

René Jean-Paul Dewil

Polyphemus
God's Curse over Robois

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The characters

Alphabetically, comment preceded by age.

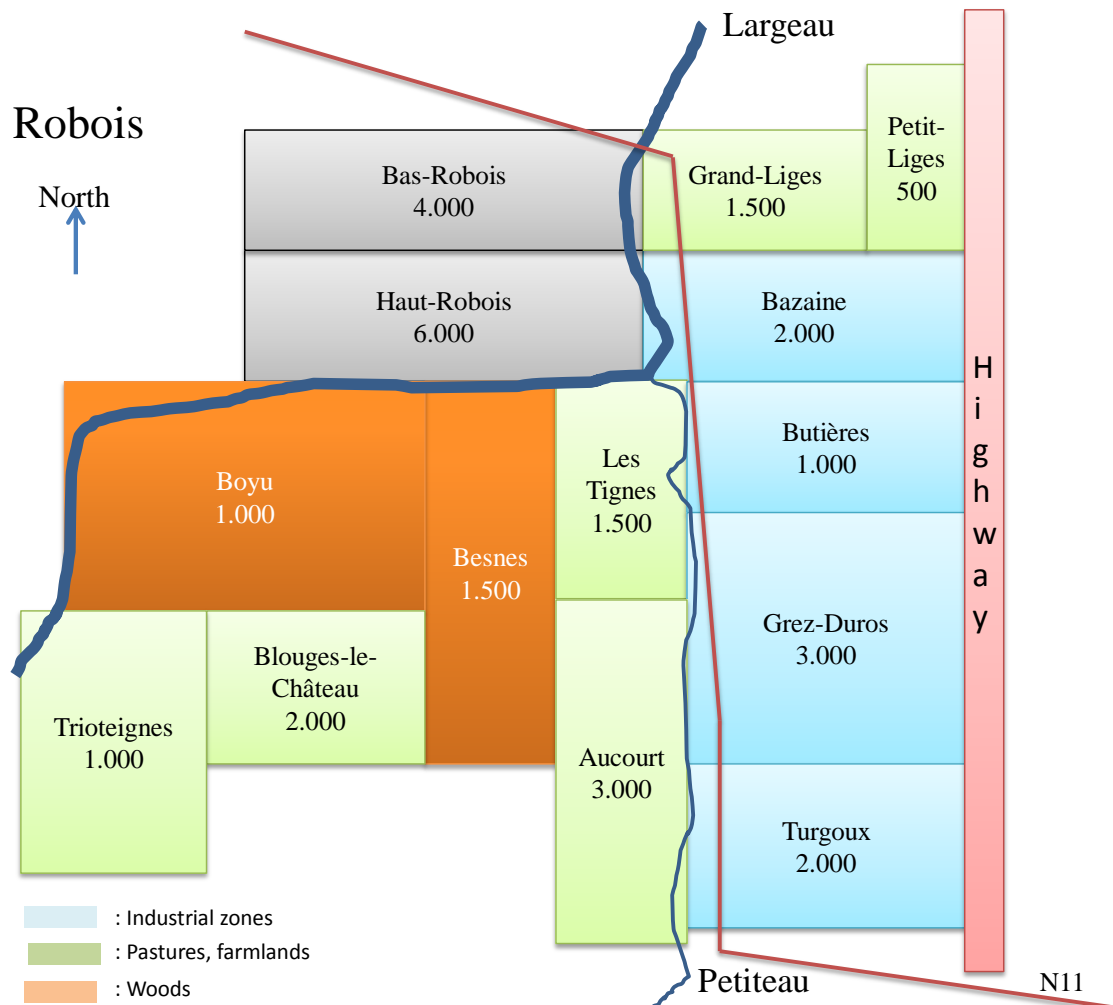
Dhakhir El-Amin	49, former imam of Robois
Alexandre de Bazaine	56, owner of Castle Bazaine
Evelyn de Bazaine	28, former friend of Diego de Trioteignes
Marc-Julien de Bazaine	32, son of Alexandre de Bazaine
Michelle de Bazaine	26, owner and cook of 'The Lady of the Lake' restaurant
Khadijah Bennani	21, younger sister of Samia Bennani
Samia Bennani	29, wife of Joseph Bikri
Youssef/Joseph Bikri	39, Commissaire of police
Léon-Jules de Blouges	33, husband of Evelyn de Bazaine
Dominique Bussy	31, assistant inspector of Commissaire Bikri
Majdi Al-Faris	50, imam of Robois
Monsieur François	56, owner of the hotel 'The Horse Bayard', real name Francesco Treviani
Monique Ghijsen	51, mother of Diego Trioteignes
Hamza Al-Harrak	21, young man of Moroccan origin, engineer
Karim Khedis	66, gardener of the hotel 'The Horse Bayard'
Denise Legrand	33, member of Turkish counter-terrorism MIT (Deniz Sürkoglou)
Madyan Bin Mahfouz	36, current imam of Robois
Christian Trevanion	32, member of Israeli Mossad counter terrorism (Atsel Ben Asher)

Charles de Trioteignes 53, father of Diego de Trioteignes, owner of Castle Trioteignes

Diego de Trioteignes 29, son of Charles de Trioteignes

Laura de Trioteignes 27, daughter of Charles de Trioteignes

Robois



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

Chapter 1. Murder in Robois

1.1. The floating body. Tuesday, 7 July

That year, one had to describe the summer of Robois by the shortest of words, by hot, bright, dry and loud. The skies had used up all their cold and humidity and the nasty, northern wind gusts of winter and spring had to admit defeat. The last few drops of rain had fallen in May and early June. In July, the sun relentlessly scourged the fields, the woods, the town and the villages of Robois with its heat. Poppies and cornflowers flourished early. Grumpy old men and women continued to lament over the dark clouds that had poured buckets full of water over each square meter. Now, however, they began to puff and wipe the sweat from their eyes. They reclined listlessly in their parasoled transatlantics planted in the gardens. They lay powerless, devoid of energy, like English wobbling puddings poured out over a flat surface. They might be melting away in the heat!

Many different, almost forgotten noises filled the air. Early summer was prime construction time. Several new houses were being built in each village. High steel cranes turned, creaking in the heavens. The roads trembled under the ever heavier and longer trucks laden with beams, bricks, stones, cement tanks, huge piles of isolation materials, expensive wood panels, and everything else needed for the countryside villas preferred by the new inhabitants who had come to invest rural Robois rather than huddle together and suffocate in the pollution of the larger cities.

The loudest noise rose from a large pasture near the Largeau River at Les Tignes. The grass field, kept free of cows since spring, lay squeezed between the vast forest of Besnes and the steep, jagged hill rocks of the confluence of the gentle Largeau River and the smaller but more impetuous Petiteau. A camp of tens of tents stood under this high rock promontory of Bazaine on which towered the like-named Castle Bazaine.

A large group of Flemish young scouts had set up camp there. It had taken the boys and girls and their leaders three days to place their tents in the desired order, to organise the camp fires, lit the braseroes, and build rough wooden structures to delineate their meeting places. The leaders had hidden their provisions among the majestic trees, in the ferns beneath the oaks and beeches, to keep their food supplies fresh. Two leaders guarded the cardboard and plastic boxes.

The scouts were numerous, boys and girls of from ten to sixteen years old. They had arrived in buses, forty boys and about fifty girls. They had separated in two autonomous assemblies of tents, lined along grassy lanes. When all the tents stood, had been placed and replaced and re-ordered in the pattern fancied by the scout leaders, a truce of sorts had been called for an afternoon of rest. The scout leaders had to meet and organise their days. They too were youths, about a dozen young men and women of from seventeen to twenty.

The first groups of uniformed scouts started almost immediately to roam in the fields of Bazaine and Les Tignes. A few boys looked with eager eyes to the hill on the other side of the river, to the winding streets of Haut-Robois. The ancient, medieval centre of Robois with the high citadel formed by the very old abbey and the few remaining, preserved wattle-and

daub houses, did not so much attract the most enterprising scouts for the picturesque scenery and for Robois' small, local museum. The shops of Haut-Robois tempted, as well as the pubs that served the blonde pils beers the boys especially were after. The cafés of Robois had to be discovered!

To reach Haut-Robois, however, one would have to pass the Largeau, and then walk the road that climbed the hill, in full sight of the scout camp and of the leaders in the lower pasture. Could the boys escape that way and draw a few girls with them? What excited the scouts more than booze and girls? The try was worth a laugh, and, who knows, while the leaders were busy, attention might have slackened! A first group of five particularly daring, enterprising boy scouts thus ran in search of a bridge to pass the Largeau. There was one, indeed, in the valley, farther off, an ancient Roman stone bridge, laying right under the rock of Castle Bazaine. Five boys quickly slithered through the high grass, towards that means of escape from the camp. They were among the most daring young brawlers of the Brussels scouts.

The presence of the rivers and of the bridge was a great worry for the wiser among the scout leaders. Water always could mean a deadly danger for careless, inattentive boys and girls who thought they could ward off any threat. One could easily come too close to the slippery banks, wanting to take a swim, and be caught in the mud, head down. Also, the leaders had remarked the potential of the stone, arched bridge. Their duty was to keep their scouts out of reach of alcohol! Alcohol was for the leaders exclusively! The scout leaders had decided already on the day of their arrival to place a permanent guard at the river and towards the bridge, certain to surprise not a few of the boys and girls in the evening and early nights, when sneaking off was most alluring. That was the time when the boldest scouts might attempt a dash for the bright, twinkling lights of Haut-Robois. They had not expected a gang of enterprising boys to start at it the first free afternoon!

Five boy scouts, eager to impress the girls, ran crouched to the bridge and to the temptations of Robois. The group was led by two tall, boastful youths. A fat boy followed, panting but keeping up with another tall, lean scout. A younger, considerably smaller, stocky and quiet boy closed the line, running less hurriedly a few steps behind.

The boys reached the bridge without having heard the high whistle of a leader. They thought nobody in the camp had seen them wandering off. They were wrong in that assumption, but ran on.

The scout leader who had insisted most on guarding the bridge had taken the first watch. He was a prudent leader. He liked the campsite, which lay very bucolically near the river. He was, however, very much afraid of the water, hating the carelessness of the Brussels adult leaders who had picked this site among other, but who would only once or twice come to visit the camp. Water meant all sorts of dangers to the leader. Scouts would be drawn to it, try to risk all kinds of tricks, get caught in the roots of the plants that grew on the banks, and they might drown. He cursed, because the other leaders did not understand how particularly vigilant they would have to be near the river, also at night. Moreover, he did not want to show himself an aggressive punisher, for a girl walked beside him. She was a scout leader he had been attracted to since long, and who he knew quite well. He felt he shouldn't be too

authoritative with this girl, not be bullying the boys around. He liked the feeling. He gave all his attention to the girl, but one eye didn't leave the young scouts who fled to the bridge. The boys might still come to their senses, or merely be scouting, indeed, and turn back yet. He would allow them to get just over the bridge, no farther.

The boy scouts reached the bridge in no time. Still crouching, advancing with heads down, they hid for a while behind the stone defences on top of the arch. Once every while they held their heads over the stone parapet to see whether they were being followed. They were not. They spotted the two leaders, but saw them looking the other way. The boys assembled on the bridge and held their breath.

The fat scout shouted first. When he peered over the stones, he had remarked something round floating in the water of the river, nearing the bridge. He had good eyes, and he continued to stare longer than he had wanted to. The floating form seemed entirely different from everything else that could move in the water, here, mainly jagged pieces of driftwood or bunches of leaves.

He cried, not too loudly, 'guys, something, a body, is floating in the river!'

The other scouts grinned, thought the fat boy was crazy. Then, they stiffened. They too looked and remarked the form could indeed be a body. Some discussions ensued on the bridge. Two of the other scouts confirmed they had recognised a body in the form. One boy even assured he had seen what looked like an arm and a hand. While the last, lingering smaller scout reached the bridge, they all ran down the arch, to watch at what seemed to float and turned now in the whirling water.

The form floated, only the back visible, head down in the murky water of the Largeau. The force of the river dragged it towards the confluence with the Petiteau. It would gain momentum there, be torn towards the middle of the river, and advance more rapidly. It moved quicker already, because the river narrowed near the bridge. It bumped against the stone base of the arch. Then it was pulled loose and the river let it continue its way to the vastness of the stream and the sea, so far away. Shallow waves rippled over the form. At times the body scarcely appeared above the surface. But for the whiteness of what seemed cloth, the boys would not have remarked the form bobbing up and down in the river. The form still accelerated in the swirling around the base of the bridge. It narrowly avoided a pile of wooden debris that had accumulated there, and turned under the bridge. It would emerge on the other side. The boys ran to that side and saw the body slow down in a lull, in a pool of still water that had eroded a part of the bank to a muddy basin. More rests of rotting, wooden branches and leaves lay there. Maybe the body was caught under water in the decaying mud or plants. The scouts were by then certain the form in the water was of a human body, for an arm and hand were quite visible at the neck. What looked clearly as an arm at times, was twisted on the back.

The scouts ran along the water, pointing to the body. The tallest, leading boy, grabbed a long, dead branch, which ended in a sturdy hook. He slammed the hook in the cloth and pulled. By that unnatural movement, the body rose upwards in the water, so that the boys hoped to distinguish the face of the man or woman. Maybe they still hoped for a plastic mannequin to

float in the water! They merely saw a pale neck cut very red, then, no head! This was severed, sawed off flesh and skin, no plastic!

The scout who drew on the body dropped the piece of wood in horror and staggered backwards. Seeing indeed a human body in the water, and the jagged cuts of the neck, the broken arteries, was too much for his nerves. The sight was also too horrible for the second tall boy, who seemed to close his eyes and then slowly toppled over in the grass. He fainted. The fat boy threw his arms to the sky, and began to shout like a wild man. He ran in panic back to the camp, crying out loudly as if he had seen the greatest atrocity of his years, which might well have been the case. The other scouts ran a few steps backwards. The body moved again. It might be drawn to the confluence.

The most silent boy, the one who had lingered last, stepped closer to the river. He did not hesitate. He took up the discarded branch. The wood was till hooked onto the corpse. He dragged with all his might, and drew the body closer to the bank. The white cloth tore, to reveal whiter underwear, a shirt. The young scout used all his power to drag the corpse nearer to the pasture. He pulled the body to where the earth was firmer though still under water. Then, the boy broke of a piece of wood from his improvised hook, reached out and drew further on the cloth to bring the body still nearer to the bank. He surmised he held on to a drowned man. He did not realise at that point what a headless body meant. He slammed the sharp end of the broken off wood through the hem of the cloth, into the earth. The boy thus secured the body from floating on. Satisfied, the silent boy hooked the rest of the wood behind the collar of the clothing, and fixed a second time the body, refusing it to become further the plaything of the currents. He slowly turned to his pale companions, who were now crouching around the fainted scout. When the fallen boy opened his eyes and stood, they all remained transfixed by the horror. They ran two more steps from the banks.

The stocky, usually taciturn boy shouted then, 'warn the leaders! Call the police! We really have a drowned man in the water! Be quick!'

He kept looking at the body, and remained standing on the bank, lest it floated on.

Already, the scout leader who had been watching the scene, and his girlfriend, had understood something unusual was amiss at the bridge. They had seen one of the boys faint. They heard the shouting of the fat boy. They saw all the scouts but one run back to the camp, arms held high, and shouting. They both ran to the bridge.

1.2. Commissaire Joseph Bikri. Friday, 10 July

Only three days later, Commissaire Youssouf Bikri, called Joseph, returned to Robois and to his office from holidays. He had been touring in France with his wife, Samia Bennani, his children having been parked with friends. Although he mostly kept his mobile phone closed, refusing all incoming calls, he was aware of what had happened in the Largeau near Bazaine. Before his holidays, he always gave a particular hour he could each day be reached by phone. His assistant, Dominique Bussy, had told him about the discovery of the floating corpse.

Dominique was Joseph's very pretty, intelligent and elegant inspector. She was married to a principal inspector of the 'Service d'Enquêtes et de Recherche' of the nearby largest town of Namur, the SER, the Service of Criminal Investigations of the police zone to which Robois belonged. The zone consisted of several commissariats. Her marriage gave her some added authority in the zone of Robois over the other inspectors and officers of Joseph Bikri's modest force. Yet, even before she had been appointed to inspector, Joseph had chosen her as his assistant. Not only had Dominique been the first officer present at the site where the floating corpse had been found, she had also called the SER and the Prosecutor of the King. She had supervised the recuperation of the body, and had ordered it transported by ambulance to the morgue of Namur. The crime squads of Namur and of the federal police headquartered in Brussels had sent to Dominique's personal computer their reports about the first results of the investigation, which were understandably meagre.

The victim had been murdered indeed, no doubt about that. The water could not have battered the victim's body such as the injuries showed. The head had been found far upriver, in the woods of Boyu, on dry earth, in a clearing surrounded by old oaks, though close to the Largeau. The face of the dead man had been found so clogged with dried blood and battered, it was sheer unrecognisable. It had been brought to Namur, then to Brussels, to the local and federal autopsy labs. The SER had asked for a drawing to be made of what the man might have looked while still alive. An artist would prepare the portrait.

The first day after his return, near noon, a heavily sighing Joseph Bikri sat in his office, his legs resting high on another chair, reading Dominique's first report. Dominique sat on the other side of his desk, telling him at the same time all she knew. After a few minutes, Joseph failed to listen attentively to the stream of words a very anxious Dominique poured over him. He was reading how the body had been found, decapitated, left hand tied to the neck, right hand tied at the back. Joseph paled when he read those lines. He sagged farther backwards in his modern swivel chair. His first reaction was to dismiss the information and the accompanying complications.

'Wait, wait,' he stopped Dominique's burst of rapid phrases. 'What was he wearing, the dead man?'

Dominique repeated, 'a long white robe, sir, a kind of rough woollen, long shirt. A nightshirt of sorts, or a djellaba, the Arabic gown, you know. A robe so long it covered the man's feet!' 'A djellaba? Would you then mean the man was a Muslim?'

'I think so, sir, yes. He might of course have been a North African man, of that type, or a man from the Near East, Muslim or not. He definitely wore white underwear and above that the

long, thick, white robe I have only seen being worn by men from those regions. Whether he was a Muslim or not, I wouldn't know. Even our Muslim men usually don't wear djellabas these days, not here, in Robois! I saw what remained of the man's face. He had a dark complexion, black hair, a long, black beard, a beak nose. He was of the Semitic type, maybe the Maghreb type, but I wouldn't dare to fix an exact land of origin on him, and even less a particular religion.'

'No identity papers have been found, I surmise?'

'No, sir! We have no idea about who the man might be. We are waiting for the autopsy report. We should also receive a tentative portrait made by the artist of Namur, today or tomorrow at the latest, though how the artist can draw something resembling out of the mess I saw, God only may know. I almost got sick, boss, when I saw the head!'

That was interesting to Joseph Bikri. Dominique Bussy, frail and female as she was, was known never to show any surprise or feeling at a dead person. Bikri chuckled.

'Has anybody been reported missing?'

'Not yet, sir. You look pale to me, suddenly. Are you all right? Has the transition from holidays to work been too sudden?'

'As sudden as a hammer hitting an anvil, Dominique. But I am all right.'

Joseph Bikri waited a few seconds, continued reading the report, and then he added, 'one hand tied to the neck and one hand on the back, head cut off, fingertips cut off, are the signs of an ancient ritual execution among fundamentalist Muslims, Dominique. So is decapitation. The case looks like a Muslim assassination! Have you ever wondered why the IS, the newly founded and so-called Islamic State also called Daesh, decapitates its victims? Sura 47, the Muhammad sura of the Koran states somewhere that when a Muslim encounters infidels, he must slaughter them, strike off their heads, and put the rest of the infidels into fetters. It is a sura that refers to one of the Prophet's battles for supremacy in the Arabic peninsula, but references to history are not indicated expressly in the Koran, so may or must be interpreted literally. The SER of Namur must be made aware that the man may have died of a ritual, staged execution perpetrated against an infidel. Only a Muslim with some knowledge of history would know the signs. If I am right, we have a nasty hornet's nest on our hands. Can you telephone your husband of what I said just now?'

'I will, of course, sir,' answered a very surprised Dominique Bussy. 'Nevertheless, sir, I would like to remark that the killing may also have been staged as a religious Islamist execution merely to send us on the wrong path!'

'It may, yes, it may. I even hope so. Few people, however, would know about this Muslim tradition, Dominique. No non-Muslim person, unless a scholar of Islamist traditions, would know about these ways. The information might be a lead.'

Inspector Dominique Bussy considered her boss's origins. Bikri was of Moroccan descent, though born and educated in Belgium. She knew Bikri was a Muslim. She did not know, though, whether her commissaire was a profoundly religious man. She thought not. She had never heard Bikri mention anything about the Koranic faith. The dean of the priests of the Christian faith was a friend of his, but Bikri did not attend Christian masses. She didn't think her boss regularly attended ceremonies at the mosque, either. Dominique had met Joseph's wife. Samia Bennani also originated from Morocco and had been born there. Samia definitely was not a practising Muslim. She never wore a scarf, a veil to hide her hair. She dressed

freely, and from scarce remarks, Dominique had concluded Samia was rather opposed to religions of whatever kind. Joseph's children attended the local schools. As far as Dominique knew, the Bikri children did not go to the Koran school of the mosque.

Dominique continued the subject.

'So we should be looking to the Muslim community to find the culprit, you seem to believe, sir?'

'We should, Dominique. Now. We cannot start asking questions in the air, however. We must wait for the portrait drawing. As soon as the portrait arrives, two of our officers should start interrogating the Muslims of Robois. Can you arrange for that? I'll need a copy too. I know a few people of the community. My wife may, too.'

'We could begin interrogating the Muslims that leave the new mosque of Turgoux after their Friday evening prayers.'

'No, no, Dominique,' Joseph Bikri shook his head and brought his legs back down on the floor. 'We should not stir up bad feelings in the community on that hour and day. Do it individually. It takes us more time, but that is how we must proceed. Just have our officers show the picture to person after person. You can check for Arabic, Moroccan, Algerian names, and so on, in the list of inhabitants of the town. A painstaking work! Start with the street of Bas-Robois where most of our Muslims live. Try the Roms, too. Check also on the names we have in our petty crime files. Tell our officers to always remain polite, be brief, not to insist too much, will you? You had better lead them, and instruct them. I don't want to make waves for the moment. Asking one question, showing the portrait, will sufficiently make waves to start the community buzzing. Sooner or later, somebody will come in to talk to us. Watch out for dismayed reactions. I'll have a talk with the imam of the mosque. I haven't met the man. Both I and Samia avoid the mosque. Samia had very bad experiences with Muslim fundamentalists in her country of origin. You'd better not come with me for that interview with the imam. The Muslims may not appreciate having to answer to female officers in their mosque building.'

Dominique was a little scandalised, 'should we care about such reactions, sir?' she protested, combative as ever.

'Probably not, no,' Bikri replied, 'but I want no unnecessary provocations at this stage, Dominique.'

Dominique drew her lips in a pout, but remained silent.

Commissaire Bikri and Inspector Bussy continued musing about the murder. Was this indeed a ritual murder or a murder staged to mimic a Muslim execution? Who was the man killed? Why had the murdered man not been hidden, buried in the earth, instead of given up to the waters of the Largeau, where he was bound to be discovered sooner or later? Had the assassination been committed somewhere on Robois territory or elsewhere? Had the corpse been displaced and then thrown into the water? Could the corpse and the head have been brought from elsewhere to Robois to mislead the investigation? Had more blood been found near the place where the head lay? Was the dead man meant to be found, to serve as an example for others? All these questions remained unanswered for the moment. Bikri felt in his bones there was a lot more than the murder of a single man in this case. He also wondered whether the murder might have been committed here in Robois, precisely because he, supposedly a Muslim, was head of the police of Robois. Was the aim of the murder meant to

discredit him, or to warn him for more crimes? Would he be pushed aside by the federal police? His position in Robois as head of police might be endangered!

Commissaire Bikri sighed once more. He had expected an easier homecoming. A long, difficult work of interrogations and investigation waited on him and on his officers, as if they had not enough work already. He would have to walk on eggs.

He concluded the conversation with, 'well, Inspector, we have a list of question marks, here. I suppose we will find answers, given some time. We always do, don't we? First, we must wait for the autopsy report, for the report of the site of the head, and for the portrait drawing. Then we go on our way. Start with a list of names of immigrated North African or Near East men. Include men from Eastern European countries. You must not expect to have that list complete. Take care also, such lists are very confidential, but I don't see how we can avoid putting the names down. What we know already is some justification for the list. Nevertheless, only you, the two officers and I should be aware of the existence of a list. The officers should only go out with a partial list of names! We are at the limit of the Belgian privacy laws with such a list!'

Dominique Bussy stood from her chair, sighed very audibly too.

'I'm going home to have lunch with my wife,' Bikri stated. 'Samia promised me to make stewed chicken. I like stewed chicken the Walloon way. I'll come back in an hour or so. I have to think some more about this case.'

'Please give Samia my regards, boss,' Dominique ended.

A few moments later, Commissaire Bikri escaped from his office in the police station of Robois. The police station and several other communal services, including the office of the mayor, had been installed in the old abbey of Robois. Bikri only had a few streets to walk to arrive at his house in the centre of the town. He had been talking to his wife Samia about moving to the countryside. They had the money. They could build. His best friend, the mayor of Robois, was a building contractor. He would ask Joseph and Samia a reasonable price for a new villa in a nice, quiet, residential neighbourhood. At that thought, Bikri shook his head. No, not yet! Both he and Samia didn't really like moving homes. He also didn't like to drive cars. Joseph would have to drive between the Abbey, as the officers called the police station, and his new home. He preferred to walk. He had been born in Brussels, at heart he remained a city dweller. When he now stepped out of the Abbey and into the blazing sun, the heat fell on him like a blow of a sledgehammer.

'It would be better, though, in this weather, to drive an air conditioned car to home than to walk on foot,' he grumbled.

When he pushed open his door, he caught in his nostrils the first, wonderful odours of his preferred stew. He went straight to the kitchen, found Samia there, and admired for a few moments in silence how beautiful, gracious, gentle, elegant and sweet his wife was. He kissed her in the neck, which she shook away, for she continued to turn a long wooden spoon in her pots. The stew simmered in the largest pan. Joseph lifted the lid of a pot in which he knew more vegetables cooked. Carrots and peas! He liked carrots with his chicken. Samia had begun to prepare a white sauce in yet another pot. She stirred a roux. He left Samia at that difficult work. He did not dare disturbing her lest he would have something on his plate that more resembled clotted warm cream rather than the consistent sauce he adored. He stepped to

the fridge and took out a bottle of Alsace Riesling from his preferred vineyard of Eguisheim. He had put the bottle in there that very morning, as consolation for his return to the office and for the end of their holidays. Golden refreshment! He pulled out the cork, poured himself a glass. Samia formed a little heart with her lips, always a sign she too wanted her part of the wine. He handed her the glass. She took a sip, agreed with the taste, and handed it back. He poured a second glass.

A little later, they sat at the dining table. Samia served the stew. Samia was a lawyer. She worked mainly in Brussels. Today she could stay at Robois. She had an appointment in Namur in the late afternoon and could as well prepare her files here, at home. So, Joseph could have lunch with his family. This happened only two or three days a week. On the other days, they had their main meals at supper. Their two children, a boy and a girl, were at school and ate their lunch there. Joseph and Samia enjoyed the days they could quietly eat together and have a quiet tea afterwards. They loved their children, but they cherished the rare moments they could be alone. Samia soon remarked Joseph didn't say much. 'You're worried about something,' Samia began. 'Tell me'.

