem in the industrial zone of Turgoux. The three police cars stopped in front of the firm. Bikri, Bussy and the officers wore bullet-free jackets over their uniforms. They stormed instantly into the entry hall of Robchem, handguns first. In all, ten policemen and policewomen invested Robchem. The reception girl was overwhelmed and ready to faint, but she could tell who was in the building, and where.

The operation then proceeded with exemplary rapidity and efficiency. The officers assembled all personnel present that day in a corner of the entry hall. They stopped them from using any fixed telephone set, and they confiscated the cell phones of everybody they drove to the entry hall. The policemen ran through the administrative sections, rounding up five people. Among these they found Bernard Gorelle, sitting at his office desk. Gorelle protested loudly and vehemently. *Commissaire* Bikri threw the papers signed by the Investigating Judge of Namur under Gorelle's nose. Bikri's police force had all the right to burst into the plant and arrest everybody present for interrogation. They advised Gorelle not to resist violently. They bound everybody's hands behind their backs, as they did to all common criminals.

A little later, *Commissaire* Bikri and his assistant, accompanied by four heavily armed officers, penetrated into the manufacturing part of the building. They took out five more people there, the chemical technicians. They led these men and women also to the reception hall and bound them. The policemen discovered two large, well-equipped laboratory rooms. The man called Teilo Merthyn was not present, but an electronics engineer was brought out under guard.

Dominique Bussy checked on the personnel list whether all Robchem employees had been assembled. That was the case, except for the people ill at the moment and for the man called Teilo Merthyn. *Commissaire* Bikri sighed with relief his police intervention had been executed in record tempo, without too much humbug. Despite a few protests, nobody of Robchem had truly resisted being made a prisoner.

Joseph Bikri ordered the people gathered in the hall to be interrogated in the Abbey. He phoned for a bus to drive to Robchem. The bus had been reserved the day before. The police officers made everybody step in the bus.

Dominique Bussy, accompanied by four policemen, brought the lot to the Abbey. She started the first, short interrogation there. This became one of the most tedious tasks of her life as a policewoman. Each interrogated man or woman had the right to ask for a lawyer to be present. Luckily, only four members of Robchem's personnel demanded for the privilege. Bussy interrogated these four the last, and for the longest time. She finished only in the afternoon. She kept most of the people in the Abbey, however, telling them to declare anything more that could come to their mind about the activities of Robchem. She did not allow the men and women to go free. She had Bernard Gorelle and three other men be transferred to the prison of Namur, to be interrogated later by Paolo Timario and the substitutes of the Investigating Judge.

At Robchem, *Commissaire Bikri* made a phone call to the expert police team of Namur. These officers, led by a substitute of the judge, began loading devices into their vans. They first took the personal computers of the directors and leading people of Robchem. They gathered all the accountancy and financial documents of the finance department. Another team spread into the production hall to search for illicit chemical substances. Many samples were taken, numbered, and listed with a description of where the samples originated from. Two machines that pressed pills seemed still to hold some hallucinatory drugs in their containers. This alone provided sufficient proof, justifying entirely the police intervention. The same team proceeded to the laboratories. They loaded all documents found in cupboards and drawers into their vans. They listed methodically the substances present in bottles or flasks in the aluminium and glass cupboards. Here too, they took very many samples of the chemical substances discovered. They found numerous fingerprints on the test tubes and tables and on other glassware. The policemen meticulously photographed the rooms. All the samples and objects taken were listed and numbered.

When the work was done, the teams placed seals on all cupboards and drawers, and then on the doors of the laboratories. They went out of the production hall, and placed seals on the doors leading to these rooms. They left an entirely empty building, and placed additional seals on the outside doors, gates and windows of Robchem. Nobody could in any way enter the premises without breaking a police seal. Papers, stuck to the doors and windows, told the building had been closed for investigation by the Belgian Police and could not be entered.

The entire operation had started at nine o'clock in the morning. Robchem stood closed and without a living soul in its buildings by noon. *Commissaire Bikri* left two policemen in plain city clothes posted around Robchem, but at some distance. *Bikri* ordered Robchem to be guarded very discreetly. These men received orders to intercept any man or woman who snooped around the firm. Any person trying to enter the building had to be arrested. If groups of more than two men attempted to enter the plant, the officers were to phone the *commissaire* or his assistant at the Abbey.

At the Abbey, Dominique Bussy, later accompanied by *Commissaire Bikri*, proceeded to the interrogations. They did not learn much at that time. Most of the personnel shouted they did not know what exactly Robchem was producing. Bernard Gorelle refused to answer on any of the questions posed to him. The men and women did explain what their function was in the Robchem building.

Gorelle was put to the test for more than one hour. Finally, he fell through, and admitted maybe having produced drugs. He signed a declaration to that end, and was immediately charged with the crime. A police car brought him separated from the rest of his personnel, to the prison of Namur. He would be further interrogated in the next days by the police and by the substitutes of the judge.

Three other men admitted having known Robchem was producing hallucinatory drugs. These men were charged for crimes of drug trafficking. They too were sent to Namur. When Dominique Bussy and *Commissaire Bikri* were convinced an interrogated man or woman was most probably innocent of any crime, the police told the man or woman would be kept until tomorrow in the Abbey and in the local prison, waiting for being released. They had to sign their declarations. All this took much time.

In the hospital of Robois, Georg Stratten lost conscience again. Additional urgent examinations proved a clot of blood had formed in his head. He would have to be operated on by a specialised team. Georg was sent by ambulance to the university hospital of Saint Lucas in Woluwe-Brussels. By that time, Laura had been released from hospital. She stayed at Georg's side during the ride to Brussels. She waited for the results of the delicate operation in Brussels, phoning regularly her parents and her brother about the situation.

Around 17:00 in the afternoon, Chief Inspector Dominique Bussy received a phone call from the two police guards left at Robchem. The men had been standing at some distance from the building. They had seen two cars drive to the Robchem parking, to behind the plant. They had noticed some hesitation and discussion among the men who came out of the cars when they perceived the police seals on the gates, doors and windows of Robchem. Despite the signs, at least seven men had broken into the building. The policemen had seen some of the burglars were armed. The burglars were too many for them to arrest. They asked for help. Bussy told them to hide as much as possible, not to intervene, to observe only, and to wait for reinforcements.

Dominique Bussy immediately alerted *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri. The *commissaire* ordered his entire force to the Abbey. The men and women were to gather in full combat attire, including bullet-free jackets and with their heaviest weapons. A few minutes later, they all rode in police cars and vans with wailing sirens and sweeping blue lights to Robchem.

Diego de Trioteignes and his wife, Deniz Sürkoglou had also been called that day to the police station at the Abbey, to give a short declaration about the whereabouts of Laura and Georg right before the accident. They testified Laura had drunk some Champagne, but not much, and not during lunch or after. That, declared Diego, was the reason she had been driving the car, and not Georg. Also, Laura preferred to drive her own car. She was an experienced driver. Laura rode large distances with this particular vehicle.