'There has been a murder in Robois while we were on holidays. A corpse was found in the river. A man has been killed. He didn't drown. He may have been a Muslim. The murder looks like a ritual assassination.'

Joseph let the awareness of a crime out of the ordinary seep into Samia's brain.

He continued, 'tell me, you are participating in those Muslim women meetings. Have you remarked anything unusual, lately, in the Islamic community?'

'Oh, so now you bring your investigations home?' Samia Bennani laid down her fork in surprise. 'During our meetings of Grand-Liges? No, nothing out of the ordinary happened at our last meetings. Our talks are organised by the mosque services of Robois, but they are no religious ceremonies. We don't want men to take part in our conversations. We would even throw out the imam! I met only once the assistant imam, never the imam himself. The assistant imam made a friendly face at me, but I hardly believes he likes me. I am not a particularly fine example for his community, I suppose! I don't wear the scarf! The women appreciate me, however, and stand by me. He had to swallow his remarks. We rarely discuss religious items, you know. We talk about the problems of everyday life, about invoices to pay and certificates to obtain. We try to help each other with the bureaucracy of Belgium. Well, I don't need help, but some of the other women do need legal advice, some comforting too. They remain naturally suspicious of the administrators. Others merely like a laugh. In essence, they come more for a cup of quiet tea and a chat.'

'You have one meeting per month?'

'Yes, but I cannot always attend. The last meeting was two weeks ago. I noticed nothing special.'

'What else do you talk about during those meetings? Do you read the Koran?'

'Sometimes we cite verses from the Koran, but only seldom. I doubt all the women have read the book entirely. We talk about what concerns us directly. Some women take strength from what the others tell. We live quietly in Robois, Joseph, but not all is so easy here as you may think. The Muslim women do not always understand the administrative machinery and the rules of our country. They are submerged in papers and have declarations to fill in for the

town, the province, the region and the federal institutions. Their husbands do not always understand, so they take up the burden. I help them with that. We talk about our female issues. How do you cope as a woman wearing a veil when men make fun of you in the streets of Robois? How do you cope when you don't wear a veil but Muslim men harass and even threaten you to put one on and be a humble Muslim woman? How do you react when men tug at your scarf or tear at your hair? How do you deal with gymnastic classes in school for your daughters, when the teachers want to see the girls half undressed? I agree it is difficult for girls to follow normal sports classes with veils over their hair. What do you do when very devote Muslim men insist on traditional Islamic education for their children? These are not even questions of religion, Joseph, but of differences in culture. These people are proud of their traditions, as you are of yours. They are not eager to abandon their habits of old. What should be our attitudes towards grandmothers and grandfathers demanding total obedience to the sharia? The old people were used to harsh religious rulings in their villages! Women who have lived for tens of years in Belgium and in Robois help newcomers. How do women cope with Belgian doctors who want to feel their heartbeat near their breasts? How do Muslim women go to hospitals for a scanning of breast cancer? Not all doctors and technicians are women in our hospitals! All gynaecologists are not women! You see, those are the issues we talk about. Some women have progressive, no-nonsense views. Others reflect and accept, yet others refuse to be touched by male doctors. We are also organising courses in French. Some men don't seem to like their women knowing any other language but their dialect and some Arabic!

'Do you get to talk to the men too?'

'Rarely! Most of the men bring their wife and also come to fetch them. Most of them are friendly. Some men smile at me, some men shy away from me, some look at me with scorn in their eyes. I do not wear veils! I suppose they regard me as almost indecent, maybe the like of a Christian or lay woman. Nevertheless, they let their women come to the meetings. I am not the only so-called progressive woman in the Muslim community. We try to exchange views calmly, try to discuss what is important in Islam and what can be adapted to the customs of this country. Change happens very slowly, though.'

'I can understand that!'

Samia and Joseph ate and kept silence for a few moments.

Joseph broke the silence by asking, 'do you know where the imam and the assistant imam live?'

'They live in apartments in the mosque buildings. I wouldn't know where exactly that is in the complex.'

'The mosque covers quite a surface! I wonder where they got the money for that building site. They have a large parking and several halls.'

'The Muslim men give one percent or so of their salaries to Muslim charity. The mosques gather the money.'

'How many Muslims live in Robois? One hundred? A few hundreds at most? Not a thousand! One cannot build a complex like we have here, on the money provided by so small a community.'

'Muslims from the surrounding towns attend the prayers at Robois. The Turgoux mosque is the only modern, large one, for tens of miles around. Most mosques are in small spaces, in city houses, in garages even. Many men from Namur and from Brussels even, come to

Robois. The interior of this mosque is nice. There is much space and light. You can see how large the windows are. The surroundings, in the countryside, are fine. The mosque is on the N11 roadway, near the highway. There is a large parking lot. One can drink a cup of tea in the bar, and eat a halal sandwich. The buildings are spacious. The Turgoux mosque is becoming famous for how agreeable the site is. Much outside money has been invested in the Robois mosque, in the Koranic school, in the apartments and other halls. The Muslim women I meet with, however, sought a place way out of the complex. We wanted to be able to speak freely. I have heard voices calling our group back to Turgoux. If that should happen, many women from our group, even newly immigrated women, and especially the very moderate ones, also the lay women, will then not attend our sessions anymore.'

Joseph Bikri conjectured, 'the money may have come from the Arabic oil states, from Turkey and maybe from Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. I can ask our friend the mayor about that.'

'Is that tolerated by the European states?'

'I guess so. I never heard of any measure against import of capital for building mosques. Yes, I think such subsidising is allowed by Belgian law. You could look into that.'

'Financial law is not my specialty, Joseph. Coming back to the murder, could that be an act of terrorism? Has terrorism also reached Robois?'

'No, no, I don't think so. Robois is too quiet. I have noticed nothing special in the behaviour of the Muslims of Robois. The murder may be an act of vengeance, an act of passion or an act of anger, camouflaged as a ritual murder. I have to admit, though, I have given no special attention to that aspect.'

Joseph Bikri did not want to scare his family.

Nevertheless, he added, 'of course, extremists may be eliminating opposers to their ideas. City Muslims from Namur or Brussels or Charleroi may have something to do with the murder and brought the corpse over to here, where there is less police. I have the nagging feeling that more than a simple murder for money or for power or than of a dispute over a woman has happened. Something is lurking under the surface, here or elsewhere. I have that funny feeling in my bones. Everything is too quiet. I don't know yet what to think. I have to investigate the murder and find out about it before the rot contaminates our town. We have much and delicate work ahead! At the first wrong step I take, the more extreme Muslims may start a riot. And if indeed many people from other towns come to the mosque of Robois, the riot may spill over to those other towns. Then, I'll be blamed for everything. I don't want to have to leave Robois.'

'You look worried, too worried! Our coming home after the holidays was not very joyful. I think you are too pessimistic, Joseph, and a little depressed over the end of our vacation.'

'Maybe I am. I prefer to anticipate the worst and be prepared. If this affects the Muslim community, it may also affect us. We are a family of Moroccan descent, quite estranged from the traditional Muslim community, yet regarded by many as of the Islamic religion. We are very exposed. Extremists may want to hurt a Belgian commissaire born out of the immigration and a famous, successful lawyer who refuses to curb to the imam's wishes, also from that same immigration. I am worried about you and the children. We must find an apartment for you and the children in Brussels or in Flanders. Under threat, we would have a

place to hide in for a while. We can probably hide in one of the houses of my family in Brussels, too.'

'Hide? In our own country? The Muslim immigrants truly have come to this country with their demons of old, accompanied by the extremists and terrorists and killers they tried to escape from, haven't they? I have no intention to flee, Joseph! We'll have to cope. We can have the children stay for a while in another town. Our friends will help. Our children can also go and live for a while at Castle Trioteignes. Charles de Trioteignes will help us, and his daughter Laura too. No, this is our country, now. I am not ever going to give it up to the bloodlust of a bunch of extremists! I shall not flee! I want to see how the Muslims react. My guess is they too will side with us. I am sure many of the women I met will be of the same opinion.'

'I think so too, but under threat, who knows how people may react? People naturally seek security and protection. If that means kowtowing to an imam and to armed extremists, they may well do so.'

'I believe the men will be more cowardly than the women.'

'They may be, yes. They are more exposed to the imam and to the other men in the community. They have learned to be careful and to be patient. A few aggressive men can shut the mouths and the minds of hundreds!'

'You cannot let that happen, Joseph! Not here!'

'No. We cannot. We have the police. I must fight for our values of peace, justice, freedom and tolerance in this country. It may come to that.'

Joseph changed subjects.

'I have seen your sister Khadijah sauntering in Robois with a young man. Should she not be at school?'

Samia was instantly interested. Her younger sister had come over from Morocco and was taking courses at the University of Namur. She stayed with her and Joseph.

'She has no courses today, except for a couple of hours late in the afternoon. She went out for a walk. She said she would grab a sandwich in town. She is an adult, Joseph. Who was the young man?'

'Oh, I don't know. He seemed to be a Moroccan or Algerian young man too. They laughed with each other, but they didn't touch. He was dressed in blue jeans, blue light parka. A tall, lean boy, intelligent eyes. He remarked me, she not so.'

'That must be Hamza. I met him at our meetings. He is the son of a very nice woman who comes to our gatherings. Hamza usually fetches his mother at the end of the meeting. His mother is married to a rather stern, older man. I believe the father is of rather fundamentalist, traditional faith. Hamza's mother has to wear a scarf and she has to stay indoors most of the time, although she would like to have a job. Her husband refused to allow her to look for work. The son is friendly, and knows a lot about electronics. He told me so. He studies electronics at the Technical School of Robois. He wants to be an electronics technician. I think he could easily become an industrial engineer or a university-degree civil engineer if he set his mind to it, but his father wants him to earn money quickly, so he chose the short cycle of studies.'

Samia hesitated, then continued, 'do you remember that old Bakelite radio of yours? You like the retro model, don't you? The radio broke down.'

'Yes. I do.'

'One evening, Hamza promised me to come to our house and repair the radio. He did, too, but he needed spare parts. He'll come back. He met Khadijah.'

Samia laughed.

'Khadijah will give us trouble, Joseph. She already confided in me she would refuse to return to Morocco. She would like to stay in Belgium. That was even before she met Hamza. My parents will say I debauched her.'

'Well, one issue after the other,' Joseph sighed. 'I just don't want her to get into trouble while she lives with us.'

'I'll talk to her.'

While Samia cleared the dishes, leaving Joseph to finish his glass of wine, Joseph Bikri remained lost in thoughts, sitting on his chair in the dining room. Would the murder lead him to a confrontation he had always feared and hated? Would he finally and personally have to choose between his roots and his aspirations? Would he have to choose between his upbringing, however slightly Muslim and Koranic, and his being a Belgian, and a commissaire of police? Had he not sworn loyalty to the Belgian king and to the constitution of this country? His children could have a good life, here. Would he have to choose between his Muslim traditions and everything he aspired to? He was quite determined about what choice he would make!

Joseph Bikri drank his wine, said goodbye to Samia, thanking her with a kiss and a hug. He did not doubt the choice Samia would dare. He walked out of his home, back to the Abbey, back to his office.

1.3. Diego de Trioteignes returns to Robois. Saturday, 11 July

While Commissaire Joseph Bikri and his wife Samia Bennani were finishing their dinner, a large, black, new BMW four-wheel drive car rode authoritatively, almost silently, through roads in the woods of Besnes, a village of Robois. The car emerged slowly, majestically, into the fields of Blouges-le-Château, and then sped more rapidly onto the plateau of Trioteignes. The roads of Trioteignes became smaller as the car sped on, so narrow only one car could drive safely between the grain fields and the high, thorny hedges that lined them. Passing another car would be a feat, let alone get past a tractor, but the driver encountered no vehicle here. The car rode north, until it arrived at an elegant archway beside the asphalted country road. The car moved under the arch, leaving the road to glide over a wide gravel path that led on for a minute or so to a grassy courtyard in front of a country house. The car stopped there.

The house was large, formerly a hunting lodge of Castle Trioteignes. It had been used as such in the previous century, before the World Wars, as a place where hunters gathered before and after the hunt. It had a reputation also for having lodged not a few mistresses of the lords of Trioteignes. Long before World War II it had been transformed into a large house, a small castle or manor in its own right, where several families could live. The house stood in a wild garden of trees and bushes, the last patches of the woods of Boyu, and high walls surrounded the domain. The archway could be closed by an ancient iron bar gate. Nowadays, the lord of Trioteignes used it to shelter special guests who wanted or needed to stay near the castle for longer periods than merely a few days. The Trioteignes family had many friends and connections, and these stayed quite often for friendly gatherings. The house was a classic rectangular building, a one-volume block. A large door lined with stones, was topped with a dark marble triangle showing the modest Palladian influences in its architecture. The front windows were narrow but high, strictly rectangular, and symmetrically placed. It was a two-storey building, but the many windows in the roof suggested habitable rooms had also been foreseen in the attic.

The door on the driver's side of the BMW opened, and Diego de Trioteignes stretched his limbs. Diego was twenty-nine years old, the only son of Charles de Trioteignes, the owner of the castle of the same name. Castle Trioteignes was a dark, rather ugly, massive swamp fortress built in medieval times. The outlines of the castle could be seen in the far, its towers forming a dark shadow above the treetops. Castle Trioteignes still prided in its fifteenth century walls and towers, even though the main wing had been modified to a fine, spacious, modern living mansion. It stood 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. These lands had once been swamps, been dried out with time, to be turned into rich agricultural fields. The lords of Trioteignes had owned the farms of the environs and grown rich from the grain crops and the raising of cattle in these fertile fields of the Hesbaye Region. The Hesbaye ended here, at Trioteignes. When agriculture had brought in less and less money, the lords had traded. They actively participated in the many, extremely profitable industrial ventures of the nineteenth century. Now, Charles de Trioteignes moved in circles of international finance. He owned vast shares in banks and in investment funds, and was allied to several other families in Flanders and in Germany.

Diego Trioteignes was a handsome, tall, well-muscled, athletic young man. He had dark hair and fair eyes. His features were angular but oddly pleasing, his strong-boned face long and narrow, his chin firm, nose right and his lips thin and delicate, ears small and close to his head. He kept his hair very short-cropped, which made him definitely look younger than he was. Diego was not too clean-shaven that day, the Italian way. One might have taken him for a Milanese or Portofino gigolo, for his tan was regular and deep, his walk elegant, his grin a little arrogant. Anybody who looked at him would be instantaneously impressed by his male power, his lean body, showing the demeanour of the decisive man. He might have been a model for male fashion.

Diego was anything but a weakling. His green-grey eyes shone intelligence and cunning, though also with a tinge of melancholic gentleness. His gentleness could be accentuated when he smiled warmly. When he spoke to you, he seemed to want to touch you in physical intimacy. His words came always well-chosen, slow, and well-felt. Diego was one of those men who had retained the easy elegance of his aristocratic forefathers and who seemed aware of his charisma, charm and some form of natural superiority. He made one feel at ease instantly with his presence. Nobody would have contested his leadership qualities.

Diego de Trioteignes would have been the joy and pride of his parents, a fine addition to the people and the town of Robois, had he not left Trioteignes surreptitiously six years ago. Since then, he had only returned for very brief visits once every two years or so. He stayed at the castle of his parents during those visits, and didn't show up to friends of Robois. Except for with his parents, he had nurtured and entertained in those years no contacts with other people in the town or villages.

Life had continued at Castle Trioteignes without Diego. Charles de Trioteignes still led his finance enterprises with firm hand. His wife managed the last large farm the Trioteignes owned in the village. Charles had a fine assistant in his daughter Laura. He remained the president of the board of his companies. Laura, however, had become the Chief Executive Officer of his most important firms. Charles was slowly relenting power to his daughter, withdrawing from the businesses. He was preparing the transition of his daughter to the true leader of the family businesses. Laura could be as cunning and as ruthless as her father when necessary. She had an innovative mind and thought far in strategy, bringing a new, youthful dynamism Charles knew he was lacking. Laura was not married yet. No aspirant young man seemed in the near future to feature in her life.

Charles de Trioteignes might have liked having his son at his side. He had never told his children what they should do, for he knew the obstinate Trioteignes character forbade such commands. He had let his children choose their ways. He was happy to have Laura at his side. He worried about Diego, of course, but without in the least showing his pain. He was worried about what Diego might be doing, where his son was, in what dangers he might have run. Charles knew his son had to find his own way, however, unaided by his parents.

Laura had sought a steady pattern after her studies. She had known what she wanted of life: a home, the castle, and a challenging job. She liked to travel in luxury and elegance. Charles could offer her all of that on a golden and diamond platter, and Laura had accepted eagerly. Diego, however, had to go out and find his own fortune or his own perdition. Charles de Trioteignes knew well the impetuosity and dangers of youth. So he worried about his two

children, for he was certain sooner or later also Laura would put into question what she was doing and seek a more meaningful life. Both of his children were still seeking their ways. Nevertheless, Charles would never have stopped his son and daughter for one second. He understood too well that if he tried to force these strong characters into any direction, they would hate him for it. He waited and prayed.

Diego de Trioteignes had phoned his father three days ago. He announced to Charles he would stay for some while in Robois, maybe for a few weeks. He asked whether he could live in the hunting lodge of Trioteignes if it was not hired out. The lodge had actually stood empty for some months. Charles hated hiring the place out to people he didn't know intimately. Charles agreed for his son to live there. He had sent a team of gardeners and cleaning women to prepare the mansion.

Diego stepped now towards the fine, spacious, red-brick house. The roof was covered with grey slates. He found the key to the door under the third flower pot from the left, as his father had told him. He opened the door.

Diego was dressed only in a blue jeans pants and a white, open shirt. He first went through all the rooms. Downstairs was a very large, L-shaped living room with an open hearth, fine windows. The hall contained rich furniture, with leather sofas and seats, low tables, display cupboards against the walls. Diego passed the room. He noticed the television set and the stereo installation. The living room led to two other rooms at the end, a small office and a library. He returned to the entry hall. He looked at the stone stairs that led to the first floor, admiring the old hunting scene paintings that decorated the walls here.

He went to the kitchen on the other side of the hall. He found the kitchen very large, too large for his taste. One could dine in the kitchen with at least six persons sitting around a massive old oak table, and still have the space to cook comfortably. Diego noted the kitchen had been entirely refurbished in impeccably modern style.

He returned to the entry hall and mounted the stairs. He entered one by one the rooms on the first floor. They were large bedrooms, all reachable by a windowed corridor that offered fine views on the rear garden. He found two bathrooms, one at each end.

Another stairway led to the attic. Here too Diego found more rooms, smaller and lower, and also an additional bathroom had been arranged under the roof. He opened the doors of three more rooms there, then went down the stairs and returned to the first floor.

He went to his car, and fetched two heavy travelling cases on small wheels, which he brought to the first bedroom. He immediately emptied the cases, placing his shirts, pants, pullovers, costumes and underwear in the cupboards. He brought a large, brown leather bag with his shaving gear, toothbrush and soaps in the bathroom to the right of the corridor.

Then, satisfied with his homecoming, but feeling hungry, Diego decided to have a look at the refrigerator. He hoped his father had ordered the fridge to be filled. He was not disappointed in that expectation. He prepared himself an omelette, scrambled eggs with mushrooms and thin slices of English bacon, found the bread, and ate. He turned the knob of the radio and listened to the broadcast news while he ate. He spotted a recent newspaper on a side table and read that too, laying it open on the table in front of him.

It was early in the afternoon. He was at a loss for what to do next. He could visit Castle Trioteignes now! He could visit his parents, but he decided to postpone that to the next day. Charles did not like being surprised, so Diego would phone his father later and announce his visit. He could sit at ease, now, relax and read a book, or watch television. He asked himself what he would most want to do on his own and spend the rest of the day with. This day was so different from the hectic life of the last years! He had to get used to doing nothing for a while! He thought of what he should do. After so many years of not so fine meals, he longed for a grand Belgian-style supper in a chic gastronomic restaurant. He desired for once to enjoy privately the best food and the best wine Belgium could offer. Was he not a Roboisian, and was not every Belgian an Epicurist at heart? He returned to the main hall and to the telephone. He asked the information service for the number of the 'Lady of the Lake', the only excellent restaurant of Robois. He phoned the restaurant and reserved a table for one at 19:00 in the evening. His aim for the rest of the day settled, he sat down with a book.

His leisure was interrupted by the shrieking tyres on the gravel path of the mansion. Diego went to the window and saw a white minivan driving towards the front door. He didn't wait for the driver to ring. He had expected this only to happen the next day! He opened the door and went up to the van. The driver was already out.

The man asked, 'are you Georges Dumont? I have a package for Monsieur Georges Dumont.' Diego answered, 'I am Georges Dumont. The package has to be delivered to me. Polyphemus.'

The man waited, did not move.

'Poseidon,' Diego continued.

The man nodded. He opened the minivan. He took an electronic device and asked for a signature on a writing pad, to be signed with a stylus. Then, he asked Diego to place his thumb on the same pad, waiting for the confirmation of identity. He received a positive identification note, and then drew a large carton box out of the van. Diego took the box. The box was heavy. He too nodded then to the driver, saying nothing more. He stepped to the house, the box in his arms. He waited a few seconds, putting the box on the gravel. The driver immediately went to sit behind the wheel and turned the car. The whole scene had not lasted longer than a minute. The car drove off.

Diego brought the large box painstakingly to another upstairs room but the one he had chosen as his bedroom. He placed the box on a table and tore open the carton. That proved too difficult, so he fetched a cutter in the kitchen. He found a set of other boxes in the outer one. The first box contained a handgun, a Belgian Fabriques Nationales gun, the 9 by 19 mm FN HP MKIII, with a magazine of 13 rounds. He saw two smaller boxes of cartridges, more than 50 rounds each. He placed the MK III and the two boxes of cartridges on the bed. The second, heavier box, held a Fabrique Nationales FN P90 tactical LIR personal defence weapon, an automatic gun with a magazine of 50 cartridges. The P90's ammo was of 5,7 by 28 mm. The gun had an infrared laser pointer, visible only with a night vision device. The gun was compact, short, very lethal, giving extraordinary fire power for near-combat, but it was also reputed to be accurate in single shots to up to 200 metres. Diego found four large boxes of cartridges for that gun, more than 400 rounds, and four spare magazines. The people who had sent him the guns had been generous! He needed night vision goggles for this weapon, and he found those in another box. It proved to be an Armasight Ninox device, with

a head mount for dual eye images at night. The Ninox illuminated the surroundings with infrared light and would allow him to detect the line of sight of the automatic P90. He placed these also on the bed, and assembled the headgear.

The last, larger box contained a NATO-grade F SCAR-H PR high accuracy rifle for 7,62 by 51 mm cartridges. The rifle had a folding buttstock, a range setting for up to 600 metres.

The last box contained a Burris Ballistic Laserscope III, a 4 to 16 times magnifications rifle scope Diego could click onto the FN rifle. The Eliminator III with its 50 mm lens was accurate to up to about 1000 metres. It had a ballistic programming unit that allowed him to enter the drop number and the ballistic coefficient of the cartridges for the SCAR rifle. The small computer was not fully automated, for the rifle shooter would have to compensate for the wind value. Diego had, however, a digital display for the 10 mph Wind Value for his specific cartridges at the indicated range. One box of fifty cartridges was added.

Diego groaned. He had a handgun, a precision sniper rifle and an automatic gun for close combat. He could defend himself in all circumstances, and perform stunning attacks on his own if necessary. He looked at the three weapons displayed on the bed. He had handled all of them before. He could even disassemble and reassemble them in the dark. He read the operating guides anew. He oiled the guns and cleaned them, using such implements also found in the large box, and placed them on the cartons to not soil the linen of the bed. The night vision goggles and the scope were new to him. He studied them and trained a while in operating them.

Then, he went back down the stairs to the main hall, and poured himself a large glass of Cognac. He sat and thought about a hiding place. Before his glass was emptied, he went back upstairs, to the attic, and inspected the rooms more closely there. He found a room in which space had been lost under a few stairs. The floor of this room was lower than the floor of the corridor that led to it. Four stairs brought you from the door to the floor of the room. Under these stairs was a lost space that had been made useful by closing it off with wooden panelling. A small wooden door gave access to the space. It was not a good hiding place, but it was the best and only place Diego could think off for the moment. He hid the boxes under the stairs, the automatic P90 and the rifle, the night vision goggles, the boxes of cartridges and the scope. He had found empty cartons in the kitchen with the names of wines on them, so he placed those in front. He closed the door of the hiding place.

Diego went back to the living room carrying only the handgun with its loaded magazine. He hid that gun simply behind a series of thick volumes of books on geography on a shelf of the library room. Then he sighed, sat again in the sofa, and finished his drink. He began reading Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms', grinning at the title. He had much pleasure from the style of the brilliant English writing of the author.

He woke out of his literature trance around six o'clock in the afternoon, put the book back in its place in the library, took a shower, shaved and prepared to leave the house for the restaurant. He rode to the 'Lady of the Lake' in the forest of Boyu.

'The Lady of the Lake' was a nineteenth century country house built on an island in a large lake of Boyu. The house radiated the Art Nouveau Brussels style, transplanted in the province of Namur. The interior had been modernised and served as a restaurant. To reach it, one had to leave one's car on the banks of the lake, in the parking lot arranged there, and then one had

to go on foot to a floating ferry platform to reach the island. One had to step on the platform and set the improvised ferry in movement by pushing a large, green 'Start' button. An electric motor pulled you to the other side.

Diego thought he looked smart in his new light-grey suit bought in London. He drew his jacket right. After the platform had arrived on the island, he went slowly up to the restaurant. A tall, long-legged, slightly coloured beautiful young Indian lady waited for him, and gave him appreciating looks. She had seen him coming up their way, one of the first guests for the evening. He offered his name, and received a table for two at one of the central windows, from where he enjoyed a nice view of the lake. He asked for a glass of Champagne wine for aperitif. The servant proposed him the menu and recommended some of the dishes. He chose from the entire menu. He asked for a dish of grilled scampis first, then for a Chateaubriand à point with Béarnaise sauce and steamed vegetables, a choice of cheeses and a chocolate desert. The young lady proposed to surprise him with the house wines, but he chose a half bottle of a Haut-Médoc Sauvignon white wine with his scampis and half a bottle of red Aloxe-Corton for his beef and cheese. He dined at ease. He looked around the rooms and watched the people who entered the restaurant. He vaguely knew a few. Nobody remembered him. The room filled with couples and with groups of up to six men and women. Diego supposed they had come to feast the mid-weekend on this Saturday evening. The noise rose in the restaurant, but Diego didn't care much, for it broke his loneliness, made the evening lively and more social. He could relax.

Diego ate slowly, meticulously, cherishing every taste. Time passed slowly. Afterwards, he asked for a coffee and for a glass of Gewürztraminer Marc. He sipped at his glass. The colours faded in the darkening evening. The lights in the restaurant came suddenly on. Diego was sighing for pleasure, though knowing he would soon have to stand up from his chair and leave.