Diego and Deniz were still in the police offices of the Abbey when they heard of the sudden commotion. They learnt of an additional raid on Robchem was being organised. They decided to have a look at what happened at the building. They too drove to Robchem! They saw the police cars riding into the industrial zone of Turgoux. The police officers spilled out, holding riot-guns and handguns in front of them, and entered Robchem. Diego and Deniz brought their car to the parking space of Recycfast. They remained waiting there, looking at what happened at Robchem. They had an open view at the space in front of the chemical plant. They saw the Bikri force of Robois gathering at the entry to the reception hall. They police officers entered the building.

Two police officers, the ones who had held the premises under guard, and who had waited in civilian clothes outside, had remained standing at some distance of the building. These also received bullet-free jackets, and they too chose a riot-gun each, added to their concealed handguns. One of these men stood near the parked car of Diego and Deniz. He was not too happy with their presence. He knew who they were, made a sign to stay put, ready to duck behind the engine block. Diego and Deniz had arrived in a heavy Ford, Texan-style pickup, a vehicle Diego used for his trips to his fields and pastures.

A few seconds after the policemen had entered the Robchem offices, Diego and Deniz heard the first shots. They heard many shots. A true shootout was taking place inside Robchem! They listened, and watched in horror.

The police officers of Joseph Bikri had split into two groups of each five men and women. The first group, headed by Chief Inspector Dominique Bussy, advanced to the administrative wing. They walked cautiously, slowly, in the simple but effective drill they had learnt at the police school, and for which they had trained often. One man advanced, the other covered him. They advanced door to door, room after room, checking each office for intruders or traps. They did this work meticulously and systematically, patiently, taking their time, carefully applying their drill, and being thorough.

When the police force entered a second corridor, a corridor of mostly unused offices, they encountered two gangsters who took aim at them with handguns. The men shot immediately, not waiting for any summation from the police officers. They were stuck at the end, however, no door or windows leading outside in this part of the building. The police officers shot back with riot guns and small hand weapons. One police officer went down rapidly, blown back by the impact of two bullets on his bullet-free jacket. The officer was wounded, but not severely. He got winded and he remained panting, more from the shock of having been shot at so soon, rather than from real pain. The other officers drew him into a room. The shooting then developed on both sides in the same way.

One bandit shot from either side of the corridor, out of the door openings of offices. The officers also stood behind the door openings of the corridor. In each room waited two officers, heavily armed and protected by their vests. Dominique Bussy stood, gun in hand, as the third officer in the right-sided room of the direction of their advance. Several shots were being exchanged.

The two groups shot from a distance of about ten metres at each other. The police officers waited until the bandits shot, then they rapidly appeared with head and side only in the door opening, and shot back one or two times. They also sent their bullets into the sidewalls of the corridor, hoping one bullet would pass the plastered separations. Then, they withdrew, to wait a few seconds until a new salvo from the bandits' side had sounded. The police officers could hold out this way much longer than the bandits. They had ample ammunition, and more ammo lay in their cars. They assumed the gangsters had less ammunition at their disposal. Also, the police force of Robois could call in additional forces of Namur, specialised in tough interventions, to assist them. They had brought a few grenades in their car, smoke grenades and tear-gas grenades, but those and their gas masks had remained in their car.

Dominique Bussy shouted several times in French and in English for the gangsters to give themselves up. She cried the men could not in any way escape from the trap they stood in. She urged them not to aggravate their case by shooting at the police. She wanted them to surrender before somebody got hurt seriously. Dominique sensed some hesitation among the gangsters. She heard them shouting at each other in Spanish. They continued to answer the shots from the Robois police, however.

One officer of Robois, a young man, dared a little more than his colleagues. He detected a regular pattern in the shooting. They shoot, then we shoot, he thought. One side shot from behind the door opening, and then the other side shot. While one side shot, the other one ducked in the rooms. He thought of breaking this pattern. When his side shot, he didn't instantly afterwards withdraw back into the room. He crouched to form an unexpected, low profile, and waited until the bandit on the opposite side of the corridor appeared. He shot three times in rapid succession, holding his handgun with both hands. Then, his colleague appeared above him and shot with a riot gun. A bullet missed the young officer by a hair, but he wounded his opponent in the chest. The man fell down, maybe mortally wounded. He fell into the corridor. He slumped against the wall, and sank down a little later in the middle of the corridor.

After a few seconds of no shots exchanged, the second bandit shouted in English he would give himself up. He held his gun high and showed himself in the corridor, hands up. Dominique cried to him to drop his weapon, which he did. The police officers then advanced, guns in front, and made a prisoner of the man. The man let himself be arrested docilely. The officers bound his hands behind his back.

Dominique Bussy phoned for an ambulance. The wounded bandit still lived. She helped stem the blood seeping out of the man's wound.

The policemen had to move the wounded gangster. He was losing much blood. He lost conscience. Inspector Bussy did not want the ambulance nurses to enter the building. The officers found a low table in one of the offices. They placed the wounded man on this table, and carried it out, to the entry hall. They left the building for a few moments, and placed the table and the man on the pavement of the road a few metres in front of Robchem. The ambulance could recuperate the man there.

For Dominique's team, her part of the raid was finished. She and her men had secured the administrative offices and the three apartments above. She found a carton box the bandits had been filling with all sorts of papers from the Finance Director's office. She smiled at that, for the morning teams had secured anything of value to the investigation out of the offices already hours ago. The intrusion of the bandits had served for nothing. What would they have expected? They had seen the seals as well as anybody. Dominique Bussy's team remained on guard now, guarding the entry to the administrative wing of Robchem.

Chief Inspector Bussy had only four officers with her to secure her target. One of these men had accompanied the wounded gangster to the hospital. Meanwhile, *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri was advancing with six officers into the production hall.

He immediately walked into a confrontation with other gangsters. Three men occupied the hall, hidden between the machines and the containers of the chemical products. Bikri's officers, men as well as women, entered the large room and could hide behind metal tables near the door. They turned the heavy tables over, and waited. The bandits only sent two shots in their direction. *Commissaire* Bikri shouted several times the building was completely surrounded. He cried the gangsters could not escape. They could surrender or be killed. He told an entire squadron of police officers stood all around the building. Bikri heard the men shouting at each other in French, which astonished him some.

A little later, three men shouted to the officers they agreed to surrender. Bikri told them to show themselves hands up, and then to throw down their weapons. The men had handguns only. Bikri heard and saw the weapons being thrown on the ground. The gangsters stood before the officers, hands up. Bikri told the men to advance slowly. The gangsters did so, and only then the *commissaire* also showed himself. Joseph Bikri sent two of his men forward, still fearing a trap. His men could arrest and handcuff the three bandits. Later, *Commissaire* Bikri learnt these three men were hired hoodlums from Brussels, known the police of the capital for petty crimes. They had been hired for much money by the team of South-American gangsters sent to handle matters at Robchem.

Commissaire Bikri asked the men where the other gangsters were, and how many men still hid. One of them put two fingers up, and yanked his head to a door that held the inscription ‘Laboratory’.

The gangsters in the laboratory could have followed the exchange of fire from out of the glass windows overlooking the production hall. *Commissaire* Bikri made the three men taken prisoners lay down on their bellies in a corner of the hall, bound and guarded by his two female officers. With his men, he took up position behind the door leading to the lab. Joseph Bikri pushed open the door. He remained standing behind the wall next to the door. Immediately, shots of automatic fire resounded, a furious salvo of at least ten bullets passed the door opening and slammed into the wall around.

Joseph Bikri shouted the gangsters used automatic assault weapons, even though he had only heard one such weapon. Two police officers armed with riot guns took his place at the wall beside the door. Together, they emptied several rounds of their slugs into the lab, without looking at what they shot. They wanted to give an impression of their firepower to the bandits inside. *Commissaire* Bikri heard the impact of the bullets on wood and plaster. He heard glass break, and the sound of bullets penetrating into iron or aluminium plates. He also heard a muffled cry. He supposed one of his opponents had not been very careful with his position and cover. That man had underestimated the firepower of the Robois police. Bikri waited.

One of Bikri’s officers ignored the *commissaire*’s appeals to caution. He jumped into the large room, and emptied once more his riot gun. His colleague cursed, but felt obliged to follow him, to cover for his over-courageous and imprudent friend. He too jumped into the lab, shooting wildly around. Bikri cursed, and followed equally. He had only a handgun, but he too shot several bullets around.

His two officers hid behind a strong cupboard. They reloaded their guns. Bikri put another, full charger in his handgun. He shouted for anyone still in the lab to surrender, and added a few bullets to his words. A voice shouted to stop shooting, and a man emerged from behind an overturned metal desk on which could be noticed the impact of several bullets. The man held his hands high as a sign of surrender. He still held a modern Kalashnikov in his one hand. Bikri shouted for him to throw down the weapon. The man did so, and remained standing hands up. The three police officers surrounded him, cautiously at first, then with more confidence, and then they tied his hands at his back. The other police officers of Bikri’s team entered the lab. They whistled at the destruction they saw. Glass and wood shards lay everywhere around. The officers still looked shy, guns ready to shoot, but nobody reacted. They found nobody else in the large lab.

Commissaire Bikri advanced to the door leading to the second lab. He opened the door, heard no shots, sprang inside, and found stairs leading to the second floor. He also saw a shattered window behind the staircase. He sent two policemen up the stairs, while he looked out of the window from the side. He saw nothing. He also heard nothing upstairs. He shouted to his men, asking about the situation in the second lab. An officer shouted back nobody was present upstairs. The man added much electronic equipment stood in this room. He suggested *Commissaire* Bikri took a look.

Joseph Bikri cursed again. He would have wanted to climb outside by the shattered window downstairs, and follow to where the probably last opponent had run. The curiosity to have a look upstairs won. He went up the stairs, and found the second lab entirely different from the first. His policemen stood with lowered weapons, looking around. They also looked through the windows offering a view on the production hall. Bikri noticed all was calm. No bandits sneaked in the hall. The arrested gangsters still lay there, guarded by his two officers. Bikri went back to the rear windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of the last, escaping man. He didn't spot the gangster. He had a fine view of the surroundings, here, a better view than he could have gotten from out of the downstairs window. He wondered where the last bandit might have run to. Had he hidden in the bushes or in the small wood behind Robchem? If yes, Bikri would have a long man hunt to perform.

Commissaire Bikri then took less than a minute to see why his men had called him in here. This lab looked very, very different indeed from a chemical lab. Various electronic equipment stood here on tables, neatly arranged one item next to the other. Computers, computer screens and wiring occupied the room. Some of the computers were still humming. *Commissaire* Bikri drew a few electric wires out of their wall sockets.

Electronic equipment was being designed, here, too. Bikri saw several electric measuring devices, electronic boards, hard disks separately. He sighed. He would have expected the hard disks to have been taken in for examination by the morning, expert team. The team had missed some! What had Robchem been doing in here? He wondered what such a room might have meant for a chemical firm.

The gangster who had escaped through the rear window of Robchem was at that moment running along the walls of Robchem. He wore on his back a heavy sack with objects taken from the electronics lab, as instructed by his anonymous bosses. He too had an automatic weapon in his hands, a small, compact, but sophisticated machine gun of Belgian origin. He had not used the weapon yet. He preferred stealth to noise and to open violence. He arrived at the end of the wall, at the corner to the reception hall of Robchem. He looked to the parking space of Recycfast. He had left his car on that parking, not near Robchem.

He had come to his most dangerous trajectory, to the open space between Robchem and Recycfast. He noticed only one man in his way, obviously a policeman in plain clothes, but protected by a bullet-free jacket. This man held a riot gun in his hands, but he held that weapon nonchalantly, loosely. The man's handgun still remained in his closed leather halter, at his hip.

The gangster did not hesitate. He ran over the space separating Robchem from the parking space of the other company. He surprised the policeman. When he saw the police officer freeze, call out something and raise his weapon, he let go of a burst of his automatic weapon

and downed the man. He then saw two more persons, a man and a woman waiting in a pickup on the same parking as where his car stood, but these two seemed harmless onlookers. His car stood closer in front. He triumphed then, and ran to his car. He opened it with an electronic key while he ran, and opened the door. He threw his sack inside.

The gangster had already forgotten about the two unarmed people in the pickup. He did not notice them getting out of the car and running to the wounded police officer. He couldn't care less about their charitable intentions. He wanted out of this trap! He would be the only one to report the failure of his operation in Belgium to his bosses. They had to be warned of the consequences. He sat down in his car, a black Renault bought for a small price on the black market of Brussels, and turned the ignition key.

The gangster did not follow with his eyes the man sitting in the pickup. That man had opened his vehicle, followed by a woman, and had reached the fallen police officer. The officer had taken bullets on his protective jacket, and two bullets in his legs. One bullet had grazed his head, and left a long cut, so that the man bled tremendously.

Two ambulances arrived with blazing sirens and sweeping white-and-blue lights from the direction of the National Road, adding to the pandemonium behind the gangster's car. In his rear mirror, he also saw police officers running out of the building. He could escape in time! He did not see how Diego de Trioteignes reached not only the fallen officer, but how he took the riot gun of the man and threw it to Deniz Sürkoglou.

Diego knew Deniz was the superior shot. Deniz plucked the gun out of the air, turned, took aim, and shot twice in the direction of the black Renault. She exploded the rear tyres of the car, so that the accelerating Renault suddenly spun around and glided in a direction the driver had not intended at all. When the front of the car slid into her view, Deniz shot twice more slugs through the front window of the whirling car. The Renault skidded, and stopped. The man at the steering wheel slumped over the driving wheel. He activated thereby the car's horn.

Deniz advanced, her weapon in front and levelled. She went up to the car, saw the gangster had been hit in the head, was maybe still alive but barely. She opened the left door of the car, and drew the gangster back. She halted thereby the deafening, enervating sound made by the car's horn.

Deniz remained standing a few seconds next to the car. She looked at her work, quite satisfied. The last gangster slid lifeless out of the car. He fell sideways, partly still in the car, partly hanging out. Deniz turned contemptuously. She went back to her husband. Diego had already received the assistance of a male ambulance nurse to stem the blood from the police officer. The officer sat straight. The nurse worked with his back to Deniz. Deniz threw down the gun. She joined Diego. The officer who had been wounded by the escaping bandit was still conscious, and watching carefully what Deniz did, his eyes wide open.