At that moment, a woman entered the room from the side of the kitchen. She wore the white robe of a cook. She must have changed robes before she entered the restaurant room, for her white was spotless. Diego could not imagine anyone working in a busy kitchen with meat, fish, vegetables and sauces without receiving one stain on the white robe. She did not wear the high chef's hat. Her thick, auburn hair was tied to a knot behind her face. Diego had only remarked her for a moment, for she came in from behind him, while he faced the entry. He looked out of the window again.

Several tables had already emptied of people before she came. She paused at the tables where people still sat with a coffee and a last drink. She passed to the tables sideways from Diego, all but ignoring him, until she appeared suddenly in front of him, her hands on the chair. Her voice was a little deep but melodious, 'hello, Diego. How are you? Have you enjoyed the evening?'

Diego hadn't seen Michelle de Bazaine for ten years or so. She looked far more attractive than he remembered her. Michelle was three years younger than he. She was a lady now, almost as tall as he. The last time he had seen her, she had been a skinny thing with glasses on her nose, who didn't seem to know what she wanted. She had studied, he remembered, at various cooking schools. She had served with chefs in France and in Belgium, and had seldom returned to Robois in the times from before he left town. Still, Diego knew her well,

from his youngest age on. He had played with her in Castle Bazaine and in the castle of his father when she was only five. She had lived with her family at Castle Bazaine, a castle Diego had often visited. Charles de Trioteignes, Diego's father, rarely sought contact with the people of Robois. Still, he did not refuse invitations to feasts in the town, and also not to the more formal dinners and balls organised at the castles of Bazaine and of Blouges. Michelle and her sister Evelyn had been to the same schools as Diego until her seventeenth year. Michelle had taken more flesh on her bones, Diego remarked. She had a fine face with nice, soft, rounded features, yet the very special green eyes and the full mouth he had always in particular liked on her had remained the same. Michelle was not the typical grand and alluring beauty, but Diego stared at her to study how a remarkably beautiful and special woman she had become. He recognised a fine, warm character in her face. Her eyes flashed mysteriously in the evening light. Her soft lips gleamed red, her cheeks were still lightly flushed from the work in the kitchen, and she smiled warmly, a little mockingly, but gently, to Diego, who kept staring. Diego hadn't looked at such an innocent, honest, open smile since many months, if not years. He sat speechless, and did not move. His silence made her look a little uncomfortable in the end, though she did her side of the staring too. She repeated, 'did you enjoy the food, the wine?'

Diego pushed his back straighter in his chair.

'Of course! What a surprise, Michelle! Are you the chef here? I'm amazed!'

Michelle opened her arms, 'yes, Diego, I'm the new Lady of the Lake! It bought the ailing restaurant two years ago. I borrowed the money. I used only my own money and the money from the bank. I'm finally getting ahead of ruin. This is my enterprise, now! This is what I accomplished, quite alone.'

She smiled.

Diego didn't comment on her economic success. He went straight for her gut. He shook his head.

'You're gorgeous, Michelle! You look just lovely!'

This was no doubt a very untypical conversation in the restaurant, but Diego was not accustomed to anything but very direct talk.

'You are simply beautiful. Yes, you definitely turned into a fine lady, Michelle. And you are the manager of your own enterprise! I admire you. Please have a seat, for old times' sake. Do you have time to chat? Would you have a glass Champagne with me, for our meeting again? Do you have to return to the kitchen?'

'No, I don't yet have to return to the kitchen, and yes, I have time for a glass of bubbles. I'd love one!'

Michelle took the chair opposite Diego, and sat. She continued to look straight at Diego's eyes. She didn't avoid his gaze. Then, before Diego could move, she called the young Indian lady who had served at Diego's table and ordered two glasses of Champagne. The girl's eyes sparkled in mockery.

Michelle didn't speak immediately. She studied Diego, never lowering or diverting her eyes.

'Where have you been, Diego?'

'Oh, I rolled my feet here and there, doing government work mostly. I have come back only today at Robois. I'd like to stay here for a while, now. I'm doing fine. I'm still amazed at how wonderful you look.'

Michelle ignored the compliments.

‘Where have you lived all this time, Diego?’

‘Brussels mostly, but I’ve been abroad too, for years. England, other countries.’

‘Married and with family?’ Michelle dared, as bold as he had showed himself.

‘No, not at all. Still single! You?’

‘Single too! I’ve had to work too hard. No time for lover boys, Diego. What you see around you has been built with sweat and tears! And love only for food!’

‘I imagine. You were always a very headstrong young lady. That is how I remember you.’

Michelle laughed.

‘You look fine, too, Diego. Have you come back, now, to work with your father?’

‘I don’t think so, no, not yet. Laura is doing a great job assisting my father. She is very efficient. I don’t know. Maybe I’ll stay and ask him for a job in one of his companies. I live at the hunting lodge of Castle Trioteignes for the moment. I got a little homesick, I suppose. I may stay some time in Robois, meet old friends.’

Michelle lowered her eyes to her glass, turned it, cheered to him. They drank.

She then said in a softer voice, eyes still on her glass, ‘Evelyn is married, you know. She has a child, a son.’

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I have heard so.’

He hesitated, then went on in the same direct way they both spoke.

‘I left, Michelle, because of Evelyn. That was no secret. You know as much. That affair is over since a very long time. Much has happened to me in the meantime. I am not the boy I was when I left Robois. It was ridiculous, feeling for Evelyn the way I did. Adolescent infatuation! That is over and gone. Like you, I lived a very active life. And I am quite cured of Evelyn!’

‘Are you sure of that? Have there been other women? I shouldn’t ask about those matters, and the answer will no doubt be a resounding yes!’

Diego blushed, chuckled, laughed uneasily, and then replied, ‘yes, there have been other women. None important. None lasting longer than a few weeks at best. I’ve grown up. Have you?’

‘I never was much involved with men, Diego. A few have tried, though!’

‘I bet. Are you happy?’

‘I am! Sure! I have my work. I love the restaurant. I love designing new dishes. I like my clients to be satisfied and hear them tell me so. I learned to live on my own, though I always did that. And to hold my stand.’

‘Yes, you did that already when we were children.’

She seemed to come to a decision of sorts.

‘I was in love with you, Diego. Very much in love. I was sixteen. Too young. You only had eyes for Evelyn. You see, I was as ridiculous as you. We both have a scar.’

‘And are you cured too?’ Diego ventured. He was scared of the answer, though.

Michelle didn’t answer. She looked again at Diego, insisted with her stare, hesitated, and then she finished her glass in one gulp.

She sighed, said, ‘I have to go back to the kitchen. Wait for a few minutes, and I’ll see you out. We can talk a little longer. We should see each other again.’

Few women had ever invited him so openly. Usually, Diego, the man, had to say those words. He didn't mind. He liked her openness and her direct speech. It sounded refreshing compared to the other women he had met.

'Yes, yes, we should definitely see each other again,' he replied. 'How do we do this boy meets girl thing? Do you come to fetch me in a car, wearing a long, pink dress and a white gardenia? Do I go somewhere to see you back?'

She laughed. 'We can meet somewhere, and check how many strings still link us. My father stages a supper tomorrow evening at Castle Bazaine, much in honour of Evelyn and my brother-in-law. Consider you hereby invited. Come at eight o'clock to Bazaine. I'll reserve you a chair next to me. That is, if you dare to confront Evelyn without trembling knees.'

'I would come for Michelle, not for Evelyn!'

Michelle should return to the kitchen, but she still lingered, hesitated. She looked at the empty glass in front of her, continued turning it in her fingers. She did not look at Diego.

'I read the last letter you wrote to my sister, Diego. Evelyn read the letter to me. It was a fine letter, each line filled with love. I didn't think it was a ridiculous confession.'

'I was a schoolboy, Michelle, drawling like a lovesick adolescent I then still was. I tell you again, that affair is long over. It is over and done with, terminated, finished, faded away to far under the ground!'

'You might have married her, then, Diego, had she said yes. She ran away with the other one, and I think she made the error of a lifetime. Still, we can't turn history back, can't we?'

Anyway, you said true. We are grownups now, aren't we? So many things have changed. The scars don't hurt anymore. Well, consider yourself invited tomorrow evening at Bazaine.'

'My sudden appearance may seem like a grenade exploding in the hall, Michelle. Should we risk that?'

Michelle laughed again, throwing her head in her neck. She laughed almost uproariously.

'I'd love to see that! I like upsetting the whole lot of them, Diego! Are you scared?'

'It will be I doing the upsetting, Michelle. I don't think I will like that. I've been avoiding such things these last many years.'

'Oh, don't worry! Are you truly scared, now? Laura is invited, too, and will come. I'll squeeze you between me and her, so you'll feel protected, my poor boy!'

It was Diego's turn to laugh.

'All right. I'll come, promised. Smoking?'

'Yes, please. Or something not too far from smoking. I have to go, now. Wait for me!'

Michelle stood and went through the revolving kitchen doors. Diego continued staring after her.

Diego called the young serving lady and asked her for the bill. He finished his glass, paid, but remained seated a little longer. Michelle returned. Diego stood from his chair, said he had to return home. Michelle walked him to the ferry platform. She took his arm on the path. It seemed to Diego she took possession of him. He was astonished at how much had happened the first day of his return to Robois. Not just Michelle, but also the town seemed to have laid hands on him. Diego brushed his lips to her hair, which she had let loose. Her hair fell long, thick, and silky. It was nice hair to feel with one's lips, bury one's face in. It hung to below her shoulders.

'For the sake of old times,' he apologised having touched her.

They reached the ferry. Michelle withheld him. She came to stand close to him. 'For old times' sake, Diego. This has been confessing time for both of us. We are even, Diego de Trioteignes, I loved you, you loved Evelyn. Weren't we both ridiculous? Don't we know better, now?'

'No, I don't know more than when I was as old as then, Michelle. I know I didn't love Evelyn, though, not really. I loved a mirage, an idea, a concept. It had the face of Evelyn, but it wasn't Evelyn at all. I want something else than ridiculous love. I want a life.'

He hugged her, but didn't kiss her. She held her head low, he only touched her hair with his hand. This was the goodbye he could give, and she didn't want more. Michelle let go of him. Diego went to the ferry. He was confused, considered returning to Michelle, but he reminded himself of what he had come to Robois for. It was too soon. He pushed the start button, the electric motor started to hum. He looked back, and saw Michelle still waiting on the banks of the lake. Yes, she was the Lady of the Lake. Would she be his Lady of the Lake? He waved a last time, and she liked that. Before the darkness hid her, he heard her call, 'don't forget about tomorrow evening, Diego!'

No, he would not forget.

He went to his car in the dark parking lot and rode back to Trioteignes. He rode fast and confidently.

1.4. The imam of Robois. Sunday, 12 July

Joseph Bikri rode to the new mosque of Robois in his old Renault of more than ten years of age he should replace soon but had not the courage to. One does not easily discard old friends. He was dressed in simple civilian clothes, not in his police uniform. Like the previous days, the air had remained hot and dry. The morning dew had evaporated early. The sun already forced its warmth on nature. Even with its windows open, the Renault couldn't dissipate the heat that had gathered in his car. Bikri had not telephoned the imam he was coming for a visit. It was already close to eleven o'clock when the commissaire left the centre of Robois. He expected there was a high chance he would not catch the imam for a conversation, but he also wanted to look more closely at the mosque buildings. He needed to snoop around, to sniff and feel and catch the atmosphere of the place. That was his way of knowing Robois, and he had neglected doing so with the mosque for too long. He drove to the National Road that traversed the villages of Robois, the N11, to the south of town, to Turgoux. He rode for twenty minutes and then turned into the compound of the mosque's buildings.

The mosque of Turgoux was a complex of several buildings. The buildings were low, modern blocks of concrete and glass, standing among other such characterless, rectangular constructions with flat roofs of industrial halls and large distribution centres. Bikri saw a sports centre, a centre of furniture and one of children's clothing, all near the mosque. He had never before realised the parking lot in front of the mosque was so vast. Few cars stood here on this Sunday. He rode to as close to the mosque building as he could.

Bikri began to feel this was not a very appropriate day to pay an unannounced visit to the imam, but he wanted his investigation to proceed. When Bikri stepped out of his car, he saw the actual mosque was the large, one-floor rectangular building in front. He noticed the long entry doors of thick glass panels. He imagined these doors standing open on a prayer evening. Now, all seemed closed and quiet. He remarked there were no windows in the façade facing the road. Bikri noticed tall but narrow windows at the sides, all protected by heavy iron bars. All glass panels, also of the front doors, were stained with harsh colours so that one could not have a glimpse from what was going on inside. Bikri imagined a thick wall behind the front door windows, and then the prayer hall, behind the reception space. When the sun shone through the side windows into the prayer hall, many colours would be projected into the large room, which would certainly provide a nice effect of play of light. Bikri wouldn't know. He had never set a foot inside the mosque of Robois, neither in the old nor in this new building. When he walked by, he realised looking through one of the windows from the outside was impossible. The colour on the glass was too dark. The glass was opaque. The panels stood too high. The architects had been cautious men.

Commissaire Bikri stood a while, taking in the various aspects of the buildings. He whistled at the vastness of the whole. He went up to the doors of the mosque, remarked a copper plate announcing this was indeed the mosque of Robois, but found the doors closed. They wouldn't open when he turned the handles and rattled the panels. He saw no bell. He hesitated for a moment, looked up, then sideways, and walked, exploring, around the mosque proper. He missed something. He noticed no minaret had been erected. A minaret would indeed not have

been useful here, as the call for prayers would be heard only by the few people working in the enterprises of the industrial zone. He also believed the Christian community of Robois would not have liked another tower but those of the Catholic churches of the town, and of the tower of the civil Belfort near the Abbey, the tower of the civil authority of Robois. Robois would also not have allowed loudspeakers to throw the imam's prayers in Arabic over the town. The mosque of Robois was a vast complex indeed, but it had been placed in the very modern, low, impersonal European style, to blend in with the architecture of the surrounding halls. This mosque did not want to draw attention to it. Yet, it was not a humble building. It looked discreet but massive and vast to the commissaire.

Joseph Bikri walked on, along the left side of the mosque, towards the constructions behind. He arrived at three more buildings. These too were mostly one- and two-storey rectangular blocks with flat roofs. One building stood in the alignment of the mosque itself. Bikri supposed this might be the place where the imam lived and had his office.

A second building seemed to hold apartments on two floors. The commissaire counted ten large windows on either floor, he surmised meaning at least twenty apartments. He wondered whether the apartments went to the back of the building, or whether more apartments could be found at the back. He could see gardens of trees and bushes behind. Could the mosque complex contain up to forty or fifty apartments? Who lived here?

The third building was a complex in its own right. This too was a two-storey construction. It held a large brasserie, the tea-house of the mosque. Bikri knew no alcoholic beverages would be served here. He went up to the glass façade. The glass here was transparent. He went to a menu card that hung on the inner side of the windows. He shielded the reflections of the sun with one hand above his eyes. He read tea and coffee could be had, soda waters, coke, sandwiches and a few dishes of warm food. The prices were decent. The tea-house was also closed today, at this hour. Bikri saw neat rows of modern-style tables and chairs, made of wood, placed in a straight-lined pattern. The restaurant looked very clean. The bottles, glasses stood neatly arranged on shelves behind a long counter.

Next to the restaurant was a halal butchery, a shop with other halal products, but no bakery. All the shops were closed, no people walked around. The mosque was as dead on Sundays as the rest of the town. It seemed Muslims went out of their homes as seldom on weekends as the other people of Belgium.

The building of the cafeteria and the shops was L-shaped, and farther on Bikri saw another wing that seemed to contain more meeting-halls, or smaller halls for ceremonies.

The Catholic churches of the villages of Robois held cemeteries behind or beside them, some cemeteries being small spaces and other quite larger. There was no graveyard around the mosque of Robois. Bikri remembered his friend, the mayor, having told him the imam of Robois had asked for a separate space in the central graveyard of Robois for the burial of deceased Muslims. The Town Council had agreed to the demand. The wealthier Muslims, however, sent their beloved dead in hermetically closed coffins by airplane to their homelands. Especially the people of Moroccan and Algerian descent did this. The tradition was not as clear in the Turkish community.

These thoughts occupied Joseph Bikri's mind while he sauntered around in the mosque complex. He was struck by the modern, serene, strict geometric look of the undecorated

buildings. The lines of the buildings were straight and austere. He imagined finer decoration inside. The beautiful curved lines of Arabic citations from the Koran would be artistically painted in golden colours on the inside walls and ceilings. From the outside, the complex looked like a desert caravanserai, of which only the blank walls would be visible from the far. The complex was merely an assembly of rectangular boxes. Life inside, hidden from the outside world, could be colourful and intense, but from the outside the site looked cold and impersonal. He took hold of himself and was suddenly impatient to find the imam.

A man dressed in a white djellaba came out of the cafeteria, saw the commissaire, and came up to him.

The man asked quite friendly, 'can I help you, brother? Are you looking for something or someone in particular?'

'I'd like to speak to the imam,' Joseph Bikri replied smiling, and in a few words.

The man pointed to the building behind the mosque.

'You must ring at that door, behind you. The imam lives there. Someone will open, even when the imam himself is not in.'

Joseph Bikri thanked with a nod, turned on his heels, and stepped to the indicated door. He found an electric bell with the name 'Imam Dhakir El-Amin', and pushed on the button. He heard no ringing. He had to wait quite a while, wondering whether his ringing would have any success. He noticed a camera above his head. He looked behind him and saw the man who had showed him the imam's place had not gone away. He too waited, watching the commissaire. Finally, the door opened. A small, wiry man opened. The man had glasses on, which he now took off, closed and put in his pocket. He was very clean shaven, in quite normal Belgian clothes, dressed in a white, open shirt, black pants and slippers. The man had been interrupted in the intimacy of the day.

He asked timidly, 'yes? Can we help you?'

'Good morning! I would like to talk to the imam of the mosque,' Joseph Bikri replied.

'Of course,' the man replied, smiling. 'I am the imam of Robois. I have not much time, though. I can receive you. What would be the subject of your visit, brother?'

'I am Commissaire Youssouf Bikri of the police of Robois. I wondered whether we could have a short conversation, Imam. I won't keep you long.'

'Come in, then, come in,' the imam said, opening the door wider and making place for Joseph Bikri to enter.

The imam immediately opened a side door in the entry corridor, ushering Joseph Bikri inside. This room served as a kind of parlour. It was small, sparingly decorated in furniture, with four seats and a low table, no decoration. A few folders lay neatly placed one on top of the other on the table. The walls and the ceiling were painted in the same creamy white colour. The room felt cold. The building had air conditioning. Bikri walked into a drop of at least ten degrees of temperature. Not just the air was cooler. Bikri found the whole atmosphere cold, and as impersonal as he had considered the outside structure of the compound. The imam offered a seat to the commissaire with a wave of his hand. He sat opposite Joseph Bikri. Another man then entered the room. This man was tall, muscular and heavy. He was dressed in a white djellaba and he wore a short, white cap. His beard was long and black, his face unshaven. The man did not sit. He remained standing behind the imam, two arms crossed over his large chest.

‘Jamal will assist me,’ the imam explained. ‘He can hear what we say. He has our total confidence.’

Bikri remarked a tiny camera spot in front of him, high up on the wall, directed at the scene. Why did the imam need a witness, or protection? He hadn't seen the imam push any button, hadn't heard him call a third person in. He could only think of the door of the parlour having triggered a signal of sorts to somewhere else in the rooms. Or somebody was now looking at screens with the image of the parlour. Why did the imam need such protection?

‘You are the imam of Robois, Shaykh Dhakir El-Amin,’ Joseph Bikri started, hoping to trigger some first reaction.

‘Not really,’ the imam interrupted him. ‘The imam of Robois, Imam Dhakir El-Amin, has left Robois temporarily. I am but the assistant imam, but I am officiating in his absence. My name is Madyan Bin Mahfouz. How can I help you?’

‘I am the leader of the police force of Robois, imam. I am investigating on a crime committed in Robois. A man was murdered and his body thrown into the Largeau River. I have a drawing of what he looked like, alive. I hoped you might know the man.’

Joseph placed a copy of the drawing of the murdered man's supposed portrait on the table, in front of Bin Mahfouz. The man followed Bikri's movements, saw the paper, but did not look insistently at the drawing. Joseph Bikri waited. The imam bent to the table, looked more eagerly now, but he did not pick up the paper.

He replied, ‘no, commissaire, I don't know the man. I read of the crime in the newspapers. Shocking, isn't it? A crime in Robois? Our town has otherwise been spared of such terrible misdeeds. No doubt this is because of your good services to our communities. What makes you think I might have known the victim?’

Joseph Bikri did not reply. He placed a photograph next to the drawing on the table.

‘This is how the murdered man looked like in reality, imam. Do you recognise the face?’

The imam looked closer this time, sprang back in his seat as if he had been stung by a snake. The man paled in the face, horror showed in his eyes.

He said, ‘this is awful, commissaire! The poor man. I do not recognise this face. I repeat, what makes you think I might have known the man?’

‘The body we found was only dressed in a white djellaba, imam, and the crime looked like a Muslim ritual execution. The man was decapitated.’

The imam answered, shocked, ‘there is no Muslim ritual of decapitation, commissaire!’

‘Does not Sura 47, the Sura of Muhammad, tell in a verse that when a Muslim encounters an infidel, he must strike off his head and slaughter him?’

‘That is a verse referring to the battle of the early believers of Islam against the infidels of Mecca who besieged the Prophet! We do not condone such acts here, commissaire!’

‘So you don't recognise the portrait?’ Bikri insisted.

‘No, I don't. May I add nobody would recognise the face! It has been made unrecognisable!’

‘Well then,’ Bikri nodded. ‘The man seemed of Maghreb or of Semitic origin. You have a large community of believers. You see many people. I hoped you might have recognised the victim.’

‘I repeat, commissaire, I don't!’

The imam fiddled with his fingers. He lowered his eyes, avoiding both the photograph and the stare of Bikri. Jamal looked straight at the wall behind the commissaire, at nothing else.

Joseph Bikri took the drawing and the photograph up, reconsidered, and showed the pictures to Jamal. The man looked, and shook his head. Bikri put the pictures back in the inner pocket of his jacket. He felt uncomfortable in the room. He changed subjects.

‘You have a fine mosque, imam. How old is it? It looks fairly new.’

‘You should know, commissaire. You arrived here before me. I only came to Robois two years ago. Aren't you a Muslim too? At least, that is what people told me. They call you an example for our community. A man originated from the immigration, made commissaire! That is a rare fact. I believe you are the only Muslim commissaire of Belgium. I think I heard you are of Moroccan origins?’

‘I am. My parents emigrated from Morocco, but I was born in Belgium.’

‘I was born in Belgium too, commissaire, in Brussels, like you I think. And you are Muslim by religion?’

‘Muslim, yes.’

‘Yet, I never saw you in the mosque. Also, your wife prefers to meet in other places than in the mosque complex to talk to our women. You have many Christian friends, I heard. You do not seem to practice our faith much, and your wife is rather openly hostile to us.’

‘I don't practice my faith in public, no. I say my prayers and honour the five pillars of Islam. By the shahadah I declare my faith, by salat I pray five times a day, I do give alms in zakat, I fast during the month of Ramadan, but I have not yet made a pilgrimage in the hajj to Mecca. Maybe I will go on the hajj one day. My faith is a private faith. I am very private about my beliefs. I too am discreet, imam. I have to, I am the commissaire of this town.’

‘I understand. And because you are commissaire here, you cannot proclaim your faith. Do you think you are then a good Islamist?’

Joseph Bikri had the ugly feeling he was being judged. He had the definite impression he was being accused and interrogated, instead of him interrogating the imam. He disliked the sarcasm of the man. He broke this path of conversation.

‘May I ask where the funds came from, the funds that allowed this complex to be built?’

‘Various sources paid for the mosque, commissaire. Charity is one of the pillars of Islam, as you just stated. We are a peaceful community. We commit no murders. We try to remain discreet. We practice our faith in freedom, and quietly. We stay friendly with the other religious communities, as far as our faith permits us, be they Catholic Christian, Protestant Christian or other. We practice a moderate Islam, emphasizing what is good and human in the Koran. We do not provoke anger or envy. We study the Koran, accepting the ilm al-kalam, study and defend our faith. The kalam, the consideration of Islam in general, is a collective duty. We study in our school the Koran, and also the Sunni hadith, the sacred sayings of the Prophet. We use our minds to study the Koran and deepen our faith. We teach what could make us better Islamists, in the real sense of the good, avoiding wrongdoing.’

‘Then I should call you a Shaykh al-Islam,’ Bikri retorted also a little mockingly. ‘You study the Koran like the Imam al-Ashari taught. You are ulama, then, revered scholars who teach how the Koran should be read. You define by consensus. I like that!’

Bikri kept his silence. No reaction came. The imam kept looking at Bikri, a bit surprised.

He continued, ‘you interpret the Koran, imam. Isn't that forbidden? Isn't the Koran the word of God delivered to us via the Prophet, and therefore not to be interpreted?’

The imam avoided the trap. He held to his image of moderate Muslims.

'The Koran was given to Muhammad by the angel of God,' the imam continued. 'We accept the fact that the Koran also contains some reflexions of Muhammad himself, some of his prayers to God. We are no Salafists, commissaire.'

'You interpret the Koran, then.'

'No, we don't. We seek the good in the Koran. We try to understand the Koran better, try to seek God's purpose in giving us the Book.'

'Fine, fine,' Bikri stopped this kind of proselytising by the imam. It was lost on him. He would not change how he held his faith.

He said, 'Would you mind if I showed the drawing of the victim to other persons in your Muslim community?'

'No, I wouldn't mind, of course not, commissaire. We are always available and willing to help the authorities of this country. Sunday is not a very good day for your investigations, however. Many people stay in their homes. We too close our building on Sundays. We open our premises for the evening prayers, of course. You see, we follow the habits of the country. We would like you to participate with us in our prayers and listen to our sermons.'

Joseph Bikri asked, 'I am of Moroccan descent. From what country do you come from, imam?'

'I am of Saudi origins, commissaire, but born a Belgian. I have a Belgian identity card.'

Joseph Bikri could not think of more to ask. He was keenly aware the imam had dodged most of this questions. He would have to seek his information from others. How could he speak to other Muslims connected to the mosque complex? It didn't seem easy.

'We must close the conversation here, commissaire,' the imam said, standing up. 'I have much work to do and my presence is needed elsewhere.'

The man called Jamal hastened to the door and opened it. Joseph Bikri looked a last time at the imam.

He could not help to insist one last time, 'refusal to help the authorities of this country in crime cases may be considered a crime in itself, Imam Bin Mahfouz. I am sure you know that. Please explain the same concept to your community. May I insist and ask that if you hear or happen to know anything of this affair, to contact me? I leave you my card with my telephone number. As you know, our police station is in the Abbey of Robois.'

'We know, commissaire.'

Joseph Bikri left his card on the table in front of the imam, but the imam did not take the card in his hands. Bin Mahfouz also refused to look back directly at Bikri. The commissaire hesitated. He felt the hostility in this building quite clearly, now.

'One last thing,' he said. 'When does the principal imam of Robois return?'

'We don't know, commissaire. He sometimes leaves for weeks.'

'Could you inform the imam I have been here?' Bikri insisted. 'Please ask him or contact me as soon as he returns.'

The assistant imam closed his eyes, which Bikri accepted as a sign of acquiescing.

Commissaire Bikri walked slowly past Jamal. He had to step sideways because the man blocked half the opening.