Diego saw his wife return, grinning, and wiping her fingerprints from the officer's gun. He said to the fallen officer, 'you are a hero, now, Robert. You stopped the most dangerous gangster from escaping!'

The officer sat in pain, but he was an intelligent man. He nodded and grinned as answer, indicating he had understood. No, Deniz Sürkoglou had not shot the bullets with the man's riot gun, but he. That was how things were done in Robois. He grinned a long time, quite

satisfied, and his eyes managed to glance up to Deniz. He showed he was grateful. Deniz brought a finger to her mouth to urge to silence. The officer nodded. The male nurse did not notice this almost mute exchange. And even if he had noticed, he was a Roboisian too! Robois settled its scores as Roboisians desired. When a police officer would declare he had shot several times in the direction of the escaping Renault, who was he to contradict such a claim? The bad guy had been stopped, hadn't he? Was that not what really mattered?

Diego de Trioteignes had also been watching what was happening at the building of Robchem. The police officers of Robois were drawing and pushing not too softly a score of gangsters two by two to their cars and vans. The gangsters had their hands bound at their backs. They walked, defeated, heads down, as overpowered men generally do. The police officers were looking at Diego. They might have observed the scene of the last seconds. One of the men was *Commissaire* Bikri. The other person, standing next to him, was his assistant, Dominique Bussy. Bussy held up a hand in acknowledgement of the help. Bikri, a little surprised at her reaction, smiled and shook his head. Bussy's uplifted hand meant she was glad and would see to it nobody ever mentioned Deniz's action. Joseph Bikri saw what his assistant did. He frowned, but joined Dominique when she turned. While Bikri walked back, Diego saw Bikri too bringing up an arm and a hand. Diego grinned.

The wounded policeman was being put on a stretcher and brought to the ambulance. Diego and Deniz walked back to their pickup. Diego ignited the car's engine, and rode off. A second ambulance stooped near the shot down gangster in the Renault.

The police officers of Robois has still much work to do. They found two cars, used by the gangsters, stationed in Robchem's parking lot. They had these cars being driven to Namur, to the garages in the police station. They phoned to have the black Renault being tugged away from Robois by a specialised firm, and also brought to Paolo Timario's police station. *Commissaire* Joseph Bikri went back in the Robchem building, accompanied by his assistant. They made a brief inventory of the damages incurred by their action. They looked at the lay of the building, and at the contents of the laboratories. They took pictures of the labs. In their turn, their searched through the apartment above the laboratory. They found nothing of substance. They took pictures, here too. The morning team had done its work thoroughly in these rooms. With the help of his last two officers on the premises, Joseph Bikri and Dominique Bussy placed new seals on the doors and windows where such seals had been broken. Once more, *Commissaire* Bikri left two guards in place around Robchem, this time in uniform and armed with riot guns. In the middle of the night, two other officers would replace them. Both Bikri and Dominique Bussy were confident, however, no new attempt to break into Robchem would be dared in the next days, and afterwards such an attempt would not matter anymore.

Late in the evening, still in his office at the Abbey, Joseph Bikri phoned Paolo Timario to give his friend and boss a first, brief, oral report. Also Paolo Timario was still in his office. He listened with much interest to what Bikri told him. His interest rose to surprise and horror when he heard of the shootout at Robchem.

In his turn, Paolo told to Joseph the Namur connections of the Robchem drug dealing had been arrested. Two men had been arrested in the apartment block, one of them the Head Chemist of Robchem, Teilo Merthyn. The other man was young, Merthyn's main assistant

and main drug distributor. Three young men and one woman had been arrested in three apartments on the same floor as the apartment of Merthyn's assistant. These were heavily drugged, and had probably served as guinea pigs by Merthyn. Moreover, three other young adults had been arrested in the late afternoon, when they rang at the assistant's apartment to pick up more drugs. Police officers had remained in place, but the street left normal.

At the apartment block in the centre of Namur, the block that held the plaque with the name of Oneiro, nobody had been apprehended. Nothing of importance by way of documents had been found in the small office used by Oneiro SA.

The most interesting catch, Paolo Timario said, seemed to be the man called Teilo Merthyn. For the moment, the man refused to say anything. The man's assistant, however, a young man called Philip Brelat, talked like a waterfall flowed. Tomorrow, Merthyn would be confronted with the findings of the expert teams.

Timario asked for assistance of Joseph Bikri and of Dominique Bussy in Namur, at the interrogations. He asked them to come to the prison of Namur the next day, for interrogations of all men and women involved. The suspects would be interrogated several times, by the substitutes of the judge, and by the police officers. Several reports would be written and compared. Joseph Bikri agreed to be present at the prison of Namur by nine o'clock in the morning.

In the meantime, Georg Stratten had been successfully operated upon at the university hospital of Saint Lucas in Woluwe-Brussels. After the operation, the doctors assured Laura de Trieteignes the operation had been easy and routine. Georg would recover and get better after a few days. He would suffer no after-effects of what had happened to him.

Laura stayed at first in the waiting-room of the intensive-care hall of the hospital. Then, she spent the rest of the night in a seat next to Georg. She didn't sleep well. She looked out of the window over the city lights of Brussels.

The next morning, Diego and Deniz came to the room. They persuaded Laura to return home with Diego. She was exhausted and would have fallen sick in her turn if she stayed. Deniz would guard Georg now. Deniz showed Laura the contents of her large handbag, a loaded nine-millimetre Browning handgun. Only then did Laura concede to return with Diego to Robois. Deniz did not have to hold guard for long, for Charles de Trieteignes and Monique Ghijzen came to visit Georg too. Monique Ghijzen insisted to stay at the hospital, and Deniz returned to Trieteignes with Charles.

Joseph Bikri had phoned to the Brussels police. He asked for permanent protection of Georg Stratten. Henceforth, an armed police woman stood at Georg's door.

Georg awoke in the afternoon, and smiled at his surrogate mother, at Monique Ghijzen.

Diego returned to the hospital in the evening. He wanted to pass the night next to Georg, but Georg told all was fine. He had confidence in the police woman at his door. Monique returned to Robois with her son, Diego.

Late in the evening, also a very tired *Commissaire* Bikri entered Georg's room. He told everything what had happened in Robois and in Namur, and gave the first results of the interrogations. Georg could sleep peacefully. His mission in Robois and Namur had ended successfully. The production of drugs had been stopped definitely. Sufficient proof of wrongdoing had been found to arrest several persons.

The next morning, Laura and her family organised a guard on Georg. Georg protested. He said he was fine. He didn't need somebody permanently around him. Diego and Laura hushed him. He was not in Germany, they smiled. Here, in Belgium, he had nothing to protest on, and could exert not the least authority. He should stop protesting, and let himself being taken care of. A beautiful woman, like his Laura, was worth obeying. This, he finally did with pleasure.

Chapter 6. Epilogue

6.1. The interrogations

The interrogations of the arrested men, imprisoned on suspicion of being drug producers, drug dealers and gangsters involved in several crimes, were held in the prison of Namur and in the offices of the police station of the city. Paolo Timario, Joseph Bikri and their assistants proceeded to the interrogations for the police forces. After the sessions with the police, the substitutes of the Investigating Judge also laid the convicted men on the grid. Thousands of pages of reports were printed as a result. Present at the interrogations were the lawyers of the men and the steno-dactylographers of the police and of the judge, who noted down each word the convicted men spoke out. The Oneiro case became the largest case of drug trafficking in Wallony for the past ten years at least. The press of Belgium gave the case much attention in the newspapers and on television and radio.