He said, turning to the imam, 'thank you for having received me!'

He imam didn't even nod. Bikri went into the corridor. Jamal already held open the door to the outside.

When Joseph Bikri stepped into the heath of mid-day, he sighed and puffed, which was lost on Jamal. The door immediately closed behind he commissaire. Nobody looked where Joseph Bikri went next. He saluted to the camera above the door, and smiled.

The compound was empty of people. Bikri walked to his car, and rode home. Only then did he remark he had never seen men wearing djellabas in Robois. Why then wore so many men djellabas in the mosque complex? And why not the imam?

Joseph Bikri hurried home. There was little or no traffic of cars and trucks on the roads this Sunday noon, so he rode fast. He also burst fast in his home, glad to talk to his family. When he pushed open rather suddenly the door to his living-room, he heard a shuffle of movement. When he opened the door panels completely, he saw at both ends of his large sofa two very red-faced youths. At one end sat his young sister-in-law, Khadijah Bennani, and at the other end a young man he didn't know at all. Then he remembered having seen Khadijah walking in the streets with this man. He surmised how just a fraction of a second earlier, these two bodies would have sat much closer to each other on the sofa!

The young man jumped to his feet, Khadijah too, and the girl introduced her young friend, 'oh, hi, Youssouf. This is Hamza Al-Harrak. Hamza has come to repair your old radio, and Samia invited him to have dinner with us!'

Joseph smiled, 'yes, I know Hamza would be coming one of these days. Well, young man, I'm glad to make your acquaintance. How are you? Have you had some luck with the radio?' 'It works, sir, and a good day to you too, sir. I am happy to meet you. The radio works, but I merely kept the vacuum tubes inside for show. I found no new tubes nearby. I'm afraid the sound is now generated by the transistor board I placed inside. I connected that to the receiver unit and to the amplifier in the set, which work fine still. All the knobs on the outside therefore work as before. It's a nice set, with a nice retro look. Bakelite radios are not produced anymore, I guess.'

'I got it from my father! He bought it in Morocco, many years ago, and brought it with him in his luggage when he travelled to Belgium and settled here. It is a museum piece, really, but it remembers me of my father. That is why I am so fond of it. I owe you, young man. You'll have to tell me how much I should pay you. Is Samia in the kitchen?'

The last question was addressed to Khadijah, who seemed to relax a little. She smiled, and nodded shyly. Khadijah was usually not a shy girl, Joseph knew. Maybe her conscience was nagging a little.

Joseph hurried on to the kitchen. He found Samia there, bent over a pot of steaming couscous. She was vigorously turning in the vegetables and in the grain. He kissed her in the neck, to which she giggled. Joseph noticed with relief she was good-humoured today. She turned her face to accept a long kiss on her lips.

'Where are the kids?' Joseph asked while he stuck a finger in the pot behind her back.

Samia slapped him on the hand with the long, wooden spoon.

She said, 'the kids are upstairs. Hors d'oeuvre is a tomato with shrimps in mayonnaise, the Belgian way. The main dish is couscous with lamb and lamb chops aside for the greedy.

There is a salad. I bought new cheese, Herve and Comté and Roquefort. Khadijah baked a cake. It's only a cake all prepared with the flour in a box, but you will say it's delicious with tea, or I'll scratch your eyes out. Do you serve us some wine?'

'Red or white?' Joseph wondered.

'Red,' Samia answered, 'for the lamb and the cheese. We're not very good Muslims! We shouldn't drink this much wine!'

'What?' exclaimed Joseph, 'have you forgotten what is written in Sura 83, the sura on those who stint, that the righteous shall dwell among delights, one of the delights being choice sealed wine would be given them to quaff? Aren't we righteous? Is paradise not ours? Did you not create my paradise on earth?'

'Yes, my dear, and Sura 2 of the cow, says there is a great sin and advantage both in wine, but greater sin than advantage! Islam doesn't allow wine.'

'So,' Joseph concluded, 'let's not abuse and drink only a few glasses to take the advantage and leave the sin! How wise the Koran is!'

Samia wouldn't allow her to lose the last word, so she quoted, 'Sura 5 of the table says something like: oh believers, wine and some other things are an abomination of Satan's work. Avoid them, so that you may prosper!'

'Damn it, Samia,' Joseph retorted as quickly, 'the suras I quoted have all higher numbers, so they obliterate suras 2 and 5. And in my preferred Sura 47 of Muhammad, the Prophet had it be written that in paradise are rivers of milk, and rivers of wine, delicious to drink from! I quote literally! Look at us! Aren't we bickering over Koran verses like two fundamentalists? About wine! Don't begrudge me my paradise, woman!'

'Then give me some of your paradise, husband' Samia smirked.

She pouted her lips and Joseph kissed Samia again. He held the kiss this time, allowing her the victory, but Samia pushed him back after a while.

'Get hold of you, or you'll have to scoff burned couscous!'

She turned in the couscous, and then said, 'in paradise you can drink wine as much as you want. Here, you take care not to sin.'

And that was that.

Joseph sighed, went to the cave and came back into the kitchen with a bottle of Burgundy Ladoix wine.

'The rivers of wine flow in paradise for us to drink from,' he said. 'If that is true, then I'm pretty sure it must be rivers of Ladoix: pure, of one grape only, light as air, transparent yet ruby-red, caching the light, and as tickling as my lady's breasts!'

'Don't get horny over me when I'm working in my kitchen, Youssouf Bikri, don't start thinking you're Omar Khayyam,' Samia screamed, threatening him with her huge spoon. 'Go and tell Khadijah to put the plates on the table. Call the children down. Dinner's ready.'

Joseph sighed, and took the bottle to the dining-room as consolation.

Khadijah was already placing a new table cloth on the table, and Hamza had a set of dishes in his hands. Joseph smiled. Khadijah had already begun conditioning Hamza. Joseph helped with the glasses.

'Will you have some wine too, Hamza,' Joseph asked.

Hamza looked at Khadijah, at Joseph.

He sensed a trap, and answered, 'no thank you, Commissaire Bikri. Water will do fine.'

'I'll have a glass of wine,' Khadijah added rapidly, defiantly.

She was asserting herself to Hamza, Joseph thought, smiling. Good girl!

‘Hamza,’ Joseph said while he helped them dress the table to the Sunday feast, ‘have you been living for a long time in Robois?’

‘I arrived in Belgium with my uncle and aunt when I was five years old,’ Hamza replied while he placed the forks, knives and spoons beside the plates. ‘My parents had arrived first. They have been helped much by a young imam. When they arrived in Belgium, they had no money, no lodging, no job, no nothing. The imam cared for them, found them a small apartment, a little money for first living, and a decent job for my father. My father found better-paid jobs afterwards, and he hired a more spacious and better-equipped house for my mother. He began to trade and became prosperous. He bought himself a house, here, in Robois. Still, without the young imam’s help, my parents would have lived in dire poverty still. They would not have had a decent start in life.’

‘How then was the imam called?’ Joseph Bikri asked, suddenly interested and also a little alerted.

‘His name is Madyan Bin Mahfouz,’ Hamza replied lightly. ‘He was very young, then. He is now the assistant imam at the greater mosque of Robois. He is a good man, and of Saudi descent.’

‘Yes, I met him,’ Joseph Bikri mentioned after some hesitation.

He added, ‘Bin Mahfouz seems a decent, reasonable man to me. I think he believes in the virtues of reason to consider Islam. He seems to prone the ilm al-kalam of human thought and consideration about how we should look at the Koran and live our Islamic spirituality. I agree with that view. He does harbour a streak of one-sidedness in religious matters, though not more than should be expected of an imam.’

Hamza didn’t answer. He continued to help Khadijah with lowered head, but Joseph had the impression the youth knew well what he, Joseph, was talking about. Joseph didn’t push the boy further. He merely asked him what he wanted to make of his life.

Hamza replied he wanted to become an engineer in a large manufacturing company, if possible in a research and development division. He wanted to stay in Belgium. He stated he had no ties anymore with his Arabic homelands.

For a moment, Joseph toyed with the idea of showing the drawing of the portrait of the murdered man to Hamza. But when he considered how Samia might react, him bringing his work to home and interrogating their guest, he quickly abandoned the idea. He didn’t risk spoiling his precious Sunday! He basked in the obvious happiness of having dinner with his family, with the two young people as equally happy guests. His family had no worries. He understood a little more why Khadijah wanted to stay in Belgium after her studies! He was glad also to have met Hamza. The Moroccan family of Khadijah should not now be choosing a husband for the girl!

Samia entered the living-room triumphantly, showing a large platter on which throned the tomatoes filled with shrimps, the salad and more shrimps on the salad. Joseph served the wine. The children ran into the living-room, and the Bikri family began to purr with delight.

1.5. At the 'Horse Bayard'. Sunday, 12 July

The same Sunday morning, Diego de Trioteignes rode to the castle that bore his name, to meet his parents. He arrived early at the ancient, medieval fortress, but he knew both his parents woke early, even on Sundays. He stepped over the stone bridge, looked at the moat, walked under the arch of the gatehouse formed by four big drum towers, and continued into the courtyard. The castle looked sombre and grim, even in the bright sun of summer.

Trioteignes was a castle of the plains, built in what once had been swamp land, the marshy terrain now dried out and worked into hard, stable soil since centuries. This land was very fertile, part still of the Hesbaye Region, one of the most fertile of Belgium, a land of large, square and wealthy farms. Once, a long time ago, the Trioteignes had owned most of the farms in the vicinity. Diego's mother, Monique Ghijzen, still managed the large farm of her ancestors, the last of the farms owned by the family. A young farmer was her steward for most of the daily work, but Monique had always insisted on her independence, and she had kept the reins of overall management in her own hands till now.

Castle Trioteignes stood at the last outcrops of the woods of Boyu, but well into the Hesbaye fields. The back windows offered fine views of the grain fields and the green pastures of Trioteignes. The castle still inspired awe and respect, but that may have been because of the powerful figure of its owner, Charles de Trioteignes.

Diego pushed open the door of the manor. The living quarters of Castle Trioteignes had been arranged in the main wing of the building, at the back of the courtyard. The rooms of the manor were magnificently decorated and well maintained. In the living- and dining-rooms, modern, expensive furniture provided all the luxury and ease contemporary life could offer. The impressive gate to the castle and therefore to the doors to the mansion were usually closed. Today, even this morning, the door of the living quarters could be pushed wide open. His father expected him! Charles de Trioteignes' private empire had been opened and left a while unprotected.

Diego entered the reception hall, shouted his presence, and wanted to enter the first room on the left, the grand living-room. He stopped, however, for he noticed his sister Laura coming down the stairs that led to the rooms on the upper floors. Laura occupied her own set of several rooms there, her office too. Diego waited until Laura, all smiles, ran into his arms, kissed and hugged him. Brother and sister had always been close, now nevertheless separated by the vagaries of life. Holding each other's arms crossed on their back, they stepped together into the living-room.

Laura was a tall woman, blond-haired and blue-eyed, but possibly no great beauty. Her figure was stout, yet harmonious in gentle curves, slim waist, long legs, and generous chest. Diego wondered why she had remained unmarried. Surely, some nice man would have noticed how agreeable she was, how fine her character, how attractive her figure, how intelligent her eyes shone. Maybe Laura was simply not elegant enough, not fine, too gauche, not a precious doll, too rough-hewn, too outspoken, too honest, too much the girl of the countryside for the young men of the circles in which she moved. He knew from his mother's letters many pretenders had presented themselves at the castle to his sister. Most of these had been school friends of both Laura and him. Not a few would have been ambitious men, who were out for her money.

Laura, however, had stayed stubbornly single. She had never fallen in love, she told in the few letters she had sent to him.

Charles de Trioteignes, the patriarch of the family, was finishing a coffee. A newspaper lay on his knees when he looked up. Charles always read much in the weekend, the magazines and papers that provided him the inside news of the world of finance. Charles concentrated mostly on the state of the economy of the Western European countries, on the United States and the Far East.

Charles was not a very tall, though a lean man. His thick, wavy hair had passed from grey to white. His aristocratic elegance still impressed visitors, and his age added to his image. Although it was early in the morning, he was already formally dressed in a dark grey suit. He would not have received his son otherwise, even in his own house, and in his own living-room. For a moment, Diego felt as if he entered a posh London gentlemen's club. Charles's banker's suit was his armour! He remained the financier, the man to admire, maybe the man to fear a little. He refused to dress more casually, claiming he felt comfortable only in a suit cut by the tailors of Saville Row or Burlington Arcade of London. Charles stood when his son entered. He immediately called for his wife, Diego's mother. Maybe the suit and the appeal to his wife were signs of his awkwardness to cope with his son and with his feelings of paternal love. Charles had remained uneasy with tender feelings.

Monique Ghijzen burst in from the opposite side, the side of the dining-room and of the kitchen. She had always been a stout farmer's daughter, in much quite the opposite of her husband. Laura resembled her mother, but she had inherited the subtle, complex brain of her father. Monique was never formally dressed. Diego noticed his mother had put on more weight. Diego's mother was taller than his father, and thicker in the waist. She was also white-haired, but she never cut her long hair. Elegance was not her strong point. She didn't know how to walk like a fashion model on a catwalk. She went like a farmer in the fields, among her cows and bulls. She made an odd couple with Charles, but Diego had never known his parents to argue and shout at each other. Their mutual respect was great. Diego knew his parents lived in harmony, blended together in one opinion for life, extremely intimate and happy. This did not mean they always thought the same, but they resolved their differences in simple terms. They always arrived at an agreement that satisfied them both. Diego and Laura had enjoyed a very happy youth at Castle Trioteignes!

Diego hugged his mother first, and then he said hello to his father. No kisses were exchanged with his father. They only shook hands. After the welcoming, they sat in the deep seats and sofa. Diego accepted the offer for coffee. Laura went to fetch the cups in the kitchen. New was a Nespresso machine standing on a side-table in the living-room. Charles de Trioteignes could drink a coffee whenever he liked one, all through the day.

The conversation immediately turned to what Diego had been up to the last months. He had not visited Trioteignes for more than a year, this time. Diego had feared these questions, on which he could not answer as he would have wished. He tried his usual subterfuge of having worked in a government research job.

Charles de Trioteignes cut him short, 'you can quit the nonsense, Diego. We know who you really work for. We know you have been this year in Afghanistan, in Mali, and in the Brecon

Beacons in South Wales. We know what you do, even though you can't talk about it. I have reports of how well you did, son. We are proud of you.'

'Well then, if you know all, you know I'm fine. I'm also doing what I like best. I've come into my own. I'm currently on holidays for a few weeks. Then, I must return to our offices in Brussels. I don't know yet what my next assignment will be. How have you been doing?'

The conversation focused on the family history of the last year. Diego learned how their friends in Flanders and in Germany remained in contact with them. He heard which persons they knew had died, how many babies were born. Diego received a long update on the affairs of the consortium of Trioteignes financial firms that were interlinked, covered Europe and the Middle-East, under the management of his father and sister. The talk inevitably returned to the families Diego specifically knew most in Robois. Charles and Monique told about the Blouges family, with the Trioteignes and the Bazaines one of the three aristocratic families of the town.

Monique mentioned, her hands in her lap, not looking at her son, how the marriage went of Evelyn de Bazaine and Léon-Jules de Blouges. Charles de Trioteignes told Diego they had an invitation to a festive supper at Bazaine this very evening. Diego announced he too had been invited, and would attend. Charles and Monique didn't ask how he had come by the invitation so soon, but they looked furtively at each other with frowned forehead.

Charles then embarked on telling Diego, also averting his eyes from his son's stare, how the factories of the Blouges family had run into financial trouble. The Blouges owned not one sole manufactory firm in Robois, but several ones, all nevertheless managed under one consortium umbrella and housed in one and the same industrial complex of workshops of Grez-Duros. The Blouges had produced many products for ailing industries, for the steel manufactories of Wallony and for the coal mines, and for the heavy electrical industry. These industries had all ran into trouble the last years. The Blouges also produced spare parts for the aerospace and aviation factories of Europe currently, leather coverings for the seats of the automotive industry. They produced glass windshields on demand. They also had a toy business, for which they merely designed the models and then had the pieces be manufactured in several plants of China and India, to assemble the toys in Robois. Practically all these separate business were producing at a loss, Charles knew. He didn't think these kinds of products could still be made in viable businesses in Belgium. The Blouges did own a small company that delivered regulator devices. This was a company that produced very fine and high technology oriented assemblages of complex systems, which could accept various inputs from all sorts of sensors. The systems manipulated the data in computers at will, and then sent out signals on lines to control other devices. This company was mostly a software business, but the Blouges engineers had mastered the know-how to accept and handle the widest range of sensors, and they could control at their output any apparatus of control mechanisms.

'Blouges deals a lot with Middle-East and Near-East countries now, with the oil states, with the Emirates and the Saudis,' Charles told, 'but these increasingly give out complete and huge projects to the lowest bidders. Only the contracting companies that can handle entire projects win these deals, and these firms have their own design engineers. They give out the little they don't build themselves to American and German firms. Almost all of the companies that could handle larger projects have gone out of business in Belgium, or have

been bought by American consortiums, their know-how having been transferred to the States. Blouges is bleeding. They can only handle the smaller projects, and they do not have the means to respond to contract demands for the larger projects. They also cannot compete anymore with the other firms on price. They live on, but they are almost dead. Their finances are in dire state. I wouldn't invest in a Blouges company for the moment!'

Diego nodded. He had heard these kind of stories often, lately. It was one more horror story of the depression of the Belgian and also French industry.

Monique and Charles mentioned the Blouges case because Diego had been involved in a love affair with Evelyn de Bazaine. The mention of Evelyn and Léon-Jules was supposed to interest him, but it also hurt. His parents wanted him to have such news from first hand. Maybe they were watching him to learn how he still reacted. Yet, more and more, the mentioning of Evelyn and Léon-Jules did not stir Diego's feelings much. He was so far from what had happened so many years ago! Nevertheless, feeling that the people of his family still made the connection between him and Evelyn dampened his happiness some. He loved his parents, and his sister. He did not doubt they meant well, but for how long would he keep hearing about his old failure? His parents opened ancient, completely scarred wounds. How could he definitely break the connection?

Diego led the conversation to other subjects.

Monique and Charles de Trioteignes asked Diego to stay for dinner, but he refused in an instant of obstinacy and irritation. He replied he had to go, but would see his parents this evening. He said goodbye, yet promised to return soon.

Laura accompanied him to the gate, arm in arm. Diego asked to meet with her alone one of these days, to which she agreed. He told her he would be around for weeks.

Diego was truly famished by then, and not eager to drive to a lonely kitchen and prepare something on his own. He cursed himself. He should have accepted dinner with his parents, and not have let the mention of Evelyn get under his skin again. Why was that? Was he fooling himself and did he still care for her, after all that had happened? It was true he had been badly humiliated. He shook off the memories of old.

Where could he get something to eat in Robois? He could not return to the 'Lady of the Lake' this noon! He thought, and rode instead to the 'Horse Bayard.'

The 'Horse Bayard' was actually a hotel, more hotel than a restaurant and bar. It was not a five-star hotel, but its rooms were spacious, very clean, provided with decent furniture, and well maintained. It stood on the National Road N11, in the industrial zone of the town. The hotel also held a brasserie, a bar where alcoholic beverages were served in a nice hall, as well as simple, inexpensive but tasty food of good quality. Diego knew and liked the owner, a man commonly known as 'Monsieur François', whose real name was Francesco Treviani. He was a small Italian of many words and broad gestures, with a heart of pure gold. He was also an honest man, and a fine manager. François was extremely proud of his hotel.

Diego parked his car and walked to the brasserie. The restaurant was almost empty of people. Sunday was a very quiet day for Robois, and even the hotel guests seemed to live by that tradition. Only one other man sat at a table, plunging his fork and knife into a steak. Diego

took a seat at a small table, two tables from that man. He looked at the menu card, decided for a light meal of chicken breast, mashed potatoes and a cooked apple. When the waiter came, he ordered, and also asked for a glass of white wine. He received his glass immediately, and drank. The room was air-conditioned, so he sat back in his chair, quite pleased, glad to think of nothing.

Monsieur François passed by, stopped in his track when he saw Diego, made large eyes, shouted Diego's name and then came to say hello with much effusion of happy phrases and exclamations of joy. Diego and Francesco hugged each other as old friends. Yes, Diego remembered more than a few happy evenings here, in the Horse Bayard! Monsieur François stayed a few moments to chat, then he hurried on. Diego received his dish and began to eat. Monsieur François brought him another glass of wine, whispering this glass was of his special reserve.

The man who sat not far from Diego had watched the enthusiasm of Monsieur François with a smile and growing interest. He drank his third lager beer, but asked for a coffee now. Diego looked sideways. The man was staring at him.

'The food is good here,' the man suddenly said, probably out for a conversation.

'It is,' Diego replied. 'I just returned to Robois from having been absent for years, but I am an old friend of the house. The service is excellent here, the pride of Monsieur François.'

'Oh, what is your business, if I may ask,' the man remarked. 'You born here?'

'I was,' Diego replied. 'I have a job in the administration of the government. I live in Brussels mostly, but I was born in one of the villages here.'

'Care if I join you?' the man asked after some hesitation. 'I have a coffee to finish.'

'Be my guest,' Diego nodded, inviting with a movement of his hand to the chair in front of him.

He was glad for having somebody to talk to and break his loneliness.

The man took up his almost empty last glass of beer and came to sit in front of Diego.

'Christian Trevanion,' the man introduced himself. 'How are you?'

He spoke very broken French.

'I'm English,' Trevanion continued. 'I have business in Namur. There seemed to be very few good hotels in that city, so our secretary reserved me a room here.'

'A well-known problem,' Diego admitted, switching to English.

He explained, 'part of my family is English. My name is Diego Trioteignes.'

They shook hands.

'I heard,' Trevanion smiled. 'Isn't Trioteignes the name of one of the villages of Robois?'

'Indeed,' Diego nodded. 'My family originated from there.'

Diego was on his guard by then. The man spoke not only broken French, he also spoke broken English. He was no Englishman, no Welshman, not an Irishman, and no Scot! Diego recognised too well a foreign accent.

The man must have noticed Diego's surprise, for he added, 'my family was Greek by origin,' Trevanion yielded, 'we took on the Trevanion name long ago, were allowed to do so, but Greek still remained our mother tongue indoors.'

A silence set in.

'What brings you to Robois and to Namur, Mister Trevanion?' Diego wanted to know.

'Business, a little this and that. Commerce with the UK. I am a writer mostly. I don't sell, however. I have to earn my living from a little trade.'

The man seated in front of Diego could indeed have been of the Mediterranean type. He had a darker skin than the Roboisians, a forceful square head, black, but rather dingy hair, black eyes, a broad chest, strong arms. The man looked like a Zorba. He was deep in his twenties or his beginning thirties, a powerful man. He looked like a man of action, not like a man of words.

'A writer are you?' Diego appreciated. 'Isn't that strange!'

'What is strange?' Trevanion shuddered.

'I read a lot. Really a lot! When I step in a library or in a bookshop, however, I see thousands of books on the shelves. I wonder how writers manage to come up with original ideas for so many stories to fill hundreds of pages by per book. Surely, all themes must have been exhausted by now! I have to admit I am no longer much surprised by the plots of my novels, though surprises still come once every while.'

'Indeed,' Trevanion agreed. 'Being original without falling into gore or melodrama is the major trick for writers! Besides, all novels ever written and to be written are fundamentally but variations on the same theme, about the battle of good and evil, the battle between right and wrong. I could name no novel, no story that could not be reduced to this theme. You must be one always looking for the essence, then, for the synthesis of the intrigues, so in the end you find the same patterns over and over again.'

'So true,' Diego accepted. 'And the real question nobody answers is where good and evil come from, how good and evil came to be!'

'That is not only the basic core of novels,' Trevanion sighed. 'It is also the great mystery of our life. If you can find out where good and evil really come from, you would be a famous man instantly.'

He drank.

'Imagine a world without evil,' Trevanion mused. 'How many men and women would be out of a job? No police, no wars so no military, no spies, no judges, no lawyers, no writers, no finance inspectors, no politicians even, and so on. You name it! We would also all die of boredom within a few weeks!'

They laughed.

'Where then does a writer think good and evil originated from?' Diego asked.

'I wouldn't be able to tell you,' Trevanion shook his head. 'I do know a few theories, but nothing definite. I have to believe in the duality of good and evil though, and in the ultimate victory of good over evil. It is a bad thing for a writer to not be able to believe in anything anymore. It blocks not only the imagination, but even the taste to write! It augments the taste for alcohol!'

They laughed again.

Diego was beginning to find this Trevanion man an interesting guy.

'So, you writers write about something you don't really understand and you don't know the origins of?'

'So right! It's depressing! Stupid bastards we all are!' Trevanion agreed.

The waiter brought Trevanion's coffee. Diego finished his chicken. He had eaten well. He asked for another wine and for a coffee afterwards.

At that moment of silence, a woman entered into the restaurant. She was much woman, so both Trevanion and Diego followed her with eager eyes. She was quite attractive, dressed in a tight, short, leathery, black skirt and a white silk shirt. She had good breasts, which tightened her shirt alluringly. Her long legs were slender but finely muscled. Trevanion and Diego looked down to the splendid legs first, then upward to her slim waist, to her very feminine chest, her low-necked shirt, long and attractive face of very red lips and long eyelashes, to her thick, luxurious black hair. Her hair hung to lower than her shoulders. She might be in her early thirties.

Trevanion smiled, frowned, and winked to Diego. The woman went to sit on a high tripod chair at the counter of the bar. From there, she looked around in the room. Her eyes met and focused on Trevanion. She smiled back, with a knowing look. Diego felt slightly embarrassed. Trevanion pointed with his hand to the third, empty chair at his and Diego's table. The woman got off from her chair. Diego's uneasiness grew. He hoped the woman was not what he feared. He saw she was no stranger to Trevanion, though. She came up to them.

She looked at Diego and said, 'Denise Legrand. Glad to meet you.'

She thus introduced herself before Trevanion could utter a word.

'Christian Trevanion, Diego Trioteignes,' Christian offered. 'Legrand is it? I was talking to my friend, here, about good and evil. You must know something of good and evil, too, Denise. Can I offer you a drink? Have you come for dinner too?'

'I did, actually,' the woman responded in English.

She spoke with an accent Diego did not thought far from Trevanion's. She definitely did not pronounce her singing phrases with a Belgian or French accent.

'Denise is Lebanese,' Trevanion explained to Diego. 'Her father was a Frenchman, wasn't he, Denise?'

He laughed, and Denise nodded, then smiled again.

'You know each other?' Diego dared.

'Oh yes, Denise and I know each other since quite some time.'

Diego wondered, but did not say loudly, 'why then did he introduce himself with his name?'

Trevanion called for a waiter. The waiter advanced, and Denise ordered a meal. She took grilled duck, various cooked vegetables, and rice. She asked for a glass of red wine. She settled in her chair, looked at the two men.

'We spoke of good and evil,' Trevanion repeated. 'I know of a few theories, of course, as any writer should! Each religion has a theory, and secular people have another.

First, we must define evil a little, and simplify. Evil is when humans need a conscience, and when humans hurt other humans. I might add evil is also when a human hurts animals, but let's make abstract of this idea for a moment.

The most interesting theory on good and evil is the Manichaeian one, in a variant also present in the beliefs of the Zoroastrians. It was defined by the Persian prophet Mani in the third century of our era. He wrote in Syriac Aramaic. The theory is simple. There is not one god who created us, but two, a god of good and light, and a prince of darkness. Both are equally powerful. It means people should fear and adore both gods. The idea is appealing, I must say, and totally consistent with our Aristotelian logic. In other words, the theory makes sense. The

good god proposes the good, the prince of darkness inspires us with evil. Good and evil battle.

I won't say much about Zoroastrianism, because not much is known about its sixth century BC, Before Christ, Prophet Zoroaster. Zoroaster also seemed to have been an Iranian, though one from Eastern Iran. In essence, Zoroastrianism also preaches the battle between Ahura Mazda, the god of goodness, and Ahraman, the god of evil.

The Jews, the Christians and the Islamists believe there is but one God, but angels revolted against God. The angels fell, and the head devil was called Satan. If one tries to apply a little logic on that concept, the theory does not hold. It is absurd! To begin with, in the very early writings of the Book, of the Pentateuch, on which both the Gospels and Islam builds, angels are agents and emanations of God. They are part of God. How then could they revolt? Parts of the larger absolute good cannot but also be totally good! An angel could not have revolted, therefore, and not become Satan. Also God, whether his name is Yahweh, God or Allah, is absolutely powerful. God could have crushed evil in an instant. Something totally good would not have tolerated evil to exist. Yet, evil does exist. So, something equally powerful must have created evil or be Satan, and then we are blaspheming against the three main monotheisms, and we are back at Manichaeism theories. Mind you, one variant of this theory was privileged by the famous Cathar heretics in the Languedoc area of the Middle Ages.

Another Christian theory, and maybe also Jewish and Islamic theory, is that God created man and lovingly gave man free will. Free will means humans must have the possibility of choice, so something beside the absolute good had to be created, to allow humans the faculty of choice. Now, that would be weird indeed, for then God would have created evil. That is in total contradiction again with the concept of a God who is absolute good. Jewish and Islamic theologians have concluded that evil could be merely absence of God, but that sounds as a cowardly subterfuge for granting that God created evil too.

Nevertheless, evil must have existed before man and woman, for the snake seduced Eve in the tree of knowledge, remember? Maybe God created evil at the same time as woman, so maybe woman is indeed evil incarnated, Denise, and was that not how medieval man regarded women?

So, there remains a lot of lack of logic in the religious theories of the main religions of our times, and the existence of the devil, evil incarnate, can only be explained by agreeing to the fact it remains a mystery. Of course, God or the Godly might apply another logic entirely than ours, which puts us so to say against a wall. It is a mystery indeed!

'Of course,' Diego said, 'you only know what is good when you know evil, and vice versa. The two are inextricably linked, and have to exist together. A duality of necessity! Most of us, though would wish to know evil only from memory, or from what others have experienced! Yet, none of us can really avoid being confronted by it.'

The waiter brought the dishes for Denise. She looked, from under her long, black eyelashes at Diego, appreciating what she saw. She brought her eyes to the ceiling when he returned her stare, as if indicating how a strange, maybe drunken fool Trevanion was, to be concerned with the origins of good and evil when the sun shone so brightly that afternoon.

Diego asked to Trevanion, quite amused, 'and what about the secular theory?'

‘The secular theory, the scientific theory, is equally appealing,’ Professor Trevanion continued. ‘Man has descended from the apes, and apes are predator animals. They are meat-eaters besides liking bananas. Apes and mankind had to kill to live. So they became hunters, added to their being gatherers. Man is a hunter. To hunt and to kill, man had to abandon compassion and empathy for living things. If you show empathy with the killed, you can hunt and kill only once. Then, you’ll be disgusted with what you’re doing. Good hunters lack empathy or must leave empathy at home. They are psychopaths! They learned not to feel for the beasts they had to kill, and that fact was burnt into our genome. In the evolution of our species, the habit of killing created a gene. The best hunters, the best killers, share that gene, the gene that suppressed empathy. This gene is the origin of evil, for evil comes from lack of empathy with our fellow-man. The rule is: do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you. Well, that rule is suppressed in the lack of empathy, and it brings forth the ability to kill not only beasts but also other people. Evil is in our genes!’

The remarkable thing is, the gene really exists. It has been discovered not so long ago in an American study of psychopaths. Psychopaths have in common the gene called the ‘warrior’s gene’. The gene truly suppresses empathy in the chemistry of our body by working on the punishment versus rewards molecules that act on our brain. It suppresses our inhibitions toward harming others, toward evil. Whoever has that gene, can kill easily. Nevertheless, the gene must be triggered to be set to work, to become active. It seems it is triggered by a traumatic experience, so by an event that for most killers must have happened in their youth, but such an event in later life must be part of the possible too. Mind you, the gene does not express psychopathy in general, in absolute terms. It is a gradual feature, which comes on a scale from zero to ten. Hence evil, in its many manifestations from little to worse, from petty thefts to conjugal violence and to murder. I wonder, therefore, my friends, Diego and Denise, where you stand on the scale!’

Trevanion finished the whiskey he had ordered in the meantime. Denise had begun to eat and continued to look at her plate. Diego drank his wine, then his coffee. The theory disturbed them.

‘Tell me, Christian,’ Denise suddenly asked, ‘do you believe in a God?’

‘Of course,’ Trevanion admitted.

‘Then what theory do you believe in?’

‘I think God is something of a practical joker, Denise,’ Trevanion gave. ‘He invented evil and let it loose among mankind to see us writhing in remorse and compunction, and have a good laugh at how we torture our minds and our bodies.’

Denise laughed, ‘so God is a giant Woody Allen?’

‘You might say so,’ Trevanion agreed.

They all laughed at that.

‘That cannot be all there is to it,’ Diego insisted. ‘What about motives for evil? Why do we hurt, when we all seem to believe evil, the bad, is wrong?’

Trevanion also had an answer ready, ‘oh, that is because of the great difference between the general and the local! Yes, we all know what is evil. We all have a faculty called conscience, even though also our conscience can be suppressed together with our empathy. In general, we

agree evil is not to the advantage of our species. Locally, individually, however, we may prefer evil because we think as a person or as a small group evil may be advantageous to us. We then suppress our conscience, have our empathy be suppressed as I explained earlier on, and become totally egocentric, thereby believing the evil is good for us individually. Our motives then are our personal greed, envy, jealousy, lust for power, and the like. These are the impulses called sins in most religions!

'Is that then what you variate on in your novels?' Diego asked, making in his mind the remark that Trevanion's notion of God was very Jewish.

'Oh, yes,' Trevanion exclaimed. 'We writers, we push all these concepts together in one bag, shake the bag, and pick out randomly what we're going to use.'

'I must read some of your books!' Diego smiled.

'I am an unpublished writer,' Trevanion declared then, 'but one of these days I'm going to become famous nonetheless. Bound to!'

'I have no doubt,' Diego and Denise replied in chorus, and then they all roared in laughter again.

Diego had finished his coffee. However attractive he found Denise, however strange and fascinating her oriental beauty, however cordial and interesting the writer Trevanion, he should leave the restaurant. There was a place he had to go to before he prepared for the supper at Castle Bazaine. He called the waiter and asked for the bill. He offered to pay for the drinks and dishes of Christian and Denise, which they refused at first, but accepted graciously when he insisted, in thanks for a fine noon. He paid with his bank card, said goodbye, thanked them, shook hands, and left the Horse Bayard. He rode on the N11 southwards to Turgoux.

1.6. The Robois Hobby Club. Sunday, 12 July

Diego Trioteignes rode south, to Turgoux. He rode on the straight N11, fast as usual, but still taking in the landscape of the villages he remembered so well. After a while he saw at his right a stretch of land on the territory of Aucourt, one of the many villages of Robois. Several groups of people had gathered there. He was curious about what was going on in this extreme south of Turgoux and on the western side of the Petiteau. If the rest of Robois was dead on Sundays, a lot of animation was going on here! This was the place one had suggested him to have a look on Sunday afternoon. He slowed down, rode into an earthen country road, over a small bridge, until he arrived at a space of several hectares of open, flat grassland. These lands belonged to the Blouges manufactory, whose hangars stood on the other side of the N11, also in Turgoux territory.

The Blouges engineers, Diego knew, used these pastures to test most of their toys and other devices, among which remote controlled model airplanes. In the weekend, the terrain was given over to the Model Hobby club of Robois.

Diego drove his car to a parking lot that had been arranged in one of the pastures. He rode to among many other cars already present. He looked at the people who stood close by in small groups, dispersed on this part of the terrain. The Model Hobby Club of Robois used the fields to allow amateurs of model airplanes, helicopters and small drones to show off and fly the models they had bought or built. Diego looked to the skies, but saw only two or three such models flying in the air. The engineers and other developers of Blouges used these meetings to see their models being used in the real world, and to hear of the experiences of the men who actually manipulated their devices. The engineers found here out what they could ameliorate in their models and of what the amateurs, their clients, desired as new features. They also saw in real usage the capabilities of their competitors' products. The Hobby Club was of course also a source of revenue, as Blouges models were used and sold here. Quite a few amateurs arrived from the entire country! These men appreciated talking to the designers of the models. They were proud to hear that their suggestions were being considered seriously. This exchange was one of the strong characteristics of the Blouges manufactories.

Diego locked his car and walked over to the men and adolescents who had gathered to take pleasure in their favourite pastime. He arrived at two long rows of models laying side by side in the grass. Behind each row and behind each model stood a group of men. The models were from thirty centimetres or so to a metre and a half long. They were beautifully made of brightly coloured plastic. A few were wooden models, made of balsa wood, pure shedwork. The models in the grass lay on display. They had been placed on show, maybe waiting to be flown later on. Diego understood the club members prided in their planes, had placed them to be admired and to be talked about. Some men were cleaning their models. A few planes were on sale. At one end of the rows various spare parts stood in display, and were offered for sale. Diego saw miniature explosion engines there, electrical motors, all sorts of cables, and remote control radio devices. Each group was chatting. The men discussed the qualities of the models and of the spare parts.

Diego did not know the least about hobby flying models. He could not claim being particularly interested in what was going on here. He strolled among the men and listened to the conversations. He heard brand names mentioned such as Blouges, of course, Revell, E-Flite, Hangar 9, Parkzone, Blade airplanes and Revolution helicopters, Yuneac drones, names of mostly American manufactories beside the Belgian Blouges. Some airplanes still had glow plug engines, but electrical motors seemed to be on the rise. Models had been bought in one piece ready-to-fly, models had been built in kits, and some airplanes had even been assembled entirely by their owners. The men talked and argued about the materials of construction, about the longevity of engines, different kinds of fuels, battery life, manoeuvrability, and so on. Diego saw many more models lying in the grass than he saw actually flying farther on in the air. Only two or three men could be seen with remote control radio transmitters in their hands. The rest was looking at, admiring and criticizing the models in the grass.

So many airplanes, helicopters and a few drones stood in the grass, that Diego concluded he had arrived at an exhibition rather than to men actually flying the models. So few men participated in the action, Diego grinned.

Diego understood quickly the hobbyists feared their precious models might crash when actually flown! He walked among the groups of men. When one man stood alone, he asked the name of the brand of the model. That was enough to have the owner start a long description, lauding the capabilities of this type of airplane. Most of what these men talked about was gibberish for Diego. He was not very interested also in what he considered to be merely toys for never-grown-up lads.

A few women also walked here, but they were few. Children ran around, but their fathers and uncles kept them from touching the expensive models and gear. After having spoken to a few these men, Diego could ask details more or less in the jargon used by the amateurs. He learned to distinguish between wings, ailerons and flaperons, rudders and flops, canards and flight modes. Yes, these things were expensive. The larger the model, the higher the price. Diego marvelled at the thousands of Euros that lay in the grass, or flew in the skies

The remote control or RC radio transmitters also seemed to be sophisticated devices. They had small computer screens, at least two joy sticks, each stick to be handled by one hand, and a series of switches and buttons among which a kind of panic button that brought an airplane down in urgency, and automatically. The radio transmitters were in fact programmable computers.

One man was even still programming his remote control device, having linked it to a personal computer. Diego was told the transmitters showed on-screen real-time information of the flying model, such as the status of the model's battery voltage, its engine temperature, its remaining flight-time, its altitude and speed. One model even featured voice alerts.

He heard the planes were controlled by signals sent over wideband 2.4 GHz frequency. The signals were coded, and each airplane answered only to the signals of its particular code. That allowed several men to fly airplanes of the same model over the fields at the same time.

Diego noticed many of these devices were of the Spektrum brand.

When he had grown tired of hearing the same characteristics and features and capabilities being repeated, he looked towards the men who were actually flying a few models. Diego at

first despised these men a little for dedicating so much of their precious time to what seemed to him were totally useless objects. Somewhat later he envied these men for their simple passions, simple interests and easy, quiet life. He had never wanted nor been able to spend time at such innocent games. He never had had time to spend on useless matters! Was he, however, happier than these men? Was there not great wisdom in taking the time to go fishing or flying model airplanes?

Diego walked on to the men who were really flying their models in the sky. They stood with their remote control unit in their hands, looking up and to the far, where motors hummed like angry bees. The hobbyists first ran their airplanes on the grass, brought them up to fly in the air, and then had the models perform acrobatics, including loopings and rolls. After a few minutes only, the men made their planes land smoothly. One airplane did fly out of control over bushes and low trees, hit the canopy, turned and swung high up in the air, dived, and then crashed in tree branches. It fell in several pieces among the trees of a small wood. Another such plane broke off its landing gear in the grass. It was landing at full speed. The nose of plane hit the grass, the propeller broke off. While the airplane spun, it broke its wings, and buried itself in the earth. Nobody around laughed. Diego supposed many men simply showed off with their planes, copters and drones more than fly them, because they feared breaking them. Was the greatest joy not in repairing the models?

Diego watched two such small groups, men controlling an aircraft and being admired by a few others. He watched the acrobatics of the planes and of a helicopter. The helicopter flew merely a few meters high and on these low stretches, it flew in straight lines and turned back in routes of the form of the number 8. He walked on to a third group. Maybe it was a miracle these toys really flew. Diego found nothing spectacular in the demonstrations.

When he arrived at a third group, Diego saw a man turn, obviously recognize him and come up to him. This man was Joseph Bikri, the commissaire of police of Robois. Diego and Joseph shook hands. They knew each other well. At one time, both had helped the current mayor and his wife to win the political elections of Robois. They had remained friends ever since, and the commissaire had also become a lifetime friend of Diego's father and of the mayor.

'I am so glad to see you again,' Joseph Bikri smiled. 'Long time no see! Are you well? How are your father and mother?'

'I'm glad to meet you too,' Diego grinned. 'My parents are fine. I saw them this morning. How are you? How are Samia and the children? It is quite a surprise to see you here. I didn't know you were interested in model airplanes!'

'I'm not really,' Joseph Bikri replied. 'I'm here exclusively because Samia and her sister insisted I drove them to here. Samia's sister Khadijah has a boyfriend who is a fervent model flyer. Samia wanted to chaperone Khadijah! She feels responsible for her younger sister. So we came to here. Samia thought I should have something else on my mind on Sundays than police work. I must say this flying stuff cannot much entice my interests. Nevertheless, I was curious about what happens here every weekend. These guys do seem obsessed by their hobby, don't they? I suppose they look at it as a substitute for not being able to fly the big stuff themselves. It is a pastime as any other, of course and I envy these men for being able to

dedicate their time to such innocent games. It is a passion to them. What do you think? Are you interested?’

‘No, not really, Joseph. I was just passing on the N11 when I saw groups of people here. I wondered what was happening. I thought some kind of village feast was on and decided to have a look. Then, I also saw an airplane dive above my head. Though I rode in my car, I actually ducked and thought it would crash into me, until I realised it was only a model plane. They are quite realistic models, aren't they? I came over to have a look. These guys seem indeed extremely passionate about their models!’

‘They are! Some of these men are true artists with their fingertips, you know! They are joystick specialists and almost magicians. They can force their models into very complex acrobatic figures, so complex you wonder how they do it, simply by a few jerks of their thumbs on their remote control. I do begin to admire what they make their planes do. Hamza, Khadijah's friend, is one of those young men. Well, I prefer them to play with model airplanes than drink beer entire afternoons, saunter through the streets of Robois, or give themselves over to drugs. I would rather they played football, though! At least, that is a very physical sport! This looks like playing a game on a computer screen to me. They just stand there and look to the sky. They hardly move, and their planes normally land at their feet. At least they come in the open air! Hamza, here, seems to have more joy from programming the remote control radio transmitters than from actually making the models to fly!’

Samia Bennani came up to Diego. She too embraced him. The three of them kept watching the airplanes flying. Two airplanes were flying in the air. They made joint figures of acrobatics. Diego looked at the young men who were piloting them on the ground, each with a Blouges brand radio transmitter in their hands. One of the young men was Hamza. Diego saw the airplanes performing their stable flights, as if the planes were gliding in the air. There was nothing special or extraordinary in what the boys were doing. When a helicopter flew into their path, the two planes avoided it neatly. The planes flew as far as the wood, then were made to return. They passed overhead up to the N11, and returned. The engines hummed stridently, but regularly.

Joseph Bikri and Samia Bennani had been in the field for quite some time already, so they called Khadijah, who came running to them. They told her they would drive home. Joseph and Samia said goodbye to Diego, made him promise to visit them one of these days, and returned to the parking. They had almost to drag Khadijah along. Khadijah had clearly wanted to stay with her friend Hamza. She followed Joseph and Samia sulking and drawing a long face.

Diego wondered what he was doing here. He remained standing with the group until Joseph Bikri rode out of the parking. He looked at the young men near him. He only then remarked they were all of Maghreb or oriental origin, of the Semitic type with darker skins, black hair that was very curly on some and sleek on the rest, all with dark beards that were closely but not cleanly shaven. They were dressed in the standard blue jeans of all the young men in the world, and in T-shirts with the brands of their airplanes printed on them.

At one moment, Diego heard Hamza call what sounded like an order. Hamza passed his radio control to another boy. The boys closed together, but continued to direct the airplanes, Blouges crafts. Hamza fetched a portable personal computer, flipped it open, and connected

the two Blouges radio controls with thin wires to his PC. The two men still manipulated their joysticks with much attention. Hamza said once more something inaudible for Diego, and then the young man on the right took his fingers away from the joysticks. The one on the left continued to manipulate his plane. From that instant on, the second airplane performed exactly the same figures as the first one, following the first airplane in its wake. It performed exactly the same movements as the first, but with a delay of one or two seconds.

Nobody took any notice of this extraordinary synchronised flight but Diego, who stared with open mouth at the performance. Only the first boy moved the joysticks with his fingers! He made his airplane do any figure of loopings and rolls, as he liked. The second airplane repeated everything, and stayed close to the first. The second plane flew slightly behind the first.

After only a few minutes, the boy made the first plane land smoothly. The second followed and landed too. The two planes rolled to within a few centimetres of one another and from the first boy. This seemed to end the exercise of the two planes.

Diego then heard Hamza talk cheerfully in Arabic to the two other boys. Diego understood some Arabic, but he did not comprehend the meaning of what had been exchanged. The two boys let their airplanes in the grass, took the personal computer and the radio controls away, and began to walk towards the N11, towards the parking lot. Diego failed to grasp what this exercise had been about. Why have one model follow another? The boys ran off, so he could not interrogate them why they had found a way to do what they had demonstrated. Nobody else but Diego had seen what they had been up to. The boys placed the radio transmitters in their car, then came running back to load their airplanes in the trunk. They rode off. Diego wondered about what he had witnessed. Why would one make one plane follow so closely on another? What was such a movement useful for? Was it merely a feat of smart boys? Why then had they not boasted more with their achievement? The entire scene had not lasted more than two minutes, nobody else had been watching. Diego rather thought whatever these hobbyists did remained aimless, was only entertainment. It was something like collecting stamps, beer glasses or match boxes!

Diego walked back to the other groups and to the display models. His third surprise of the afternoon was to see Christian Trevanion and Denise Legrand among the spectators. Well, he thought, those two have found each other rather quickly! He didn't want to interfere. They spotted him, nodded by way of greeting, made ready to talk to him, but Diego walked on without going up to them. He waved with his hand. He had to hurry, now. He had to prepare for the supper at Castle Bazaine this evening! He almost ran to his car.

While he stepped behind the steering wheel, he remained more than puzzled. He did accept coincidences could happen. Joseph Bikri, the commissaire, had a good reason to be here this afternoon. Trevanion and Legrand had found themselves quickly and conveniently, though. Had they been following him? Why were they together? What were they doing here? Sightseeing, like he? Who was remotely controlling him, Diego? Was this all but chance at work? Diego did not believe in such coincidences. He rode back to Trioteignes by the smaller roads that crossed the villages of Robois, and pondered over reasons he did not comprehend yet. He worried. Weird things were happening. He knew it would all come together at one time or other. He should not worry, live from one moment into the other, like

a puppet on a string. What else was he? Had he anything else to do? Could he do anything else? He sighed, and sped on, fast.

Chapter 2. Polyphemus

2.1. The supper at Castle Bazaine. Sunday, 12 July

Diego Trioteignes stood singing in the shower, delighting in the very hot streaming water, when the telephone rang. By the time he had found a dry towel, stepped out of the water and walked downstairs to the fixed phone, the device had stopped ringing. He activated on the phone the 'call the last caller' function.

He looked at the number that appeared on the screen, didn't recognise it, but he did recognise clearly the voice that sounded happily, 'hello! Michelle Bazaine, the Lady of the Lake at the phone!'

Diego amazed himself for being pleased hearing Michelle.

'Hi, Michelle,' he said, taking care also to sound not too over-enthusiastic. 'You just phoned. I was too late. What can I do for you?'

'I called you to remind you of the invitation for supper this evening. Have you forgotten about me?'

'No, I haven't,' Diego smiled. 'I am preparing for the event. You'll have to do with me, but without a smoking. The shops are all closed on Sundays. I have a decent dark-grey suit, though.'

'It will do. How about making a splash and appearing at Bazaine together?'

Diego hesitated. 'You want us to enter arm in arm at the event? Are you sure the ceiling of Bazaine will not fall down on us? Will some people have a heart attack?'

She laughed. 'No! I mean yes, I'm sure I want you to take me to the supper. That is, if you don't refuse to go with a cook at your arm. Could you do it the good old way and come and fetch me at the Lady? And bring me back to the restaurant at night?'

What Michelle asked was truly old-fashioned, Diego thought, but once more he was oddly pleased. Yes, this was the way to enter Bazaine! He and Michelle against the world of Robois! Damn all prejudices! Were his years of loneliness over? Had he found a spiritual sister, or even, a soul blending with his soul?

He answered, the pleasure now open, 'I can do that, Michelle. I'll come to the Lady at seven thirty. That will give us plenty of time for the supper at eight. We don't want to be the first to arrive, for maximum effect?'

He heard Michelle giggle.

'Fine! I'll be waiting.'

From what he was used to women, Diego doubted she would be waiting. He would have to wait quite a while at the Lady.

He hung up, broke the connection. If this was how things had to be done, he had better find a flower for Michelle, a flower she could place around her arm. Where could he find a gardenia or a peony?

Diego dressed in a hurry. He studied himself in the mirror, and found he made a fine figure in his dark suit. He thought he resembled a softer, younger Daniel Craig. He took a dark blue tie, the only one he had brought in his bags.

Then, he rode to Robois. Near the Abbey, he knew from his younger days, had been a flower shop. He was lucky. As he rode by, he saw the shop was still there. The shop was closed, but he rang and rang.

The owner of this shop was a woman called Olga. She was a Ukrainian lady, who had arrived in Robois many years ago for an Internet-arranged wedding with a Belgian man. Both Olga and her Belgian husband grown lonely had been lucky. The husband was a nice guy. He was not rich, but he worked in the town administration and had a simple, stable job. He had set some money aside. Olga bought a flower shop. She took courses in flower arrangement. Afterwards, she won several prestigious prizes with her modern-looking flower constructions. She had become famous in Belgium. She gained clients from Namur and Brussels. Many rich and extravagant people asked her to arrange the flower decorations of their feasts, weddings, birthdays, and corporate events. Olga soon added a fortune to her husband's modest means. They did well, and their marriage was a success. They had three beautiful children now, and made a fine couple in Robois. Diego knew also Olga and her husband and family lived in rooms above the flower shop.

Diego had to insist for a full five minutes at the bell, before a window opened above his head. Olga peered down.

She cried, 'go away! We're closed! Bugger off!'

'Olga, dear Olga,' Diego shouted, 'this is Diego Trioteignes. I have an urgency! My life is in danger if I can't get a flower for a girl! Help!'

'Well I ever! Diego! Out of which rat-hole did you creep? I haven't seen you for ages! A flower for a girl? You're all the same! Stay where you are. I'm coming down.'

Diego waited some more, until Olga appeared and opened her door.

Olga had become a fine, elegant matrone, something of a smiling Russian matrushka. She was a blonde, and blue-eyed, of course. She had put on weight, though in the right places. She was a splendid woman.

Diego said, 'look at you! A marvel!'

He kissed her on the cheeks. She blushed.

'Come in, you scoundrel,' Olga laughed. 'I can't serve you, not really. It is Sunday! I don't want an issue with the police. Come in, and hurry!'

She closed the door after him, put light only to her counter.

'You want a flower for your sweetheart,' she began.

'Yes, Olga! I have to go to a grand evening dinner at Castle Bazaine. I arrived in Robois only late yesterday. It is a matter of life and death! You must succour me, Olga!'

Only Olga could ask, 'who is the flower for?' without offending him. She had a right to know.

'Michelle Bazaine.'

'Oh, the Lady of the Lake, he? She is one of my best clients. Nice lady. I like her. What colour will she wear this evening?'

Diego's mouth fell open.

Olga grinned, 'I thought so. Matter of life and death, he says, but he doesn't even know the colour of her dress! Come to the counter, lover boy. You will want a flower on a bracelet, to put on her arm, the old way, I suppose? Then it should be something that doesn't move easily and that isn't too large either, something sophisticated. No, Diego, no gardenia and no peony. Far too large, not elegant enough for Michelle. All right. I have these large, wide-eyed pink

orchids. Wait a minute. No. Michelle always wears dark gowns. Of different colours. Do I hear bells ringing? An orchid it should be, these great white ones; Purity and passion! Very special orchids, Diego, expensive ones!

'Money doesn't matter.'

'Oh, oh, has it come that far, Diego? My, my, Michelle and you? Please, please, invite me to the wedding, Diego dear!'

'I promise, Olga. You can deliver all the flowers. Just get me my flower now! Please?'

Olga sought a silvery bracelet and began to fix a branch of six delicate orchids firmly to the bracelet. She had finished in a minute, and placed the orchids in a long, rectangular box.

'No wrapping around the box, but a nice, large ribbon and big knot to keep the lid on,' Olga mused to herself.

Diego paid for the flowers and for the box. The price was reasonable. Olga handed over the box to Diego.

'Let me give you one peck on the cheek, Diego. I wish you good luck!'

With these words, she ushered Diego out and closed the shop behind him.

Diego rode on and arrived in time at the Lady of the Lake. He jumped on the ferry, reached the other side, and went up to the restaurant. All lights were off in the building, for the Lady of the Lake was closed on Sunday evenings. The path to the restaurant was nevertheless illuminated, especially for him.

The young girl that had served him the other evening stood at the open door and welcomed him.