The policemen first interrogated the drug dealers of Namur, the small grit, the men and women apprehended by the police officers when they arrived at the apartment block of Jambes for new supplies of drugs. Three men and one woman acknowledged the facts laid out before them. They confessed they dealt in drugs, and came to the apartment block in the suburb of Namur on the other side of the Meuse River to buy drugs in large quantities. Interestingly, they told the police they received and bought not one particular drug, but a variety of pills, the effects of which Phil Brelat described to them. Phil proved to be their sole distributor for all drugs.

Phil confirmed he had served as the main drug dealer for Oneiro in Namur. He acknowledged Oneiro delivered various sorts of drugs to him, from cocaine and heroin to methamphetamines and other products he didn't know the origin of. The man he bought the drugs from was Teilo Merthyn, called Phantassus by the other people in the case. Phil explained nobody but him in Namur knew Phantassus's real name. Phil had given very large sums of money to Teilo Merthyn, in exchange for the drugs. He told Merthyn proposed to him often new sorts of pills to sell, asking for any complaints or other reactions. Merthyn constantly pushed new drugs on him, to be sold in Namur. The quantities of pills distributed and their variety astonished the police officers. They came to recognise the drug problem in their town was far higher than they had guessed.

The drug dealers of Namur also sent drugs to other towns in the province, and even far into other provinces of Belgium. The drug dealers themselves told the police as little as one person in ten to whom drugs were sold had been caught by the police. However, they refused to name the other people involved in the crimes, their second-level distributors. They had their moment of superiority when they could throw this information in the face of the Namur police. Afterwards, the police had much work contacting and interrogating the family and friends of these men and women, in search for the entire network of dealers. In the end, and over a period of months, the police arrested more than twenty people involved in drug dealing. Among these were also two men living and dealing in Robois.

Phil provided much information about the people who lived in the Oneiro apartments of the Jambes building. Under some pressure, but in the presence of his lawyer, he told the police these young men and women served as guinea-pigs for the experiments and products invented by Teilo Merthyn. When confronted with the written testimony of Véronique Dupas, he confessed two young men had died from overdoses in the apartments. He did not pronounce the word overdose. Some confusion remained about what the police meant by overdose. Phil told the deaths were caused by the new drugs, which might have proven too powerful, too strong, even in what was considered the normal quantities for methamphetamines. Teilo Merthyn simply did not know exactly and in the beginning, which dose to put in his pills for desired effects.

Phil told he didn't know what Teilo Merthyn did with the data he handed over to the chemist. The drug addicts he discovered in Namur and enticed to serve as guinea-pigs against remuneration, had to describe the effects of drugs in minute detail. Only that information often allowed Merthyn to determine which quantities should be put in the drug pills. The information also allowed Merthyn to develop other products with more powerful effects, to mix products in powder form and bring a cocktail of sensations to the drug consumers. Phil could deny little of what he had done. The young people in the apartment described their experiences. They told how Phil gave them regularly new products to test. Also Véronique Dupas told the police in much detail, though in those early days with difficulty in speech, about the effects of the drugs Phil and Phantasus had provided her with.

The interrogation of Teilo Merthyn, the Dream Master, proved very difficult for the policemen and -women. Very many sessions were needed before Paolo Timario and Joseph Bikri concluded they had heard enough and knew most of Merthyn's activities. At the first interrogations, Merthyn refused to answer to most of the questions. More and more testimonies and evidence were placed by the *commissaires* in front of him. Even his lawyer urged Merthyn then to present some justification and explanation of what he had been doing.

Teilo Merthyn gradually described himself as a great benefactor of humankind. He defined his work as 'a search for new, powerful drugs, which could easily be combined in determined quantities to produce desired hallucinatory or sexual effects to relieve humanity of its saddest thoughts and depressions in harmless ways'. Such aim could not be reached without extensive experimenting of various substances on real people. Merthyn only wanted to do good to humanity! He told to the policemen and to Dominique Bussy he could avoid wars and violence by bringing happiness and solace and the extermination of envy to the people. He had discovered the ultimate, harmless tool for inducing hallucinatory effects in people, by stimulating the brain's neurons electromagnetically.

Merthyn worked from the principle that everything we think and then do is the result of the electrical activity in our brain. Neurons fire electrical signals, interacting in doing so with other numerous neurons. Feelings, conscious images and thoughts are brought thus to form a coherent mind-picture. What if it were possible from the outside, from outside the brain, to change, modulate, control these processes, or even merely interact with them, cause the firing

of weird signals at large numbers of neurons at the same time? One could call then to mind completely artificial, hallucinating images and feelings, not unlike the effects caused by chemical drugs. That was the way of the future Teilo Merthyn had initiated. He had found the means to interact with the processes, though still in a very crude way.

Merthyn sought to intervene in brain activities directly. He stimulated the effects in the neurons by electrical voltage pulses and magnetic waves. The process was far more direct than the chemical ways! Merthyn was advancing by trial and error, though, his control still very crude and elemental, but he nevertheless had obtained tangible results. His main testing ground was Véronique Dupas, because he believed her mind was strong and resilient to outside influence. He needed a very expensive fMRI scanner to refine his method. fMRI or Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging was a neuroimaging procedure using magnetic resonance technology that measured brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. This technique relied on the fact that cerebral blood flow and neuronal activation are coupled, Merthyn told. He dearly needed such equipment, and such a device had been promised to him by Bernard Gorelle. Without this technology, he had been groping around, but reached some significant, early results.

Thus, his newest method of calling weird images to the brain would allow the use of crude chemicals to be made an item of history. How much more humane was his new method, the means he had lately started testing on Véronique Dupas! The Internet companies of the world, the gaming enterprises and the Internet social media could incorporate his electronic means of creating drug-like effects. The helmets he had developed were already being put to use in simpler forms by the users of personal computers all over the world. His method allowed adding a second brain, with memory and processing power, to be joined to the human brain. The possibilities of the method were truly world-changing, amazing and powerful, not merely in the domain of producing drug-alike effects.

Teilo Merthyn told he was creating an entirely new industry on his own, worth billions of dollars. No other man, no other inventor, would have such a tremendous impact on humanity as he, Teilo Merthyn! Soon he claimed, billions of people would be out of jobs for very long periods, because computers would have replaced them and taken over their jobs. The demand for hallucinatory means of entertainment, for peace of mind, for the destruction of the feeling of uselessness in the non-employed, the necessity for creating happy voids in the brain, for generating feelings of content and fulfilment, of happiness and love, would soar. If he could not bring this to humankind, humans would pass their time by killing each other. The world would go under in an apocalypse of war, terrorism, massacres and violence. He, Teilo Merthyn, he argued, was truly the new saviour of mankind. He could bring an end to all deaths by chemical overdoses! It was therefore adamant that he be allowed to continue his tests and experiments on real people.