'Madame Bazaine will be down in a minute,' she announced. 'You can wait here. Would you like something to drink in the meantime, to gather courage, a glass of Champagne maybe?'

'No, no, thank you,' Diego smiled. 'I'll wait here.'

He had to wait for about half an hour. Then, he heard steps and Michelle came down the stairs. She was dressed in a long, dark blue gown that fell low to her high-heeled shoes. The dress was tight around her forms, low-cut over her chest, showing maybe a little too much of her wonderful breasts. Diego had to swallow twice. He may have snorted audibly, gasping for breath. Michelle came down as an even more gorgeous woman than he had realised when he had last seen her in chef's white clothes. Michelle remarked his surprise, of course, and she was pleased. At the stairs she turned to show off with everything she had to Diego. She was much of a woman.

'You are just wonderful,' Diego gasped again. 'You are stunningly beautiful, too beautiful for me!'

Now, was that something to tell to a girl you took out for supper? Diego had blundered.

Embarrassed by his stupidity and clumsiness, Diego thrust his box forward, 'I thought I'd bring you a flower!'

Michelle took the box with a little cry of astonishment. She did not ask where Diego had found flowers this hour on a Sunday and in Robois. She untied the knot, let the ribbon fall at her feet, and gasped in her turn. The flowers shone like a jewel.

'White orchids for me! How romantic! Please put them on my arm, Diego. No, not on my left arm! Try the right one.'

Diego placed the bracelet around her wrist. The branch of orchids clung like a snake on her arm.

Diego heard a sniff behind him. He turned, and saw the girl who had welcomed him with a handkerchief at her nose and a tear in her eyes.

He turned back to Michelle, offered her his left arm. They strode down the path to the ferry. The serving girl remained standing at the door until they were out of sight.

On the ferry platform, Diego was struck by the fine figure Michelle made standing like a goddess statue of blue against the brown-grey water of the lake, contrasting with the luscious green of the plants on the banks. He would always remember her this way, he thought, looking straight at him, smiling, blushing under his glance, radiating happiness. The happiness also shone in her striking eyes. Her eyes stared at him and shone so brightly, expecting, he was irremediably caught in their gaze. He had to step nearer to her, and brush her mouth with his lips. She did not move, simply continued to smile. Then, she brought her eyes to the sky, as if to thank the heavens for having brought her lover home to her. The ferry arrived, bumped against the other bank. Diego opened the railings and let Michelle step onto the path that led to the parking lot. Diego led Michelle to his car. She delicately drew her robe above her shoes. Diego complimented her with her shoes, which were blue like her gown. Then, they rode to Castle Bazaine.

Castle Bazaine was everything but the dark, medieval mass that Castle Trioteignes was. Bazaine had been built in the nineteenth century, the castle of the Bazaine industrialists, and partly in the Gothic Revival style. It had two very different façades. The front was the one Diego and Michelle arrived to. This was the home of Michelle, where she was born. Diego had been here often.

On this side, the castle merely showed a classic, rectangular surface of white stone, with very regular features of two rows of evenly spaced wide and high windows, around the entry portico. In the middle of the rather stern face stood the entry gate, which also was rather modest in form. It consisted of four pedimented Corinthian columns, tall and elegant. The triangular pediment was reminiscent of the ancient Greek temples, but as the columns and the pediment had been flattened and pushed into the façade, the architecture looked modest, plain, and even simple.

On the back side, invisible to Diego and Michelle, on the side that towered above the rivers Largeau and Petiteau, high perching on the rock, the castle showed its Gothic and Renaissance, extravagant face, its real face, the façade of an English Tudor mansion broken by protruding corner rooms and windows. Turrets sprang out of this front everywhere, and the high chimneys gave it a magic appearance in the dying sun. Here, the architect had let free his fantasy to show that Castle Bazaine could also be light, playful, lovely, happy and old but young of soul. And too bad, then, that the Gothic face resembled much more the Tudor Renaissance style!

The main hall of Bazaine basked in very white light, behind the windows, on the right side of the front façade. Diego let Michelle step out of the car at the portico. He rode to the left side of the building, where a parking lot had been organised. Young boys showed him where to park the car. Then, he went back to Michelle. Michelle was still waiting for him. Men and women mounted the steps and entered. Diego offered Michelle his left arm. She let her hand

rest on top, so that her flowers also lay on his arm. Then, she entangled her fingers in his. They went up the three long stairs of Bazaine, and arrived at the entry hall. Two young men took the invitation cards, but they recognised Michelle as the daughter of the house, and Michelle waved away their demand of the card. They entered a reception hall, and from there went to a larger room, in which the invited guests stood around small but high tables. Champagne glasses were being served, as well as the usual zakouskis.

Michelle held Diego a few moments still, right in the open door panels. She savoured her triumph. Diego and Michelle made a splendid couple. Both stood tall, Michelle in her long, blue silk gown, which emphasized her fine figure. They stood arm in arm, but fingers intercrossed, the white orchids on her wrist contrasting fiercely with her blue sleeve and his dark grey arm. They smiled at each other. Hearing the noise in the hall suddenly die down before humming on louder, Michelle walked on and drew Diego into the room. About thirty people had accepted the Bazaine invitation. Diego recognised many men and women. He saw also his father and mother stand at one of the tables. They had Champagne glasses in their hands. Their eyes gawked and their mouths fell open in amazement. Somewhat to the left, Diego saw his sister laughing, shaking her head as if to mean, 'Diego, Diego, what have you done this time? You sure know how to make a spectacular entry!' Diego then also laid his right hand on Michelle's, but she kept his fingers pressed until she hurt him, the only sign of her stress. Together, nodding to right and left, they strode to the table where her parents stood. The conversation at that table stopped. Only there did Michelle let go of Diego's arm, to say hello to her parents with a kiss and a hug.

'So, Michelle, glad to see you again. It has been a while,' Michelle's father welcomed her. 'You brought us a fine young man this evening. You will amaze me ever, Michelle. Is that the young de Trioteignes?'

'You know Diego de Trioteignes indeed, father,' Michelle announced casually.

'Of course we know Diego, dear,' Michelle's mother acknowledged. 'How nice to bring Diego with you. We didn't know Diego was back in town. You stayed away from Robois for too long, Diego! Your parents are here too, and your sister.'

'True, so true,' Diego admitted. 'I only just arrived. How are you? You have arranged for a fine evening, Madame de Bazaine. I noticed my parents. Michelle, shall we say hello to them too?'

'Sure, dear, come along, then. I'll see you later, father. Mother.'

Michelle and Diego went oh so slowly through the room, saluting people they knew. They stayed together. Then, as the noise of the many voices whispering in the hall intensified, Diego and Michelle went up to Charles and Monique, picking up a glass of Champagne from a silver platter offered by a servant girl.

Closer to his parents, Diego said, 'you know Michelle Bazaine, father, mother. We met. She invited me.'

Charles de Trioteignes smiled. Monique was not yet over her astonishment. The entire room watched how Michelle hugged and kissed the parents of her cavalier.

Monique then also laughed, 'you'll always amaze me, Diego! You look splendid, Michelle! I have never seen you in a long gown before. You are so beautiful! It must have been a Diego to recognise how fine a lady you make! I must tell you how great a cook you are too, and

congratulate. We didn't have the occasion to do so yet. We come to the Lady of the Lake with even more pleasure since you have taken over the restaurant. And we heard what a good manager you are! Well done, girl! Are you aiming for a star?'

Diego smiled. Michelle was in the good grace of his parents. That mattered to him. Michelle had made a more than spectacular entrance. His parents had only known Michelle when she was young, dressed in jeans that were too large for her, in sloppy and more often than not dirty pullovers or shirts, and always running with Diego and Laura. Michelle had never put much value in her outer appearance, contrary to Evelyn. She had been that kind of girl, half a boy really, but now an extraordinarily beautiful, intelligent, fine and hard-working woman, who had established her own small enterprise. Diego's parents had more respect for what Michelle had accomplished than for her pedigree.

Diego's mother began to talk with Michelle about the Lady of the Lake and about the products of her farm. Michelle confided in Monique she had used the farm's bio products regularly in her restaurant.

Diego and his father Charles remained silent, respectfully listening to the conversation without intervening.

Diego thought his father hesitated, but then Charles whispered to him, 'Evelyn Bazaine and her husband, Léon-Jules de Blouges are here too, this evening.'

'Yes,' Diego whispered back. I've noticed them. You need not fear, father, that episode is over and done with. Evelyn was part of my younger years. Michelle is my future!'

'In the same family? That may make odd reunions, Diego. Are you sure you want to do this? Does Michelle know what she is coming into, who you really are? Have you come so far with her?'

Diego didn't answer. Yes, he had still a lot of explaining to do to Michelle, but his resolution seemed strong.

He saw Laura wink at him from behind a few backs. She waved.

He said, 'Michelle, can we go over to Laura? Sorry to interrupt your conversation.'

Monique also saw Laura waving, so she urged, 'yes, lead on, we also will come soon to say hello to Laura!'

Michelle apologised to Diego's parents, and then went to Laura's table, drawing Diego after her, holding his hand in hers.

'What are we?' Diego wondered in his mind, 'are we a couple of adolescents falling in love for the first time, thrilled by the excitement? Why do I let all this go on, why do I like this so much, when I should be explaining a lot before continuing with her. She is a nice woman, I should respect her. Robois entire must now believe we are a couple, soon to be engaged. Well, aren't we? Am I not pleased to be so obviously bound to Michelle? Is she not splendid? How has all this been possible in so short a time, with so few words? If everybody is amazed at us, I may be the most amazed of all! How happy Michelle looks! Is it not a great feeling to make somebody happy? Can I keep her happy the rest of our days? This is not a game, and not a whim. Michelle is out for grabs, out for much more than a short adventure, and do I too not wish for much more than a new adventure? Do I love her sufficiently? Does Michelle want the same thing as I: a stable relationship leading to marriage?'

Diego would wander from the wild side to a much more stable life with Michelle. He could not return to his current and past life with her. He would have to change. How had such a short time, merely a few hours, so drastically changed his future prospects? Had he not been drawn in this whirlwind too soon, too drastically? Or had he just given in to feelings that had lurked in his mind since long? The wild life was what he had desired at one moment, but now, with age and experience, had he not just been waiting for someone like Michelle to appear in his life and trigger yet the change? Could he change without someone like Michelle? Were his days of being like a rolling stone over? Had he not lately been aspiring to a steadier way of living? Was he sure it was the stable life he truly desired, and could it have been this desire for that kind of life what had drawn him in the first place to Michelle, or was it true love in an instant? Life was complicated at times! How to be sure of his feelings, of his motives? Diego wanted to reach out for the right decision. How sure was he of his feelings, how sure of his resolve, and even if his resolve was true, would he be able to make it a lifetime one? Anything less would make Michelle miserable, he thought. But why had she taken so quickly possession of him? Was he her sacred dream come true?

They arrived at his sister's. Laura stood at a table with a couple of friends, but those two rapidly went to another table. Michelle and Laura began talking to one another. Diego did not participate. He looked around. He noticed Evelyn and her husband standing two tables from them. Evelyn was staring at him. She smiled. Diego rapidly returned his eyes to Michelle and to his sister.

Only a few moments later, someone tapped with a hand on his shoulder. Diego saw Léon-Jules de Blouges come up to stand between him and Laura. Léon-Jules had come with Evelyn de Bazaine, his wife, in his wake.

'Diego,' Léon-Jules exclaimed, 'you are a surprise! We haven't seen you for so many years, and then you suddenly pop up with my sister-in-law! How are you? What have you been up to, lately?'

Diego did not refuse the outstretched hands. Evelyn's fingers only brushed his, and they felt very cool.

Léon-Jules had aged. He was still a very handsome, flamboyant, tall man with all the aristocratic grace of his family. He had thick, wavy brown hair, a strong, very masculine face, and he was impeccably dressed in the finest smoking of the hall.

The de Blouges were barons, but of very old stock. Their ancestors went back to medieval times. De Blouges gleamed polished self-confidence. The de Blouges were wealthy, as well in finance as in industrial investments. Léon-Jules led the family's manufactories, but it was rumoured his father Alexandre held tight reins.

Diego and Léon-Jules were of the same age. They had been young together, gone to the same schools, visited each other, played together. They had chased the same girls. Diego had desired Evelyn in his adolescent years. Léon-Jules had been able to offer more to Evelyn than Diego, and that had brought the ascendancy of Léon-Jules over Diego. Diego had fled from Robois when Evelyn had definitely chosen for the wealthy, self-assured, imposing Léon-Jules. Diego was glad his knees didn't buckle or tremble anymore at the mere sight of Evelyn. Evelyn had undoubtedly been the greatest young beauty of Robois, a pale, frail, fine, most elegant girl. She had been acutely aware of the power she could exert over men, and

also over Diego Trioteignes. But she had been impressed more by Léon-Jules. Was Diego's infatuation with Evelyn really, definitely over and done with?

Diego quickly looked at Michelle, who was also watching him. Evelyn saw them glancing at each other. What a difference, now, was there between Evelyn and Michelle! Evelyn was still the radiant, classical beauty, but it seemed to Diego she lacked substance, intelligence, and wit. Michelle was fully a woman! Diego wondered whether he had been up to what he had claimed, having done with his affair with Evelyn. He relaxed, and smiled to Michelle, not to Evelyn.

Diego answered after a moment's hesitation, emerging from his thoughts, 'I've been here and there, Léon-Jules. I've only very recently arrived at Robois. I may stay here, though, in the future.'

'And what have you been doing, old chap?'

'I've mainly worked in the government administration, some research too.'

'What kind of research? I can hardly imagine you sitting at a desk or in a lab. You never were a technical guy! Didn't you study economics and finance?'

'Something like that,' Diego nodded. 'I've been at this and that. Lately, we've been looking for new crops for our agriculture. The climate is changing, you know.'

Léon-Jules still remained sceptic. He looked more closely at Diego, saw Diego wore no smoking. Surely, Diego did not have the money to buy one. Charles de Trioteignes had held his children on tight reins with money. Government work did not allow Diego to buy a smoking!

Léon-Jules probed further, 'what new crops?'

Diego had a ready answer, 'well, we're looking for instance at a plant called cassava. Cassava has a high protein content, and a high carotenoid content. It is quite disease resistant and offers a high yield when properly treated. We think it might be a crop of the future, and our climate warms up'

Léon-Jules burst out in laughter, 'well, well, I should have a look at that plant, then. Maybe there is something in it for us. You indeed look and talk like a civil servant, Diego! I must revise my opinion about you. I have become an entrepreneur, Diego. I manage our family's industries. I am the manager of hundreds of employees, and I determine our company strategy. Our business are thriving! We live well, Evelyn and I. I bought my first Ferrari only days ago.'

'Oh, really?' Diego said. 'Good for you, Léon-Jules. I must envy you, then. I can see you have become a man of substance.'

Diego looked at Léon-Jules's flabby face, on which the easy life showed in rounder curves, in his growing belly, his thick hands, the brown of his skin from having lain under a sun bank.

'People tell me we go through a recession in European industry,' Diego continued. 'I'm glad you seem to have mastered the crisis. How is business nowadays?'

Léon-Jules's smile darkened somewhat.

'We've been hit with difficulties, as anybody else,' he replied. 'We are coping well, and hitting back. We are emerging from the vale, as the poet might say!'

'How did you do that?' Diego pursued, showing nothing but admiration and amazement on his face.

'We looked for new markets and adapted our products, of course, Diego! We expanded our views. We are working in a global world economy, now, you know! The stuff we can't sell anymore in Belgium or in Europe, we dumped. We are transforming our business to systems we can sell to the world because they are so sophisticated, complex, and of high added value.'

He drank from his glass of Champagne.

'Then you must be dealing with the Oil States,' Diego launched.

'That's where the big money is, these days, old chap! Yes, we deal with the Emirates, with the Qataris, with the Saudis even. I fly regularly to Dubai, to Riyadh, to Abu Dhabi, to Doha, to Dammam. That's the new life, my chap! I have shaykhs as friends, now. The weather is damn hot and dry out there, but their money is as hot and plentiful as the sun!'

Léon-Jules roared with laughter.

Diego should have stopped asking on questions of this kind for a light evening conversation, but he pushed his luck.

'In what products do you actually do business, then, over there?'

'Oh, they are financiers, Diego,' Léon-Jules continued, drawing a lip, and more cautiously.

'They took a participation in our manufactories. That brought us fresh money. They finance our newest projects. We deliver them electronic systems, our complex toys, derived systems. They gave us some multi-million projects to work on. Especially a few of the Saudi billionaires work with us. It is the grand life, Diego! You should see Evelyn move in the grandest hotels and shopping malls of Arabia, amidst the American and Russian beauties! The oil countries really are the places in the world for the grandest life!'

Léon-Jules placed his arm around his wife's waist, obviously thereby showing how he possessed his wife, his conquest, to Diego. Evelyn stood the elegant, pale, slender beauty. She smiled seemingly contented, somewhat arrogant, and her eyes tried to lock with Diego's. 'She is trying to find out whether her charm, her former magic still works on me,' Diego thought.

He averted his eyes from Evelyn effortlessly, moved a little closer to Michelle, and said, 'well then, you have indeed made a success of yourself, Léon-Jules. I'm truly glad for you.'

'Oh yes, and I have a family too, you now! We have two children, a boy and a girl, Evelyn and me. Evelyn travels with me whenever she gets a chance, though. The Arabs like a family, even if they do not involve ladies in business talks. Yes, success smiles at us. You should come and visit us, soon, meet the children!'

'Why not,' Diego sprang to the occasion. 'I'd like to visit your factories, of course. I make take something with me to our department. I like visiting interesting Belgian manufactories. The larger ones and more interesting ones are becoming rare.'

'I'd love to show you our premises and research units,' Léon-Jules boasted. 'Give me a call one of these days.'

'I will,' Diego concluded.

Diego wanted to add something, and draw Michelle and Laura into the conversation, but a strong voice, the voice of Alexandre Bazaine, Michelle's and Evelyn's father called out loudly, 'ladies and gentlemen, our dinner is served! Please proceed to the dining-room!'

The door panels to the larger dining-room opened, and the guests began to finish their Champagne and to enter the equally well-lit adjacent room. They stopped at the long tables

and sought their places. Michelle drew Diego and Laura on. As promised, she had placed Diego between her and Laura. On Michelle's other side sat Léon-Jules. On Laura's other side sat Marc-Julien de Bazaine, Michelle's and Evelyn's brother.

When they sat, Diego saw he was the only man not dressed in formal evening smoking. He might have seemed indeed the poor, uninteresting civil servant of the evening. But then, he smiled, wasn't James Bond a civil servant?

'Don't be impressed by what Léon-Jules tells you,' Michelle whispered immediately when they sat down, guessing Diego's thoughts. 'Much of what he boasted about is mere show. Léon-Jules has achieved nothing on his own, ever! His directors do it all. What he told is pure arrogance. And I doubt his businesses are doing as well as he pretends He has been begging around for funds over the entire world.'

Diego smiled back. Was Michelle now patronising him, standing by him? Diego quite liked the idea. Few people had ever stood by him. Most of what he had accomplished, he had achieved by himself, and by himself alone.

Why had Michelle so ostentatiously taken possession of him? Was she seeking a revenge on her sister? Was she coming into her own with him, finally proving to her sister she, Michelle, could enjoy a victory over Evelyn too? If so, was Michelle with him for the wrong reasons, and might she dump him when her point had been made? Diego was suddenly less sure of Michelle's noble feelings for him!

'Why am I pessimistic about Michelle?' Diego asked in his mind. 'Am I not sure about my feelings for her? Did I not sense she was interested in me beyond mere friendliness?'

Diego's mind raged. He shook the bad thoughts off, as he usually did. He would let destiny and the events decide, and act when he had to act. He should not worry so much. Let come what had to come!

The supper at Castle Bazaine lasted a long time. Five dishes had been prepared and were served one after the other, from a light salad with smoked Scottish salmon to pieces of Belgian trout in a white sauce with boiled red vegetables, leading to a main dish of veal served with potatoes and broccoli. Then followed a plate of cheese, and a chocolate desert. White Chardonnay Burgundy wine was served, with a Pauillac red wine from a well-known Bordeaux Château. At the end, coffee or tea was brought in. The men could have a whiskey, a cognac, or white alcohol. To the women, a sweet liqueur was proposed. Michelle chose a raspberry white alcohol, and so did Diego.

Michelle had chatted agreeably with Diego. They mainly raked up memories of their childhood. Michelle talked about her ambitions with her restaurant. She sought Michelin stars!

At the table, conversations began and waned. In front of Diego and Michelle sat a young man from Robois who was obviously a banker. He had come with his girlfriend. Next to her sat another young couple from Brussels. The woman was an assistant at a sociology department of the university.

The conversation focused inevitably on the two subjects that were on everybody's mind: the immigration issues and the economic crisis of Europe.

The young people agreed war refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and from various African countries should be taken in unconditionally, and cared for. They considered nevertheless an upper limit might be defined for the number of people that could be given a new home in Belgium. Michelle objected, for she said one could not put limitations on helping to alleviate the great misery these people were in.

Purely economic migration should be refused, the sociologist proposed, for a large number of war refugees should now be taken in and given a decent life, which would be hard on the country's finances in times of budget austerity. Immigrants ultimately added to the wealth of a nation, declared the young banker. The sociologist retorted, saying Belgium had already sufficient poorer citizens to care for. The large number of immigrants arriving in so short a time could at this moment bring the economy of the state out of balance. Belgium couldn't solve all alone the misery of the world, could it not?

The conversation turned to issues of integration. There was no real issue with immigrants from countries with similar cultures as ours, the sociologist explained, and so no issue really with immigration from other European countries. The issues were only with people of different countries, especially with people of the Islamic religion, which was so alien Belgium's ancient Christian traditions. The sociologist claimed people of the orient and of the Christian religion were readily accepted by the Belgian population and integrated rapidly into our society. Not so Muslims! Integration was a necessity for the long-term survival of the state. All measures should be installed to promote integration, with programs for teaching the immigrants the language of the country, the Belgian laws and institutions. Laura proposed to make such programs mandatory for all arriving immigrants. The sociologist warned for the number of immigrants. Above a certain percentage of immigrants versus the total population, she said, integration would fail. Higher numbers of people of other cultures could disrupt the social tissue! Above a certain percentage, immigrants would begin to seek each other up, create communities of their own within Belgian society. Then they would form entire streets of immigrants, entire quarters, and then integration would be refused by the immigrants or be made unnecessary. Once he incoming people had formed autonomous streets and quarters, the women especially would not leave these environs anymore, stay within their community, and submit to the pressure of extreme-thinking men.

'When an immigrant family lives in an ordinary street,' the sociologist woman gave as example, 'the family speaks to its neighbours, seeks its neighbours' help and advice, and the people in the rest of the street will accept them, help them and adopt them. When you have an entire street or quarter of immigrants together, they start living together according to the customs and rules of their homelands, and form a ghetto! They close themselves for Belgian habits, laws and institutions even, prone the sharia for Muslims, and return to fraud and imposture to reach their aims.'

The young woman thus pleaded for the dispersion of immigrants. She rejected ghettos, and quarters of new apartment buildings for immigrants where only Muslim people lived or were in the majority.

'What would you say could be the maximum percentage above which we might have societal issues?' Diego asked.

‘Good question,’ the sociologist sighed. ‘We could only form a Monte Carlo group and discuss about it in our department. The opinions diverged, but we came up with about five percent. That is a very arbitrarily set percentage, but it provides a guideline.’

‘That would be a maximum number of immigrants of somewhat more than five hundred thousand,’ Diego concluded. ‘We are far from that number in Belgium. We can take still some refugees in!’

‘Maybe,’ the sociologist agreed, ‘but we have to disperse the newcomers, dissolve them into our cities, all over the towns! Otherwise we grow locally far above our maximum percentage. As to the total number of immigrants present in Belgium, the actual number is several times higher than those five percent! We, and other European countries, have come to the points of danger.’

Diego couldn't ask her what she meant by dangers, though he could imagine some. Nearby, loud roars of laughter rose and quenched the conversation around Diego and Michelle. Everybody looked to where the noise happened. Léon-Jules sat there, in the centre of all attention, in his white shirt with frills at the cuffs and at his open collar. He had hung his jacket on his chair, shaken off his tie. He was the centre of all attention, a man of power and authority, a force of nature. He made his neighbours howl with laughter. Diego didn't know what the conversation or the story had been about. The noise held, as Léon-Jules continued to speak, but too far from Diego for him to hear what Léon-Jules was saying. Around Diego and Michelle, silence set in, eyes continued to look at the party of Léon-Jules until the last drinks were brought in.

The conversation around Diego, Laura and Michelle enlivened only later. Laura and the banker began to discuss the financial situation of Belgium. As to the economic crisis, everybody agreed it was a result of a transition from an essentially local-oriented economy to a worldwide economy. Countries didn't foresee in their own needs any longer. Products came from all over the world, nowadays, transport being so cheap. All such transitions experienced the pangs of change, as humanity moved from one equilibrium to another. In the end, all people would secure their welfare. Many more people than before could have better lives. This was also what was happening within the European Community, between the nations of the west and the east of Europe. The young banker remained quite optimistic.

‘Well,’ Michelle remarked, ‘until the worldwide transition is quite absorbed, generations of Europeans will have a very tough life. Our products are produced with higher salaries. Products produced by much lower salaries will push our products out of the market, until wages rise everywhere to as high as in Europe.’

‘Yes,’ the sociologist argued. ‘Look at what is happening in agriculture in the European Union. Too much milk and meat are thrown in the market. Prices are lowered to the prices in the lowest-salary countries, but that means our high-tech farmers earn currently too little to pay their fixed costs. Their higher productivity - thanks to modern means - does not gain any longer from the lower salaries, and the astern farmers have started to augment their own productivity, too! The salaries of our farmers tumble with the prices. Our farmers are in despair, and many small farms will be ruined by the low prices.’

The young people at the table thought these pains of transition could not be avoided, as they were dictated by the open market, and that market was now spread over the entire world.

‘Agreed,’ Michelle added, ‘and hence, however hard our farmers work, many personal tragedies may ensue in the coming years. Then, our agriculture will be dead, and we will pay harsh prices for products from the east or from overseas! When the eastern European countries joined the Union, I expected our farmers to have a hard life soon. That has not really happened until recently, because the East-European farmers had a much lower productivity than our West-European ones. We used huge tractors and other machines. The East-European farmers had no such enormous machines and other equipment. They enjoyed a cost difference because they would accept lower salaries, but the productivity of our farmers balanced the difference. That difference is dissolving currently. The productivity of East-Europe has grown, transport costs are low, yet the wages remain lower over there, and so our West-European farmers have begun to suffer. The trend is not finished!’

‘True, true,’ the banker confirmed. ‘The same happens between Europe as a whole and China, for instance. China has built in record time a grand infrastructure of roads, airports, train systems and free seaports such as Hong-Kong. It has modernised its river transport. It has invested in universities and in innovation. It has now the fundamental infrastructure in place to compete in people and in means with the rest of the world. Moreover, it is a communist country, which means it can be easily led without contestation of government rulings, and it has an American- and European-educated intelligentsia of excellent economists. The bright young economists that advise the Chinese government are Harvard-educated. The president of the People’s Republic is surely a tough man, but seems also to be a wise one, who takes the interests of his people at heart. The China picture is entirely different from the Russian and Indian picture. India and Russia have not worked so hard at their infrastructure and they lack economists who think in the same professional ways as Americans or English, or other Europeans.’