When Teilo Merthyn thus proclaimed being the Second Messiah, the police officers at the other side of the interrogation table looked at him in silence, then exchanged glances of total incredulity. They concluded they had a madman of self-delusion in front of them. No wonder he wanted to be called Phantassus! But Teilo Merthyn staunchly believed in his mission. He repeated so several times.

In the next sessions, Paolo Timario and Joseph Bikri stuck to the law, instead of entering philosophical considerations of the sort Phantassus mentioned. They understood Merthyn would never be convinced of any wrongdoing. The means to reach his dream, his search for ideal chemical drugs and then the electronic brain stimulation method, were merely necessary steps and procedures along the way. Merthyn claimed the means were entirely justified by his cause. What he had done by producing and selling drugs, by testing the substances, sometimes subjecting the human guinea-pigs to terrible ordeals, causing permanent brain damage and death by suicide in people, were only regrettable collateral damages on the road to bliss. They were as many crimes to the policemen. By questioning Merthyn on these procedures and substances, the police officers allowed Merthyn to believe the interrogators understood his grand aims and schemes. He became convinced they understood his fine targets. His lawyer protested feebly.

Merthyn refused to acknowledge any collaboration with the South-American team of gangsters sent to Robois. Of course, the South-American drug dealers would intervene in Robois, he exclaimed. Their empire of coca-derived and cannabis-based drug products would end with his transcranial magnetic stimulation methods. The South-American drug industries had already been moving away from the organic-based business to the artificial amphetamines and to other artificial substances. In the transfer to the electronic means of creating hallucinatory effects in humans, they would be wiped out. The large, already existing and new Internet companies would take over from the much cruder chemical means. Merthyn admitted he had for a long time in his life sought for better, more powerful and more narrowly targeted artificial drugs, which were also much safer. He had now discovered the ultimate means to eliminate such crude chemicals in the electronic, direct stimulation of the brain neurons!

The interrogators noted all Merthyn's reactions meticulously. When they stopped an interrogation, they sometimes remained silent for quite some time, wondering how a seemingly highly intelligent doctor of science – as Merthyn's diplomas seemed to prove – could have been led into such criminal self-delusion, into a totally unrealistic world-view. Yet, Merthyn staunchly, obsessively believed in his own dreams. Phantassus was overpowered and subjugated to his own dreams! Commissaire Joseph Bikri believed he had an authentic psychopath in front of him.

The *commissaires* also interrogated the South-American gangsters sent to Robois. Laura de Trioteignes recognised two of these men. One had been driving the truck that deliberately crashed into her BMW. The other was the man who had shouted a warning to her when she got stuck in her overturned car and was hanging helplessly, head down. This last man had been killed by Deniz Sürkoglou, or, rather, as was the official version, by one of the guardsmen of Bikri's police force posted at Robchem.

After the attack on Robchem, police officers of Joseph Bikri's team had found the sack of this killed gangster. It held several models of helmets stuffed with electronic circuits, and plans of the electronic circuits. Paolo Timario and Joseph Bikri concluded the South-American drug leaders who bought drugs from Robchem knew about Merthyn's last experiments and inventions. Timario and Bikri were convinced, that at one point in time, the drug barons would have eliminated Teilo Merthyn, thereby stopping the chemists' activities

in designing the electronic equipment at Robchem. Timario and Bikri did not explain this to Teilo Merthyn. They did not state that the police, by arresting him, had probably saved his life. Still, the South-American gangsters had wanted to put their hands on Merthyn's weirdest inventions.

The four gangsters refused all collaboration with the Belgian police. They hid themselves in total silence. Timario and Bikri had sufficient witnesses of their resistance to officers of the law, to convict them of crimes.

The last man to be interrogated was the one who had betrayed to his South-American partners his head chemist had invented quite another way of producing hallucinatory effects in people. He still needed their financial support, and he had great illusions of grandeur and wealth. This man was Bernard Gorelle. Gorelle was sufficiently smart to understand and accept his game was over. He provided full details of his activities, telling the police officers interrogating him openly and clearly about his vision and plans. He offered his entire collaboration to law enforcement and order.

Gorelle explained how, when ephedrine and other chemical substances were transported to Belgium, he had phoned the drivers of the trucks to deliver not in the centre of Namur, but at Robchem in Robois, sending them the new address. He helped Pharmtelia with the transport of large quantities of ephedrine to South-America by way of Antwerp. He also sent large quantities of methamphetamines and other drug substances, produced at Robchem, named as ephedrine, to South-America for further modification and distribution. He admitted having provided formulas of the most modern drugs invented by Teilo Merthyn to the South-Americans.

Bernard Gorelle was amassing a huge fortune from this trade. He said he found the drug selling business in Belgium too dangerous. He was considering stopping the drug dealing. But his chemical genius, Teilo Merthyn, needed the selling of drugs to obtain return information about the drugs' effects. So, Gorelle had been obliged to continue allowing some sale of drugs in the region. When the police officers told him how extensive the business had spread to the entire region and to beyond the borders of Belgium, he bowed his head. His argument was not very credible. He must have known this, but he was desperately trying to diminish his own involvement in the direct drug trade. He then promised his full collaboration in explaining the figures of his accountancy department. In this way, the police and the judge determined the true extent of Robchem's large drug business.

Joseph Bikri asked Bernard Gorelle why he had so aggressively wanted to extricate lands from Diego de Trioteignes. Had it been he, who had sent the South-American gangsters to near the Trioteignes farm? No, no, Gorelle denied. He had merely wanted to build a new plant near Robchem. He had not wanted to build a new villa, but a new factory for the production of the electronic helmets developed by Teilo Merthyn. Gorelle explained he had not wanted to accept the no for an answer he got from Diego de Trioteignes concerning the acquisition of land close to Robchem. Nobody had refused any offer of his!

The Count Buisseyre had agreed to loan him the necessary funds for his new factory, not the South-Americans. There was one condition. The Count Buisseyre had absolutely wanted to gain land of the Trioteignes. Gorelle had to show to Buisseyre he could get in hand terrains of

the Trioteignes, probably because Buisseyre sought some form of revenge on the Trioteignes. Gorelle's issue was he had not known of this in the beginning, of Buisseyre's dark connections to the Trioteignes. He only found out later Buisseyre knew all about the ownership of the terrains he, Gorelle, had to acquire.

Count Buisseyre denied this categorically during his own interrogation. It was his word against the word of Gorelle. Nothing could be proven, but the interrogators rather believed Gorelle at this point.

Gorelle also tried to lead the police officers on the same saviour-of-humanity road by telling the transcranial magnetic stimulation technique was legal and would replace the chemical methods of inducing hallucinations in people's heads. This was food for lawyers! Gorelle had wanted to patent Merthyn's invention, and keep the know-how at Robchem. With his new factory, he could provide jobs for more people in the region. He also would make contributions to science! With the first income from the helmets of Merthyn, Gorelle wanted to buy an fMRI brain scanner. The scanner would be an asset for the entire region! Merthyn could then better target his magnetic waves to the brain regions that really mattered in the creation of illusions and hallucinations.

Gorelle, like Merthyn, tried to convince the policemen they should thank him for his new methods.

Gorelle, like Merthyn, emphasized the anticipative, interesting new research done by Robchem. Gorelle did not for too long, however, pursue the line of the genius saviour of the world, as told by Merthyn. He perceived immediately the scepticism of the police officers. He saw them grin when he began this line of arguing.

Gorelle claimed the South-American gangsters had only come to Belgium to spread fear in the Trioteignes and in the Stratten families. They had found out Georg Stratten was an Europol agent. Bernard Gorelle assured the policemen he had told the South-American gangsters repeatedly the methods of violence and aggression, as they had wanted to deploy, did not work in Europe. The aim was to scare the families, not to hurt them in any way. After Gorelle had explained all this in very many fine phrases, the police officers charged him not only with extensive drug dealing, drug production and drug export. They also charged him for complicity with the team of South-American gangsters. He shouted out his innocence, but the police and the judge stuck calmly to their accusations.

The investigators of Namur finally also called in the Count Gauthier de Buisseyre for interrogation. His interrogation was very brief. Buisseyre testified he had only taken a minority investment in Robchem. His former director Bernard Gorelle had asked him for financial help to set up his pharmaceutical plant. Buisseyre did not know what exactly Robchem had produced beyond cough syrup. Buisseyre swore he had never set foot in Robois since many years. He had merely lent money to Bernard Gorelle personally, not taken firm participations in the company. The police officers and the judge could prove nothing to charge him with. He was not a member of any Board of Administrators of the firm. The police and the judge released him.

The police officers hoped the expert accountants installed by the Investigating Judge, charged with providing real insight in the bookkeeping of the firm, could still come up with some link of Buisseyre in Robchem. Beyond regular interests, generous return, payed on the count's investment by Gorelle, the search for more direct involvement of the count remained

fruitless. The count had received quite large sums of extra payments, but the drug business was totally unknown to him, or so he claimed. Nobody could prove the contrary. Paolo Timario told the count Bernard Gorelle had given a written statement in which the manager of Robchem had told Buisseyre what Robchem had been doing. Buisseyre denied categorically having known anything whatsoever about the criminal activities of Robchem. It was Gorelle's word against the word of Gorelle. The count was left to go free out of the interrogation rooms.

6.2. Véronique Dupas and Laura de Trioteignes

When Véronique Dupas had staggered out of her apartment, clutching in her hands the moneybox she hoped might offer her a new life, she fell unconscious to the ground. The Judge of the Peace and his lawyer-wife saw her fainting. They alerted the police and called for an ambulance to bring her to the hospital. The judge's wife stayed with her to assure Véronique was well taken care of. The woman promised to pay all expenses. Véronique received a private room in the hospital. The judge's wife had lost a girl in childhood, and could not have other children. She clung to Véronique, seeing in her something of the daughter she had never been able to watch growing.

Véronique was in a very bad state. She had entered a dreamlike, unconscious world, unaware of what was happening around her. Even when she opened her eyes, she remained catatonic. A few days later, she could talk to Joseph Bikri, whom she knew, and provide him with the first information about her apartment at Jambes, and what she had seen there. After two weeks of intensive care by a multidisciplinary team, Véronique could talk coherently and form a realistic image of her environment. One of the doctors who treated her, spoke of a miracle.

Véronique had not lost her mind. The hospital doctors healed her physically, and soon sent her to a special institution in the province where severe drug addicts were treated humanely. The judge's wife followed her and paid her frequent, long visits. The Judge of the Peace also sat often next to her bed and talked to her. The judge and his wife still asked for the best care given to the girl, all expenses paid by them. They signed papers to that effect. Véronique would get at least all medical and psychological treatment necessary to free her from her addictions.

Was Véronique Dupas a victim or a criminal? Luckily, Véronique had an excellent lawyer at her side. The judge's wife made her promise not to say anything whatsoever about herself without her presence. The woman explained why it was necessary to defend her rights. Véronique was grateful, pointed to her metal box, and said she had money. The judge's wife smiled, answering money was not what Véronique should be thinking of. That issue had been settled. Véronique was grateful. She showed her confidence in the woman. She did what the lawyer told her. The psychologists considered Véronique giving her trust to someone as the first step to her recovery. The judge's wife realised she should never, never, give a lie with anything however small to Véronique, or the trust would be broken and never regained.

Véronique refused categorically to see her parents, to let them come to her room, even if only for a few minutes. Her lawyer asserted Véronique's rights to demand this. Véronique never wanted to see her mother and stepfather again. An official judgement pronounced for her parents not to contact Véronique or otherwise trying to come near her.

Véronique had already in her first, better days made full confessions of her story. She gave testimony about Phil and the Dream Master's activities. She told the police slowly, in pieces, she had witnessed Phil and Merthyn handling the dead body of a young man in the Jambes apartment block. She spoke haltingly of the experiments demanded by Merthyn, the man she still only knew then as Phantasus.

The old judge and his wife were appalled to hear what Véronique had suffered a few metres from their own door. They also considered Véronique's escape from home, from Robois, entirely justified, as she might have been raped again and again.

Other terrible news shocked them. In the hospital, the doctors told Véronique she was pregnant. Véronique didn't know who the father of the child could be, her stepfather, Phil, or any other man who had raped her in Namur. She cried she didn't want the child. Her lawyer explained her she had indeed a decision to make within the next few days. She could either keep the child embryo she had within her, or have an abortion. The lawyer explained the consequences in detail, but told the ultimate choice lay with Véronique and her alone. Véronique cried a lot in the hospital, but she decided not to have this baby. She wanted no child of her stepfather, nor of anybody else she had sex with in Namur. She wanted no child that was the result of rape and aggression. She wanted also not to see the baby suffer from the withdrawal of drugs, as the child had absorbed as many drugs as she. The judge's wife was disappointed, for she did not approve of abortion. She respected Véronique's choice, however, and defended her. Many people tried to bring Véronique to other ideas, but she stuck to her decision, supported by the judge and his wife. Véronique had her abortion in a hospital of Namur.

When Véronique Dupas could be discharged from the drug addicts institution, she still had a long way to go to become a normal young woman. The memories of what she had gone through would always remain with her. Véronique had to come to terms with the realities of life. But she felt free.

Véronique wanted not to return home, to her parents in Robois, and that wish would be respected. She could have chosen to live in a house for young adult women in distress. The judge and his wife proposed her to come to live with them. They argued they could learn a lot from each other, and the judge and his wife had come to appreciate Véronique. It was a show of confidence Véronique could not and wanted not to refuse.

In a hurry, the Judge of the Peace and his wife bought another apartment in a new building of a quieter small town along the Meuse. They did not want to have Véronique return to the former Jambes block. They went to live in their new apartment with Véronique. Véronique, the judge and the judge's wife became good friends, reliable friends. Véronique found rest and protection. She did not relapse in drugs.

Véronique Dupas needed an entire year to heal more or less completely. During that time, she studied on her own. The judge and his wife helped her to get her diploma of secondary studies. In September, she began to follow courses at the university of Namur. She could easily go from her new apartment to Namur using the bus public transport. She wanted to study law. She would have excellent help at her side.