At that moment, the tables were being emptied as the sign that the supper was terminated. The conversation stopped. It didn’t resume later on.

When the supper had come to an end, everybody said goodbye to the hosts, to the Bazaines. Diego noticed how his sister Laura continued to talk with Marc-Julien de Bazaine, engaged in a hot dispute of arguments. Marc-Julien had proved to be an agreeable, amiable neighbour at the table. Diego and Michelle wished goodnight to their respective parents. They remained together. Diego still had to drive Michelle home.

Michelle and Diego walked slowly to their car. They saw Léon-Jules and Evelyn step in their Ferrari, drive off with screeching tires and roaring engine. The evening was still warm. Michelle had brought no coat, but in this gentle early summer night, she had no need of one. Diego held her close to him, and she smiled at him. Diego then placed one arm around Michelle’s waist, and she did not protest. Maybe they were both a little flushed from the wine and the brandy.

When they sat in the car, and when Diego had pushed the ignition, Diego stated, ‘so, back to the Lady of the Lake!’

‘No,’ Michelle objected immediately, staring straight in front of her. ‘I have students in my house. Take me to Trioteignes, to your home.’

Diego hesitated, ‘Michelle, if I take you now to Trioteignes, I may not ever let you go. I am not a man of several women. I am not a man of adventures. Also, there is something I need to

know. Are you with me because you finally feel superior to your sister, or because you want to take revenge on her, or because you want to come as if nothing ever happened between Evelyn and me?’

Michelle looked at him, anger in her eyes.

‘Don’t ask such stupid questions, Diego. I’m a big girl, now. I am with who I like because I like it, not because of some obscure psychological, and dumb other reason. I’ve been in love with you since ever, but I’m my own girl, now. Drive, I say, and hurry please!’

Diego grinned. This was the first time a girl had told him seriously she was in love with him. Michelle was no girl anymore. She was a beautiful, strong woman. He decided no more stupid talk was necessary. He drove to his house, as fast as he could.

As soon as they arrived near the door, Michelle burst out of the car.

‘I asked you to drive fast,’ she said, ‘because I have to pee. Where are the water closets?’

Diego smiled and stopped the engine.

‘Let me open for you, and bring light. There is one upstairs, at the end of the corridor,’ he replied.

He turned the switches that brought light in the entry hall and in the upstairs corridor.

Michelle ran. Diego drew on his tie, undid the knot while she climbed the stairs. He took off his jacket, slung it over his shoulders, followed Michelle, went to his bedroom, and put his jacket in the cupboard. He opened his white shirt.

A little later, Michelle appeared in his door. She looked gorgeous in her silk, blue gown. She had thrown off her high-heeled shoes somewhere. He could see she was a little tipsy, but so was he! She stood there, and then she swung her white, laced knickers around her finger.

Diego could not restrain himself any longer. He went in one step to Michelle, embraced her, kissed her passionately, fondled her breasts, and let his lips wander to her neck. She let him unzip her gown at her back, and she let him draw her to the bed.

Diego woke in the morning. He heard music playing downstairs. He wondered how that could be. He remembered. His hand sought Michelle in the bed, but he touched only empty sheets. He stood from the bed, slipped on underwear, a jeans and a shirt, and went down. The sound came from the kitchen. He found Michelle, standing at the table. She was only dressed in one of his shirts, and wearing his slippers. She was preparing scrambled eggs, but she had also found tomatoes and mushrooms in the fridge. He went up to her, hugged her, and kissed her in the neck. She placed a light kiss on his hair.

He asked, ‘did you have a good night? Did you sleep well?’

‘Not much of a sleep,’ she grinned, ‘but the night was fully satisfactory, Mister Diego. I hope the same for you.’

‘It was,’ Diego confirmed. ‘You made me hungry. It is nice to have a great chef prepare us breakfast. I’m not used to that, I assure you.’

Michelle smiled, ‘I hope you were not used to breakfast made by a girl in the past. You’ll find out how good a cook I am! And I enjoy cooking.’

They ate in the kitchen. Michelle did not say much. Diego kept silence while he ate his delicious food.

Suddenly, Michelle broke the intimate silence, saying, ‘you asked me a question yesterday, when we rode to here. Until then, I hadn’t really thought about what you mentioned, and

yesterday I had only one thing on my mind, which was to go to bed with you. I've never been to bed with a man before, you see. I was just glad to be with you and to hope. I worried during the night. Bust Evelyn! No, I'm not jealous of her. Not anymore. Yes, she was always the slender beauty of the house, and she was supposed to be brilliant too, which she proved afterwards not to be, but that is another matter. Yes, she was the darling of my parents. She was also the firstborn. Yes, she attracted the handsomest and most interesting boys, and especially one very interesting and cute one I wanted for myself. He fell in love with her, but she rejected him for what she thought could offer her more glamour and more money. I never gave a damn about that kind of qualities. I refused the sort of life Evelyn and her husband have, the sort of life Bazaine and Blouges and Trioteignes seemed to offer. I worked, and wanted to accomplish something by my own, with what I thought I could be good at. So, the answer is no, Diego. No! I slept with you because I wanted to, and because I love you. Nobody in the world can interfere with what I'm doing, and also nothing, no afterthoughts, no psychological trauma, nothing could change what happened. I did what I wanted to do because I liked it. Even if you mock me, even if you just abused of me, I did what I did because I wanted to. I wanted to screw you because I liked to. Even if you reject me now, I took what I could get, even if only for one night. I'm my own woman, now, Diego. Fuck the rest!

Diego was touched. So hard and yet so honest a statement no other woman had given him in the past.

He said, a knot in the throat, 'suppose you could not only get a screw, but a lifetime of love. Would you accept it?'

Michelle looked up at him from her eggs. Her mouth fell open. She dropped her fork in her dish. Her eyes turned glassy.

'Diego, is that a marriage proposal? So soon? At eight thirty in the morning? One day only after we met again? Are you sure you are awake? This is real, Diego! Do I hear bells? Where is the ring? You owe me two rings, darling, an engagement ring and a wedding ring! And you should be on your knees!'

Diego stood up from the chair, walked around the table, and went on his knees. He placed his hand on his heart and repeated, 'Michelle de Bazaine, will you marry me? The rings you shall get later. I'm in love with you, and I want to marry you.'

Michelle placed her two hands on either side of this head, pressed, caressed with her fingers. She said, 'of course, you silly boy! I want a wedding in white, in a church, with bells and flowers and all, a feast at Bazaine, many invited friends, a ceremony and a feast that will take us at least a year to prepare, but that is what I want. Maybe we must see each other more, of course, experience how we fit in daily life. Maybe we should not marry immediately. Maybe we'll live together for a while, yet not being married officially, but then, we can do all that being married to, and cope. We have to get used to each other. I also want babies. And bust the rest of the world, and bust all the psychological nonsense you seem to worry about.'

'For babies, we have done our best this night,' Diego grumbled, his head between her breasts. 'We have,' Michelle whispered. 'No pill, no condoms! Where have we let our wits? Let's start again.'

Diego took her hand, propped his mouth a last time full with omelette, and led Michelle upstairs, once more.

2.2. The gardener. Monday, 13 July

Commissaire Joseph Bikri sat in his office in the Abbey, behind his desk, his feet resting on an open drawer. He was lost in thoughts. He sat, doing nothing, blocked in a quandary. He did not know where to start his investigation! The murder of the beheaded man found in the Largeau had taken place on the territory of Robois. So much seemed obvious. The report of the Special Services of the police of Namur told him the murder had happened in the evening before the body was found. The murder had been committed in the early evening, for there was no illumination whatsoever in the wood where the head and much blood had been found. This hour was consistent with all the forensic evidence. The police had found no fingerprints, no DNA material, no imprints of car tyres. There were footprints, but all totally flat, offering no information except the size of the foot, indicating male killers, but in this dry weather the imprints could have been made days before the actual murder. The wood was situated near the town, but no houses stood in the environs for kilometres around.

An asphalted road led to the clearing and to the river. That road was in good order, relatively new, and yet the place attracted very few drivers. The communal services had ordered the road there, because one had a fine view of the town and the river at that place, but the site was known only to few people in Robois.

The ropes by which the victim had been bound were of the common sort one could buy in any supermarket of the country. The knife had not been found. There must have been blood on the clothes of the murderer or murderers, but clothes could be burnt in an instant, and none had been left behind.

The crime had been a deliberate planned assassination, Bikri mused, so the murderers might have worn special protective clothing that could have been discarded anywhere. No noise had been heard in the wider environs, no particular cars were perceived as suspicious.

The commissaire remained convinced the murdered man had been a Muslim, but the imam of the mosque had told him from the drawing portrait Bikri showed him, he had never seen the face. So far, few Muslims of Robois had been interrogated. Among these, nobody had as yet identified the victim.

Or they had refused to recognise the man, Joseph Bikri thought in his worst scenario. This thought worried Joseph Bikri most. He and his officers should continue to show the drawing in the Muslim community, of course, but if so many refused to admit they had ever seen the murdered man, then a great danger lurked in the shadows. More worrying even, then something of greater scope was going on in Robois of which Joseph Bikri hadn't heard the least about. How could it be possible that he, the commissaire of Robois, had sensed nothing about the threat that hung in his town, over his own people?

The most plausible alternative was that the murder had nothing to do with Robois. The beheaded man and the murderers could have come to this town, to a quiet corner in the woods, to commit a crime in a place where nobody knew them. That might explain the fact the criminals hadn't buried the corpse. The corpse could have been left behind because the assassinated man could not possibly be recognised here, as he simply was not of Robois. If that was the explanation, he, Joseph Bikri, might well never find the culprits! He sighed. No, no, no, he suddenly shook his head. Do not get confused in conjectures, he told himself. Do not engage in too far-fetched conclusions. The most probable explanation, the first to

investigate on, was that the murder had indeed be committed by people living in Robois. This was the most obvious explanation, the one most plausible and probable. Work on that assumption!

‘Concentrate on that thought,’ Bikri said loud.

It meant the Muslims of Robois would have known about the assassinated man. They must have met the man, have seen him, maybe even spoken to him. Bikri concluded he and his officers had probably been lied to. Why? It was quite normal to be lied to by the assassins, not by the majority of Muslims of Robois. Somebody must have scared the Muslims of Robois real hard. Why was that? What was going on?

Bikri wondered, ‘to whom can I turn to in confidence to hear about what is happening? I have no friends among the Muslims, and nobody wants to acknowledge the victim at the mosque.’ Joseph Bikri pained his brain, then decided there was only one man who might speak to him openly about the affair – unless he too was involved!

Commissaire Bikri rode to the ‘Horse Bayard’, to the well-known hotel and bar and restaurant of Robois. He did not really ride to that place to have a mint tea that day, though he stopped regularly at the Bayard bar to say hello to his friend, the owner, Monsieur François. The Bayard hotel stood in fine, well-kept gardens. The gardens were maintained by an old gardener, by an Algerian man called Karim Khedis. The old man was not really a friend of Joseph Bikri, but the commissaire knew him well. If there was one man in the Muslim community who might not be afraid of anything, due to his age maybe, Joseph sensed it might be Karim.

Karim was a tough old man, an Algerian of the ancient traditions, a man of courage, a man thought to have been a fierce warrior at one time, but who had curbed his nature to the peaceful life of Robois. Joseph Bikri did not know much about him, except that Khedis readily spoke to him and had helped him before.

Commissaire Joseph Bikri rode to the Bayard, parked his car there, and then sauntered through the gardens of the hotel. The gardens had been extended recently to almost as large a space as a park. Bikri was not sure he would find the old man today. Karim did not work each day at the Bayard, but Bikri had forgotten which days of the week Karim worked and on which days not. He did find him, though.

Karim stood on a low ladder. He was trimming a hedge of yew. This kind of hedge had to be trimmed, for otherwise it would spew bunches of red berries, which were poisonous to people, to young children and to horses tempted by their bright colour. Karim had told Joseph Bikri before how Monsieur François had bought the young trees without consulting his gardener. Karim had protested, for he knew yew hedges were poisonous, but the yew had been bought, was expensive, and Monsieur François loved the evergreen aspect and the density of this kind of hedges. So, Karim had to trim, and, despite the poison and the added task, he was glad to have the work. Something good came out of the hedges too, for with the green leaves and little branches, the pharmaceutical industry produced a medicine to cure cancer. Monsieur François and Karim delivered the green, cut leaves to a company that assembled the taxis for the good purpose of saving humanity.

Joseph Bikri watched Karim work for a while. Karim was a conscientious gardener. He cut the leaves and branches with shears, slowly, methodically. He cut not with the very noisy, atrocious electrical or explosion-engine powered hedge cutters. Joseph appreciated the fine work. He stood at first in the back of the gardener, but then he moved to the front of the man, so that Karim would notice him. The gardener did look up after a while, sensing the presence of somebody. He remarked the commissaire, and stopped his work.

Karim Khedis stood only a few rungs high. He held his shears down from trimming.

Before Joseph Bikri could say a word, Karim exclaimed, 'ah, Commissaire Bikri! I was convinced you would come to see me one of these days. I too had to talk to you, anyway. I am a bit tired. I need to sit down a while. Could you invite me to a tea in the bar of the Horse Bayard? I'll be with you in a minute!'

Commissaire Bikri was surprised. If the man wanted to talk to him, he did not fear being seen together with the commissaire of police of Robois!

The gardener did not let the commissaire react, for he insisted, 'why don't you find us a nice, quiet place in the bar, commissaire? Just give me some time to clean the area. I don't like to let the yew branches remain strewn all over the place.'

Joseph Bikri still did not speak a single word. He nodded, and strode to the bar. Very few people sat at this early hour of the day in the room. He ordered two teas. He went to sit where he had an open view over the bar hall. His tea had been brought only seconds at his table, when also Karim Khedis strode into the bar and came to sit in front of Joseph Bikri, his back to the room. The old man sipped from his tea and then sighed contentedly. Bikri noticed the man was tired indeed. He was dressed in an old but clean blue overall provided by Monsieur François. Karim had a long, narrow face. Deep lines of age, profound and long, ran in his weathered, dark skin. He had ample white hair, a bushy white moustache, but he was otherwise shaven cleanly. He was still a very lean man for his age, though his many years of hardships and physical work showed.

Joseph started with a welcoming phrase.

'How are you, Monsieur Karim? What a wonderful summer we have this year. How are your children?'

'I am fine, thank you, but getting older,' Karim replied. 'My children and grandchildren are fine too. Most of them live in Brussels, of course. My wife and I, we love having our grandchildren with us, but more than two at the same time exhaust us! We are glad to have them stay, and glad when they return. We have eight grandchildren in all, now!'

The gardener laughed.

'Blessed be the man who can pride in so large an offspring,' Joseph continued, meaning what he said.

'True, true. God has been kind to me, commissaire.'

'What was it you wanted to talk to me about?' Bikri wondered.

'Ah, quite other matters, commissaire. A few of my younger friends asked me to talk to you,' the gardener said.

Joseph Bikri held a silence.

'The younger men are worried about what is happening in Robois,' Karim said, hesitating.

'They want no trouble. They want to live in peace. They want to live quietly. They want their children to go to school and become engineers, doctors, nurses, grocers, bakers, butchers,

scholars and teachers. They like living in Robois. They like the feasts, they like the shops. They like the people to say hello to them in the street with a smile and a nod.'

Joseph Bikri waited. He drank his tea, avoided at that point looking at Karim. He wanted the gardener to continue talking. Listening was what he, Bikri, did best. He let the man take his time. He showed his respect to the old man by not interrupting him, not now urging him on to the essentials.

'So, the young men approached me,' the gardener told on. 'As I said, they are worried, for there is a new mosque in Robois. They approve of a grand, fine, modern mosque, commissaire, built to the glory of God. They were very enjoyed with the beautiful prayer hall. However, people from the neighbouring towns poured in, people from Namur too, from Charleroi and even from Brussels. Our young men felt less at home in the mosque. They didn't like some of the newcomers, who they deemed arrogant. Also a new imam arrived, a Saudi like the other imam, but this one had entirely been educated in Arabia instead of in Europe. The young men were not sure they understood him well. He and the men who accompanied him also preached ideas our young men did not fully subscribe to.'

The gardener drank.

Joseph Bikri threw in a word, 'I spoke to the imam yesterday. He explained to me he desired a very moderate Islamic practice. He looked and sounded honest and reasonable to me.'

'Yes. You spoke to Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz, did you not?' the gardener asked.

'I did,' Bikri acknowledged.

'He is the assistant imam of Robois. He is a good man,' the gardener agreed. 'He is the assistant imam who worked with the community. Our young men and women like him. Yes, he is reasonable. He is a kind man. He does not just read the verses, he also explains them. He told the young men to be kind, not violent. However, he is not the imam who leads the mosque!'

Commissaire Joseph Bikri was amazed, and fully interested. Another imam?

'The imam of the mosque, until very recently, was Imam Dhakir El-Amin. He too was of Arabic origins. It was he who assembled the funds for the new mosque. He was a very devote man, maybe a little too devote. He was a dreamer, a kind, naïve, innocent man. He might even have been gentler than Madyan Bin Mahfouz, which is why Bin Mahfouz took on so many tasks. The two imams got along very well. Bin Mahfouz organised, El-Amin inspired. El-Amin preached, and he was an authority among Belgian and European Muslims.'

'That sounds all very commendable,' Bikri stated.

'It was,' Karim Khedis agreed. 'But the man on the portrait of which you have a drawing in your jacket, a drawing you no doubt wanted to show to me too, the picture of the murdered man found in the Largeau, is Dhakir El-Amin, our beloved imam!'

'What? The imam? But ...'

'Yes,' the gardener interrupted. 'Amazing, isn't it? Some of the young men recognised the drawing that was shown to them. The drawing was badly made, but then you only had a destroyed face to work from. Imam El-Amin was assassinated, commissaire, his body ignominiously thrown into the Largeau. The men who recognised the portrait were so shocked they dared not react. They imagined what had happened, understood the consequences, and the warning. They thought El-Amin was murdered because he had

befriended the Christians of Robois. The young men needed a few days to reflect on their fears. Then, they started to talk among one another, and then a few among these approached me.'

'Are you suggesting Madyan Bin Mahfouz eliminated the former imam?' Bikri guessed.

'No, no, no, commissaire. Bin Mahfouz is too kind a man! He is no murderer. No, there is a third imam in Robois!'

'What?' Bikri exclaimed.

The gardener whispered then, but he continued speaking slowly, calmly. He did not bend his head to the commissaire, as if he were telling him a secret. He held his body as if he was merely telling nonconsequential niceties to Bikri. He drank his tea as an old man who spoke to a friend. Nevertheless, he looked around with sneaky eyes. No other Muslims sat in the bar.

'The real imam in the mosque, the one who was sent to replace the other two, the one who holds all power, is a man called Majdi Al-Faris. This Al-Faris arrived with the construction of the new mosque. He was sent to us by the Saudis to oversee the building of the mosque. You see, commissaire, the new mosque was built mostly with Saudi money. The man who held the strings of the purse for the Saudi financiers, was Al-Faris! He is not officially the imam of Robois. Oh no! He rarely comes out of his apartments. He does not preach in the prayer hall on Friday evenings! He asks the people to come to him in a smaller meeting hall in one of the buildings next to the mosque proper. There, he preaches to chosen men, mostly younger men, and that sometimes for hours. Bin Mahfouz may be the imam now, but the religious power and the funds by which the mosque is administered are held in the hands of Al-Faris!'

Karim Khedis waited for a moment, and let his words sink in the mind of Commissaire Bikri.

'The three imams are Saudis, but only Al-Faris is a Wahhabi, commissaire,' Karim continued. 'The Wahhabis are Islam fundamentalists. They are Salafis. They do not like to be called either Wahhabis or Salafis, because they claim to be the only, pure Muslims. For them, the Koran was not created but is, simply is. The Koran is the eternal word of God. The Koran being Gods' word, must be accepted literally. It cannot be interpreted in any other way than the Prophet and the early khalifs wrote and said. Independent reasoning over the Koran, the ijtihaad, is forbidden by the Wahhabis. You and I know that if one takes the suras and the verses of the Koran literally, out of their historic context, one ends up with very strict and sometimes violent conclusions. Some of the Wahhabis preach the jihad, the holy war against all infidels, as such violence is demanded in the Koran. We don't know who killed our Imam Dhakir El-Amin, commissaire, but like you I can deduct. I am worried, and so are our young men. They asked me to warn you. They are frightened, of course.'

Joseph Bikri had some notion of the history of Islam. He had read about the Wahhabis and the Salafis. He held a silence, and thought. The images and the implications of what had been said whirled around in his mind.

'The man Al-Faris lives in the apartments of the mosque?'

'He does. He is not alone. He has come with at least four or five men and their families. Al-Faris has brought two wives and their children.'

'What does he look like?'

‘He doesn’t shave and doesn’t cut his hair, but his black hair isn’t long. He wears a long beard. He is a bulky, strong, heavy man in his fifties. He usually sits in a chair that is large, because he does not move about much. He limps, his left leg is injured. He lost several fingers on his right hand, so he uses a scribe at all times near him. He lost his left eye. The imam wears a thobe always, a flowing white robe, and he equally demands of the men around him to wear the traditional Arabic thobe. Imam Bin Mahfouz refused to wear this robe, stating he needed to go out often in the Belgian community. Bin Mahfouz is a good Sunnite, who accepts the ijthihad. He has to walk a tightrope, however. He cannot oppose Al-Faris too openly, for he may be punished by the Wahhabis, maybe removed from his post.’

‘Bin Mahfouz is a Belgian citizen,’ Joseph Bikri remarked.

‘Indeed he is,’ the gardener Karim confirmed, ‘but the Saudis can nevertheless recall him. If he refuses, he will be out of a job. Bin Mahfouz is afraid. Do not underestimate the influence, the power of the Saudis over their imams, of whatever nationality the imams officially are.’

Karim Khedis stopped talking. He finished his tea. He looked around several times, as he had done throughout his entire conversation. Joseph Bikri felt the fear also in the gardener, even though the old man had been brave to talk to the commissaire of Robois. The talk should end soon. The message had been delivered. He had to ask one last question, though.

‘Karim Khedis, I appreciate very much what you told me. You are a brave man. Please tell the young men I cannot really act without proof of the murder. If they truly want to help, they must help me find the proof of the crime. Tell me, why did they choose you to talk to me about their apprehensions? They could have come to me themselves, in discreet ways!’

Karim Khedis righted his back.

He said proudly, ‘I am an old man, now, commissaire, but once, long ago, I was an amir, the head of my village. The younger men know that, and they respect me for it.’

He hesitated, then added, ‘we lived peacefully in the mountains of western Algeria. One day, my family and I travelled to the city to visit other members of our family. We remained in the city for several days. While we were away, so-called Algerian jihadis came to my village in the night. They claimed to be fighters of God, Mujahedeen, but they were mostly only thieves and murderers. They killed for pleasure. They killed the men, women and children of my village in the dark. They came with knives and old swords and they slid throats. Then, they stole the possessions of the villagers. I had failed to protect the village. There was nothing left for me in Algeria, and I did not want to live in a country where such massacres could be perpetrated.

The young men have not forgotten my story. I suppose my children told them. The young men show me respect. They continue to honour my family.’

‘It is good to respect old men,’ Joseph Bikri nodded. ‘Old men have the wisdom we, younger people, often miss. I thank you, Amir Karim Khedis. I shall do what is needed to keep this country and our community peaceful.’

Joseph Bikri shook the gardener’s hand. Karim stood, and he walked back to his work, a bent old man, but a leader in the community. Joseph Bikri paid, went out of the bar, took his car and rode back to his office.

A little later, the commissaire explained to his assistant, Inspector Dominique Bussy, what he had learned from the gardener. He asked her to find whatever information she could gather on

the three imams of Robois, on the murdered Imam Dhakir El-Amin, on his assistant and current Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz, and on Imam Majdi Al-Faris. He told her he could translate texts in Arabic she might stumble upon. He also asked her to explain everything to her husband. Dominique's husband was an inspector of the 'Service d'Enquêtes et de Recherche,' the SER, of Namur.

'Wait, commissaire,' Dominique said, 'you'll have to explain me some more about the Wahhabis and the Salafis! Who are they, what do they represent? You seem to think they are dangerous. Why is that?'

Joseph Bikri showed some patience. Dominique would have been able to find out from her computer, from the Internet sites, much more and better than he knew, but he felt the need to talk to somebody. He did this often with Dominique, or with his wife Samia. Talking was for the commissaire a way of thinking out loud, of conjuring threats by the word, a way of diminishing his irrational worries to items he could handle.

He explained. Dominique sat in front of him.

'The Wahhabi religious movement was founded in the eighteenth century in the Najd region, the centre of Arabia. The man who spoke and wrote about it was Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, hence the name. The Arab leader in that remote and sparsely inhabited part of Arabia was Muhammad bin Saud. He allied with the Wahhabis, which allowed him to enhance his secular power over the people. The political alliance lasted, for the House of Saud eventually came to reign over the newly created Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the 1930s. Mecca and Medina had been conquered. The reign indeed lasted, and the kingdom expanded. The Saudis came to more power when, helped by the British – remember Lawrence of Arabia –, they defeated the Ottoman Turks. The defeat of the Turkish armies led to continual strife between the Turks and the Saudis. I don't recall exactly what percentage of the population of Saudi Arabia are Wahhabis, but it is probably not more than 25 percent. The majority of the Qataris are Wahhabis, though.

The Wahhabis believe they are the only ones who are pure Islamists. They believe in the oneness and uniqueness of God, which is a notion called the tawhid in Arabic. They are conservatives and fundamentalists, proclaiming that the interpretation of the Koran leads to a polluted Islam. They take the verses of the Koran literally. Strict adherence to the Koran is called taqlid in Arabic, by the way. The Wahhabis do not deviate from ancient Islamic law, the Sharia. They do not allow progressive thinking and reasoning about the Koran. They reject the ijthihad and religious innovation. Rational disputation of their religion, called the kalam, is forbidden. No speculative philosophy in theology for them! No kalam! In simpler words, they want Islamists to stop thinking, read the religious texts, and apply them literally.'

'That sounds familiar to me, commissaire,' Dominique sighed sympathetically. 'I seem to remember our Saint Bernard de Clairvaux in some aspects proposed something not so differently. Bernard didn't like the philosophers like Pierre Abélard either!'

'True, yes,' Joseph Bikri mused, surprised at his assistant's knowledge, 'but that was a very long time ago. The Wahhabis still stick to their beliefs today. Nevertheless, things seem to move in Saudi Arabia too, though very slowly. Slavery has been abolished in the country, women are allowed to drive cars in Qatar – tough still not in Saudi Arabia. The Muslim Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt, has been declared a terrorist organisation. Only officially approved of religious scholars are allowed to issue fatwas, and so on.

Notwithstanding advances, people are still being beheaded for crimes of murder or for rebellion, however slight, and their bodies crucified. Homosexuality is not tolerated, and homosexuals hide from the religious police. Women must still wear the black abaya, covering all but their hands and eyes. They are not allowed to travel independently. The Wahhabis do not really care for social justice. You would not like living in Saudi Arabia as a Wahhabi, Dominique, for you would be almost totally subservient to your husband. You would be allowed to put your name on the election lists, but not to wage an election campaign and show your face on posters.