Véronique Dupas heard during the trial of the Phantasus drug case of Laura de Trioteignes. She saw the elegant aristocrat, the beautiful, dignified lady in court, but didn't manage speaking to her. She compared her own trajectory to Laura's and wept. Laura had everything she, Véronique, didn't! Laura had a wealthy and loving family, a castle for a house, as much money as she ever would need, a man she loved, work that satisfied her and was intellectually

gratifying. She enjoyed the sympathy of many concerned people. She, Véronique, had nothing of all that in her life.

Nevertheless, Véronique had come to terms with the vagaries of life. Living with the judge and his wife at least provided her peace, rest, comfort and shelter, though not the love she craved for, and which she had not been able to enjoy for many, many years. A form of love would eventually develop, of course, and something of the feeling of having a family. But a pain nagging at Véronique told her this was not the real thing. She continued to cherish the loving memory of her true father and the happiness she had once known with him, if so briefly.

Georg Stratten remained two weeks in the Brussels hospital. Then, entirely healed, though not yet able to do whatever he wanted, he could leave the medical institution. By general consent, Laura de Trioteignes alone fetched him in her new car, a more modern model of the BMW she had driven earlier. Georg smiled at that. Laura was a loyal woman, up to the choice of her cars!

Georg Stratten stayed for a month more, resting from his wounds at Castle Trioteignes. He rested in the arms of Laura. His leg had healed by then. The plaster had been removed. His headaches had passed.

When Georg's plaster was taken off his leg, and when all seemed fine with the healing of his bones, he and Laura took a habit of going on long walks in the woods of the Trioteignes Domain. On one of those walks, the matter of having children came up.

'I don't know. I'm afraid,' Laura whispered, head bowed. 'Mind you, I am not afraid of the pains in the act of giving birth. I only wonder what kind of world we are leaving to our children to grow up in.'

'We have the means to give them all they may ever need,' Georg protested. 'Money, they will have. We can teach them how to manage their assets, and love is cheap. We can give them lots of love! Do not your brother and sister-in-law have fine children? Very beautiful children, too.'

'I read the books published by the French philosopher Michel Onfray and by the Israeli Professor Yuval Harrari,' Laura continued. 'They draw a very pessimistic picture of the future.'

'I wouldn't mind,' Georg answered. 'They are philosophers vowed to human reason, to our Aristotelian logic, to the algebra of Boole. They start with a few premises, such as the non-existence of God, and then they infer, deduce an entire world and future from those premises. Using pure logic always leads to pessimism, in which one can prove nothing. These theories only represent one side of the coin, the side that says God does not exist and does not interfere. The side is obvious, as nobody has ever seen God. The other side of the coin holds the premise that God does exist, and that human logic does not reign in the universe. It says another design is at work. I believe there is much hope for mankind if you only think a benevolent God, an intrinsically good force, is at work in the universe, subtly but recognisable, and not only human reason and its logic. Our family, the Stratten von Schillersberg, have kept their faith in God during very hard times. Remember what fine hope have not Winston Churchill and the so famous English king's speech inspired in people of good will, to defeat Mussolini and Hitler! Of course, we and our children will have to fight,

and defend hope. But the pessimism of Onfray and Harrari, the pessimism of the philosophers, are but one side of the coin.'

Laura smiled at Georg. Her fears had subsided. She walked closer to him, rested her head on his shoulder, confident in the future with her lover.

Charles de Trioteignes organised a family meeting. Laura and Georg wanted to marry as fast as they could. They wanted to move to Germany, to build a new home there. Georg had resigned from Europol. He would henceforth take over the management of the Stratten business from his father, though gradually, and over a number of years. Laura would help him in his work.

Charles de Trioteignes proposed Laura to continue managing parts of the Trioteignes fortune, primarily the businesses that concerned Germany and Switzerland. Diego de Trioteignes would have to manage the rest of the family's wealth and financial assets. Deniz wanted to keep the farm and continue living there. Her husband promised to help her with the farm, and also Monique Ghijzen promised to invest more of her time helping her daughter-in-law.

The first mission of Laura de Trioteignes and Georg Stratten was to reform Pharmtelia, the Basel pharmaceutical and chemical firm. In Board Meetings, they explained of which illegal drug trafficking Pharmtelia had served as the basis. The Board voted for the immediate halt of ephedrine production, as well as of any other product that could easily be used to produce hallucinatory drugs by. At the hastily called together General Assembly, the two majority shareholders, the families Stratten and Trioteignes, forced the President of the Board and the Chief Executive Officer to be discharged of their function in the enterprise. Felsing and Haller were generously paid, but sent away from the firm. Georg and Laura replaced them by more reliable people.

After the General Assembly of Pharmtelia, Count Charles de Trioteignes phoned Count Andreas Stratten von Schillersberg in Germany. Charles explained once more his views on what had happened in Namur and Robois, and what should be done with Pharmtelia. He and Andreas agreed the matter was now entirely in the hands of Georg and Laura. Their children would have to define a completely new organisation for Pharmtelia. Georg was thinking of leading Pharmtelia himself, Charles told, but in view of the many tasks with other firms his father owned participations in, he had finally declined on that option. Andreas had already heard, of course, his son wanted to marry Laura de Trioteignes. He could not be more enthusiastic about this union. Georg had asked his father to arrange for a proper wedding in Germany, at a near date, but at the family's convenience. Count Charles de Trioteignes had agreed to have the wedding feast take place in Stuttgart. Georg's mother shoved her husband aside, and began organising with German and female efficiency.

'Well, my dear friend,' Andreas concluded at the end of the phone conversation. 'We'll never admit or mention we transferred our shares in Pharmtelia to bring our children together, won't we? Our little scheme of placing our two, at that time rather unhappy children together in a situation of some stress which might push them closer, has worked perfectly, to our mutual satisfaction. Yes, Georg was hurt, and that horror will forever weigh on my conscience, but would not Georg have anyway been attacked had he worked on his own for Europol? I hear my son regularly on the phone. He seems happy, to me. He loves your daughter dearly. The

marriage will work, I am convinced of that. My wife and I could not think of a finer woman for our son. My son has now a decent purpose in life, something to fight for, and he will not be alone. He and Laura will be the founders of the next generation of the Stratten family, and also of the Trioteignes. Our sons will like each other. They share common experiences and memories. We will organise the wedding as quickly as we can, though my wife blows it up with more feasting each time I ask her about her advance.'

Charles de Trioteignes laughed in the phone, 'we must find some time in Germany, my dear friend, after the wedding, to drink on the happy conclusion of our scheme! I could not be more satisfied with how matters proceeded. I admit I, like yourself, passed many sorry days when I heard Georg, our dear Georg, had been hurt in the car accident. Nevertheless, the ending of our scheme is a happy one. Our children have found happiness together.'

'We have merely been giving a small, helping hand to destiny,' Andreas Stratten continued. 'I will start cooling a few bottles of our best Franconia wines, our *Frankenweine*, and reserve a day or two, to quietly spend together with only the two of us and our wives present! What greater happiness is left for us in life than being able to share a bottle of wine with friend and family? We should gather a few days at our estate near Würzburg amid the vineyards next summer.'

'I am looking forward to our seeing each other again,' Charles de Trioteignes laughed, and so ended the conversation.

They hung up.

They were men of few words, and of instant, far-reaching deeds.