Music is more or less tolerated, but not dancing. Alcohol is prohibited, as are games and even television except for religious programs. You would not be allowed to send flowers to relatives who are in hospital. Petty crimes are punished by whipping, cutting off limbs, worse crimes by hanging or beheading.

The rulers of Saudi Arabia very slowly alleviate the rules, but Wahhabism stayed the religion of the kings and princes.'

'I heard much talk of Salafism, lately,' Dominique intervened when Joseph Bikri stopped talking for a while. 'What is the difference between Salafism and Wahhabism? It seems the same thing to me!'

'Well, Salafism is another form of fundamentalist Islam. The Arabic word of "salaf" means the predecessors or forefathers, the Prophet and the first Muslims. Salafism thus means a return to the proper, first, pure, true Islam. Salafists are people with a strict, equally literalist and puritanical approach of Islam. Wahhabis may be called Salafis, but not all Salafis are Wahhabis. The notion of Salafi goes wider. Wahhabis reject any other form of Islam but theirs. Salafis also reject the kalam and the ijthihad. Salafism is, however, much older than Wahhabism. It may have started with the reflections of a scholar called Imam Ahl-al Gunnah in the ninth century of our era, and one of its best known scholars was Tacqi ad-Deen ibn Taymiyyah of the fourteenth century.'

'Are they a threat for us?' Dominique dared to ask, drawing a wondering face.

'Some of the Salafis are jihadi,' Joseph explained. 'They vow o the Holy War to have the entire world be Islamic. They proselytize, because they believe Islam should be universally practiced by all people on the earth. Many terrorists claim to be Salafis. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL or Daesh, is a Salafi jihadist group. These last also vow to Wahhabism, by the way, to pure Islam. They believe the armed jihad is the only way to cause the advance of God on earth.

There is another word used for the Salafis. That word is "Athari". The athariyya or Atharis also reject the Islamic kalam, in favour of the strict textual interpretation of Islam. Proponents of the Athari School of theology are again the Salafis, the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. They follow the works of ibn Taymiyyah. Atharism also goes back to the ninth century.'

'That seems all very confusing, commissaire. I repeat: just how dangerous would Wahhabis, Salafis and the like be for us?'

'I suppose there are bad guys and good guys in all societies and communities, Dominique. The percentage of good Wahhabi guys may vary a little with their degree of adherence to the

violent items of their ideology and their lack of empathy with other people, but there are good guys and bad guys everywhere! The trick is not to let the bad guys get to power!’

‘That makes it simpler for us, doesn’t it?’ Dominique mused. ‘We catch the bad guys and throw them in prison, waiting for trial. The bad guys are the ones who do not live by our law, so that definition is simple too! We protect the good guys, regardless of what they believe in. Our profession is a simple one, thanks to God! Or should I say inch’ Allah?’

Joseph Bikri laughed.

‘Yes, that is what it amounts to for us,’ he smiled. ‘And that simple wisdom is what we should never forget. You may think whatever you want, but you don’t transgress the law of our country. If you transgress the law, we, the police, arrest you and send you to prison. You are so right in that, Dominique.’

‘The law is one, the law is good, the law is great and applies to everybody,’ Dominique continued. ‘That is the credo of the secular state. It is also our credo, of the police, of the judiciary apparatus, of the lawyers, and so on. The law of the state stands above the religions and their laws. If not, we would be at each other’s throat quite rapidly, and decent life would become impossible. The law of the state is a religion without a god, and it is the supreme law. That is something everybody has to accept, and if somebody does not accept that, then his or her place is not in this state.’

Bikri preferred not to dwell further on these notions. Yet, he thought, this principle is absolutely not accepted in many countries of the world, and there, indeed, people are at each other’s throat.

‘So what do we do now?’ Dominique asked. ‘I’ll find the information you asked, that is if I can find anything worth its while at all. I suppose we should not anymore send our officers out to ask Muslims about the portrait drawing. We know who the murdered man is. But we are not closer to the elucidation of the crime, aren’t we? We must still find the culprit and bring him to justice!’

‘We must find the actual culprit, yes, and the one who ordered the murder. The two may not be the same. My next step should be to have a talk with the third imam of Robois, the one-eyed one, with Al-Faris. Who knows? He might suggest a lead.’

‘Should I go with you, commissaire?’

‘No, I don’t think so, Dominique. Not a first time. Answering to a woman may send the imam into apoplexy and provoke him to total silence. Let’s be cautious first. I’ll go alone.’

‘He may refuse to talk to you too, commissaire!’

‘He can try to do that. In that case, I’ll threaten him with an official order to present himself here, in the Abbey, and I’ll issue a same order to all of his acolytes. I don’t think he’ll like that, for one of them might mishap during the interrogation, and say something that can incriminate them all. No, he’ll not refuse a first conversation. He will want to know how smart I am, and just how much I know.’

‘Which isn’t much, commissaire.’

‘True, it isn’t. Well, we’ll see. How many times have we not proceeded slowly, meticulously, Dominique? Do you know the word: the arm of the law is long and slow, but it reaches far?’

‘I do, commissaire. Still, I also know the statistics of the never elucidated crime feats, and the odds are not in our favour.’

Joseph Bikri sighed.

Inspector Dominique Bussy stood from her chair and called the officers together.

In the late afternoon, Commissaire Joseph Bikri rode home. Samia had already arrived at home. She had prepared supper with a light meal of a couscous of vegetables, no meat. Khadijah ate with them. Afterwards, they had a piece of bread and a choice of French cheese. At table, they talked with the children. When the children had gone to bed, Samia asked what her husband had been up to. Joseph explained. Khadijah sat with her sister and brother-in-law in the living-room. She listened to what Joseph Bikri told. Joseph had spoken to her many times, emphasizing her to not repeat elsewhere what she heard in the house about his police duties and Samia's law cases. Joseph had shown confidence in his sister-in law's good judgement. This evening, Joseph explained at long to the two women what he had learned in the case of he murdered man.

'Heaven forbid,' Samia cried out, 'I fled from Salafis in Morocco! I hope they have not come to spoil our life here, in Robois too!'

'Not while I am the commissaire of Robois,' Joseph affirmed. 'I cannot believe much harm can come from a Wahhabi presence in Robois. Nobody can trespass the law.'

'A hundred things could happen with men such as Al-Faris in Robois,' Samia Bennani protested. 'Such a man can work on the mind of our young people. He can excite them to go and fight for Islam in ISIL. Isn't ISIL a Wahhabi and Sunni extremist movement too? Have you not heard how many Belgian young Muslims have travelled to Syria to fight in the ISIL ranks in Iraq and Syria? Such is what a man like Al-Faris can do with his preaching! And what if he is a jihadi? If he preaches the holy war, we would not be safe from acts of terrorism. One young man gone crazy, given some explosives smuggled into Robois, would mean a terrorist attack would suddenly become very tangible. What about the murder of the former imam? Is that not a violent act? What more do you need? Evidence of many more dead?'

'Of course. I know,' Joseph Bikri replied.

Joseph had, these last years, not given one second of thought to such acts he abhorred. He had refused such an appalling possibility. Now, even if he could stop the violence before it happened, the confidence between the population of Robois and the Muslim community would be destroyed. How to communicate? Communication, even after the facts would be crucial. Luckily, he had Dominique with him to explain matters in simple terms. He would have to bring her forward. Nevertheless, despite these thoughts, he also did not dare believe the facts might be violent for more people.

'I can do nothing without evidence,' he desperately gave Samia. 'How could I proof the imam and a few hotheads harboured the idea for such acts, as murder or worse?'

'Evidence, evidence,' Samia exclaimed. 'You can evict these men from Belgium for rebellious language. Can not one of our Muslim men attend the preaching of the new imam with a hidden recorder? One or more recordings brought in a court room should suffice to have him evicted out of the country!'

'Maybe,' Joseph Bikri replied feebly.

How would he be able to smuggle a spy into the preaching sessions of Al-Faris, when the imam chose which Muslims he allowed to his private meetings? He, Joseph, would have to speak to judges before he could use such means! He had already thought of such a possibility, though. None of his officers were Muslim. How could he ask the men of the Muslim

community to use such subterfuges? This was a job for the National Security, not for a local commissaire of police!

At that moment, Khadijah surprised them by saying she would go on a walk.

'Khadijah, it is already eight o'clock,' Samia looked on her watch. 'Walks are best in daylight!'

'This is summer, Samia! It gets only dark after ten!'

'I don't want you so late in the streets, Khadijah! And don't think I don't know who you are going to have a walk with! Hamza is a nice boy, but nice boys can get angry and pushy at certain moments. I want you back here at the latest at nine thirty, do you hear? And stay in the main streets! I don't want to catch you with Hamza at his home or in an apartment of his friends. If you go to a pub, no alcohol! Drink tea, or a soda. Watch out for what goes into your drink. Did you understand me? I wouldn't want to announce to our Moroccan family you returned with a baby in your belly!'

'Don't be vulgar, Samia! I'm an adult, remember? I can take care of myself! And I can do what I damn well like!'

'No, you can't,' Samia hissed. 'Not here! This is my house and my town. Here, you do as I say until I think you reason like an adult, which you still have to prove to me. So, keep Hamza at a distance, and don't be naïve! Nine thirty! Not a minute later! Or you'll be shipped back to Morocco sooner than you expected. And don't shout to me, for I won't shout back, but I will act! You can count on that!'

'All right, all right,' Khadijah cried.

Khadijah stood and ran. When she had left the house, she slammed the door after her. Samia was angry and nervous.

'Girls,' she shouted. 'Khadijah has the head of the Bennanis, hard as stone, stupid as a back door.'

Joseph Bikri frowned his forehead.

'That girl is going to give us trouble, I tell you!' Samia went on. 'If she goes on like this, I'll buy her a one-way ticket back to Morocco, whether she likes it or not, and I'll put her on the plane myself!'

'Aren't you a little too hard on her?' Joseph asked. 'She is not a bad girl! She knows from herself everything you told her. She is intelligent! No trouble will come to her. Not in Robois!'

'Ah, she has turned you around her little finger too, hasn't she? She has used her charms on you! She has shown her beautiful eyes to you!'

Joseph preferred not to answer. Samia hesitated.

'You may be right,' Samia agreed after a few moments, 'but I'm worried with all you told me. Khadijah is my responsibility here, remember?'

Joseph Bikri nodded, but he let the conversation end there.

Somewhat later, Khadijah Bennani and Hamza Al-Harrak walked in the main shopping street of Haut-Robois, not far from the Abbey. They walked hand in hand. Khadijah gesticulated wildly at Hamza. At times, she even cried at him. She was reproaching Hamza for being so much involved with the mosque authorities of Robois. She told Hamza she did not want him to attend the speeches of Imam Al-Faris. She thought Al-Faris to be an extremist who poured

violent ideas into the heads of the young men. Hamza denied this. He said Khadijah was crazy. Nothing special was going on at these meetings, he claimed. The meetings he went to were nothing but friendly discussions over Koranic questions, and working at a project of their club of small model airplanes. The imam only explained the Koranic verses. Hamza then talked her of a project of model airplanes he had been working on with two other students of the technical school. He could have a job at the Blouges factory at the end of his studies, next year, because of that project. Khadijah wanted Hamza to promise her never to go back to the preaching of Al-Faris, but Hamza waved her away. Khadijah began to cry.

The tears proved too much for Hamza Al-Harrak.

'All right, all right, Khadijah,' he surrendered. 'I'll go less often to the mosque meetings, I promise you. I'd like to continue developing our project in the workshop, however. Our project is interesting. We are writing software programs now for our on-board computer. All that is very useful for my future career. I want a job right after school, have money and attend evening courses at university to become an engineer. But I promise I'll go less to the preaching in the mosque. I suppose you cannot object to my going to the evening prayers, can you? I want to be a good Muslim, a good husband and a good father.'

'Of course not,' Khadijah said then, drying her tears and blushing. 'But stay away from that imam. He may be dangerous! I don't want you to become an extremist too! You'll have to choose between me and that so-called imam!'

'Ah, women,' Hamza shouted, 'don't they tell me all the time what I have to do and cannot do? People have been pushing me around like this my entire life, first my parents and now you! The mosque meetings are the only place where I can be myself! Nobody pushes me around, there!'

With that, Hamza drew away from Khadijah's arm. He hurried down an alley. Khadijah called out his name several times, but Hamza didn't slow down, stop or look behind him. Khadijah felt new tears in her eyes. She slowly returned to the house she thought of as her home.

When Khadijah opened the door, it was only nine o'clock. Samia stepped into the entry hall, coming from the living-room. Khadijah ran to her sister, and let her tears flow freely in Samia's arms.

She cried, 'I am so unhappy, Samia, so unhappy!'

Samia understood Khadijah had dark apprehensions, a feeling of pending disaster, unspecified fears, as not uncommon to young women.

Samia hugged her sister, thinking, 'I knew something was amiss!'

Samia said, caressing her sister's hair, 'tell me all about it, Khadijah. I'm sure it is less catastrophic than you think. We'll solve the issue, both of us! What are sisters for?'

Khadijah continued weeping, but she followed her sister to the living-room. Behind Khadijah's back, Samia waved Joseph out of the room. He said he was going to watch a program on television. The TV set of the Bikri family stood in another, smaller room on the other side of the house.

Joseph Bikri fled. He had enough worries on his mind.

2.3. The third imam. Tuesday, 14 July

The next day, Commissaire Bikri rode once more to the new mosque of Robois. He did not bother with the prayer hall, and also not with the house of the Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz, behind it. He walked past those buildings, and went to the apartments at the end of the long mosque. All was quiet around the cafeteria. Joseph Bikri wondered how the bar and restaurant could survive with so few clients. He continued walking to the apartments, and saw a name-shield with what looked like pushbuttons for the bells. Only family names had been written on the small pads. Commissaire Bikri took note of the names, copying them in a small book. One of the names was Al-Faris. Bikri pushed next to that name. He heard no ringing, pushed again, and again, and had to wait a full two minutes before a voice was heard at the interphone below the apartment bells.

The voice was short and hoarse, 'what do you want? Can I help you?'

Commissaire Bikri answered, lowering his head and placing his mouth close to the interphone.

'Hello,' Bikri said, also looking up to a tiny spot above the door he thought held a video-camera. He was almost sure he was being watched.

'I would like to talk to the Imam Majdi Al-Faris, please.'

'The imam does not receive today. If you give me your name and telephone number, we will contact you and arrange for a meeting.'

'I am Commissaire Joseph Bikri, the commissaire of the police of Robois. I need to speak urgently to the imam,' Joseph insisted.

'The imam does not receive today. If you can give me ...,' the conversation was interrupted by another voice.

This voice, higher in pitch, continued, 'the imam can receive you on another day and hour, commissaire. We will contact you.'

'The imam is in,' Bikri stated calmly, though he didn't know whether what he asserted was true. 'I shall come back with a warrant summoning the imam to the Abbey, but then also with the same warrant for every person in this building, men and women. They will receive a note to present them at the police station for an interview that shall last at least one full hour and a half. I shall release nobody until the last man and woman has been duly interrogated. You choose!'

There was a silence on the interphone.

After a long while, the commissaire heard yet another voice agree, 'come in, commissaire.'

A buzz and a click indicated the door had been unlocked electronically. Commissaire Bikri pushed against the heavy metal door, and opened the panel. Bikri stood in a long corridor, which went from one end of the building to the other. The walls were painted completely in broken white. Here and there, on these walls, hung very colourful pictures of calligraphed Arabic texts placed under glass. Bikri saw a row of oak doors on the entire opposite side of the corridor, no windows.

At the extreme left end of the corridor, one of these doors swung open and two men dressed in long, white robes came up to him. They did not stop when they arrived at the commissaire.

They did not greet the commissaire. They walked on, but the second man made a gesture of his hand inviting Bikri to follow him.

The man said, 'please follow us, commissaire. The Imam Al-Faris will see you soon.' Bikri followed the men to the end on the right side of the corridor, where they opened a door with a card key. They stepped into a room, inviting Commissaire Bikri in.

Bikri went in what looked like a large meeting-room. The walls were painted in the same whitish colour as the corridor. In the middle stood a large, long, oak table, with simple wooden chairs around it. The furniture seemed quite modern and stylish. The two men offered Joseph Bikri a chair at the left end of the table. At the head of the table, far from Bikri, stood a much larger chair, nicely carved, a leather-cushioned and padded, wide seat. Joseph Bikri immediately supposed the imam would come to sit in that throne-like seat, and thus confirm his superiority over the commissaire. Joseph disliked such unnecessary subtleties, which he considered impolite to guests. He would have to teach these men some manners! Would Al-Faris now come and throne there like an eastern dictator, accompanied by his court? Al-Faris seemed immediately very antipathetic to the commissaire.

One of the two men took a chair opposite the commissaire. The other went back out of the room and closed the door after him. Bikri and the other man waited. Bikri scraped his throat. The other man kept his silence. He fidgeted with his fingers crossed on the table. They waited so for several minutes, which seemed an eternity for the commissaire.

Joseph looked about the room, and spotted at least two video-cameras hung in corners. He had again the strong impression he was being spied upon. The commissaire looked at his watch and gave himself ten minutes, not a second more, until he would stand up, say nothing, and leave. Then, he would send his officers with warrants, forcing all the inhabitants of the building to present themselves at the Abbey. He looked ostentatiously at his watch, so that whoever was spying on him by the cameras would understand his patience was being tested and was running out.

A minute or so before Joseph Bikri's patience had come to completion, the door opened. The man the commissaire had already seen – but not really met, for the man had not volunteered his name - opened for a bulky appearance, a heavy man with an impressive head crowned by black hair. This man wore a straggly dark beard, and showed dark eyes in the unshaven face. He too was dressed in a long, white gown. All the men in this part of the buildings seemed to wear the traditional Arab robes, white and long, as well as a white taqiyah, the short, round cap worn by devote Muslim men. The man strode slowly, majestically, into the room, said nothing at first, and went to sit in the wide seat at the head of the table as if it were a throne. He waited until the two attendants had arranged the flowing folds of his robe on the seat. The man limped. The commissaire saw his left eye was scarred, the flesh closed over the eyeball. When the man drew his seat nearer, Bikri saw the imam missed three fingers on his right hand.

The second man left again. Joseph Bikri had no intention to start the conversation, the more so because the imam had given him so far no word of greeting or of welcoming. Bikri stared at the man, continued to study him, abhorrent of the decorum he was forced to witness. Joseph Bikri was a man of respect. He remained polite with everybody, from a gardener to a king, but he also deemed no man worthier than he. He waited.

The imam also waited, and he too studied Bikri for a few moments. In this challenge of wills, the imam was the first to lose patience.

Slightly irritated, with a deep, very masculine voice, he started, 'so, Monsieur Bikri, you wanted to talk to me?'

'I am the commissaire of police of Robois. My name is Joseph Bikri. I am investigating a murder committed in Robois. The murder seems to be linked with the mosque of Robois.' 'I have nothing to do with murder, commissaire.'

Bikri placed the drawing of the portrait of the murdered man on the table, in front of the imam.

'Do you recognise this man?'

'I am the imam of the Muslim community of Robois. My name is Majdi Al-Faris. I have nothing to do with any murder! I do not know the man on this drawing. I wonder what you have come here for. I have no idea how the man could be linked to this mosque.'

'Have a closer look,' Bikri insisted. 'The man is somebody from the Muslim community. He was found, dressed in white gowns as yourself and your assistants are.'

'I repeat, I do not know this man!'

'The drawing is of the face of the former imam of Robois, called Dhakir El-Amin. You have worked with him for many months. You have known this man intimately, worked with him, met him daily, yet you have now refused twice to recognise his portrait!'

'If this is El-Amin, then the drawing is very badly made. I did not recognise El-Amin in the picture.'

The man shoved the portrait back to Joseph Bikri. The imam had not even blinked his eye.

'This is how the face of the imam really looked like when we found him, after his death,' Bikri said.

He placed a second picture on the table and shoved it with one finger closer to the imam. This was a photograph of the severed, battered head of the Imam El-Amin, taken when it still lay in the grass where it had been found. Al-Faris lowered his eye to the photograph, only for a second, then he too moved the photo with one finger back to Bikri, and turned it so that the head now faced Bikri.

'Once more, commissaire,' Al-Faris asserted, 'I don't recognise anybody in this picture.'

A silence crept in. Commissaire Bikri put the two pictures back in an interior pocket of his jacket.

'Where were you on the day this man was murdered?' Bikri asked, giving the day in July the forensic doctors had told the assassination had been committed.

'I was here, of course, commissaire, in this building. I rarely leave the apartments or the mosque site,' Al-Faris replied. 'If necessary, at least ten people will witness to my presence here.'

'I will want the names of those ten people, then. Please give me their first names and surnames.'

The imam reddened. Bikri thought Al-Faris ready to explode. The imam calmed down, however, and cited a few names of men. Joseph Bikri wrote the names down meticulously, asking the man to spell some, which seemed to irritate the man.

'Tell me, imam,' Bikri continued after a while, 'what are your functions in the mosque? I was here a few days ago, and when I asked for the imam of the mosque, a man called Madyan Bin Mahfouz was presented to me.'

'Bin Mahfouz likes to think he is the imam of the mosque. He is an ambitious man. He is the imam of the prayer hall. I am the head imam, and the guardian of the mosque complex.'

'Three imams for one mosque of a small rural town of the size of Robois seems a little too much to me,' Bikri objected.

'Two imams,' Al-Faris corrected. 'There is much work to do. Many people from outside Robois come to pray at our mosque and seek our support. We hold meetings in our rooms outside the prayer hall. The former imam left Robois quite some days ago. We don't know where he went to.'

'He went to his death!' repeated Bikri. 'He was found murdered, beaten, beheaded, bound in a ritual Muslim way, and then he must have stumbled in the Largeau River.'

'You speak very denigratingly about a former imam, a man of God, commissaire. I don't like the way you talk in these buildings!' Al-Faris replied in a higher tone.

The imam hesitated, then continued, 'this does not surprise me of a man who reneged on his traditions, on his family religion, and who dwells among infidels and apparently calls them his friends. I know about you. You were a Muslim, but you are now an infidel, Youssouf Bikri. I urge you to mend your ways!'

Joseph Bikri wanted to shout he had the right to damn well speak as he wanted to. He restrained his anger, stayed calm. He held a silence.

'Does being friends with the people of Robois means I am an infidel?' Bikri retorted, quite serenely.

'Of course, commissaire. The Koran states in Sura 3, the sura of the family of Imran, that intimacy with infidel people is forbidden, for the infidels will not fail to corrupt the man who follows the Islam. In Sura 4 on women, the Koran additionally says to not have infidels for friends! In Sura 5 of the table, the Prophet told to not have Jews or Christians as friends, and the Prophet continued to state that when you take only one of the infidels as your friend, you surely are one of them. I consider you therefore an infidel, not belonging anymore to the Muslim community of this town. You are an infidel, Youssouf Bikri, you and your wife too! You see, the same affirmation is given in Sura 9 on immunity, and also in Sura 58 on she who pleaded! Verses in those suras state quite clearly that those who make friends with the Jews are not of the Islamic party. God calls them of the party of Satan. You are quite friendly with the few Jews of Robois.'

'And in Sura 60 of she wo is tried,' Joseph Bikri interrupted, 'in one of the last suras, the Prophet told it was not forbidden to deal with kindness and fairness the people who have not made war on the followers of Islam on account of your religion. In that same sura and verse, the Koran says God loves those who act with fairness! God only forbids to be kind and fair to those who have warred against you and driven you from home. The people of Robois, and I, have not made war on the people of the Koran!'

The imam laughed uproariously. 'Ah, you have become an infidel, but you have not forgotten the Koran entirely, Youssouf Bikri. I repeat: mend your ways and return to the Koran entirely! You take from the Koran what pleases you, and you disregard the rest. Everywhere in the world, our people are being persecuted by the Jews and the Christians and by other

infidels! I lost an eye in the combats and in the injustice done to Muslims. The horrors done to Muslims are extraordinary. Our people are denied everywhere to grow our economy, our finances, our military power, our fame. How dare you speak of fairness when our people are shot, bombed, tortured, torn to pieces in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan, in Somalia, Mali, the Yemen, Kenya, Nigeria, and so many more countries? The sura you mentioned, Sura 60, urges us also not to seek amity with men against whom God is angered.'

'Oh,' Bikri sounded astonished, 'has God spoken to you, then? Do you know intimately what God thinks and wants? And do you really believe war against the people of Robois is justified?'

Imam Al-Faris' anger visibly grew. Bikri saw the man move very nervously to and fro in his seat. The man seemed even to grow with his indignation. He merely drew himself up in his seat. He was not used to be answered to in the same way as he spoke. The eye of Al-Faris flickered with rage. The man placed his two hands on the table, leaning forward on them.

'Sura 2 of the cow says God is an enemy to the infidels, commissaire! The infidels shall suffer unbearable chastisement. In Sura 8 of the spoils, Youssouf Bikri, the Koran says God will cast a dread in the hearts of the infidels. He urges us to strike off their heads! So repent, Youssouf Bikri! In Sura 9 on immunity, God encourages us to make war against the infidels. In Sura 47 of Muhammad, God tells us also to strike off the heads of the infidels and to inflict a great slaughter on them! God wants the world to adore Him, commissaire. Anybody who does not do so deserves death. Surely, you must know so much!'

'Yes,' Commissaire Bikri agreed. 'All that is written. Those are the suras that call for the armed jihad against the infidels. There are more such suras in the Koran. Are you a jihadist, imam? You feel war is justified merely by a few lines in the Koran, given in a particular historical context, and merely because somebody doesn't believe the same way as you? It is true that nothing like a cause dulls one's conscience and justifies everything! Still, the Sura 60 I already mentioned, does not forbid the Islamist to deal kindly and fairly those who have not made war on you on account of your religion! You too seem to choose from the Koran what you like, imam. By the way, Sura 8 you mentioned earlier so lightly, also mentions not only the head of the infidels must be struck off, but also every finger-tip. That is exactly what happened to Imam El-Amin. Did you or your assistants apply the Koran literally while murdering Imam El-Amin?'

Commissaire Bikri had shouted these words into the face of Al-Faris. He too showed his anger openly. Al-Faris did not reply for a few moments. Commissaire Bikri had gone too far, and he had forgotten a witness was in the room. No doubt, his outrage would show on the video of the meeting-room.

Al-Faris also continued uttering his rage against Bikri, however.

He cried, 'oh no, I committed no murder, commissaire.'

The imam bended towards Bikri, although they sat far from each other. The imam wanted to come closer, as if he wanted to impose his physical bulk on the commissaire.

'The Sura 2 of the cow,' Al-Faris repeated, 'says God is an enemy of the infidels! The sura and God demand of us to fight for the cause of God, to kill the infidels wherever we can find them!'

‘The word “aslama” in Arabic means not only submission. It also means something like “to depose arms”, imam!’

The imam bellowed, ‘Sura 8 commands us to fight against the infidels until the end, and until the religion of the world be all of our God. Sura 9 tells us also, several times, to make war on the infidels! This of forced upon us in yet other suras, commissaire.’

‘As I objected, imam,’ Bikri said calmly, ‘the Koran is full of contradictions if you take all the verses literally. For instance, with Sura 60, in which God does not forbid us to treat other people kindly and fairly. We must read the Koran with a generous heart!’

‘You err badly, commissaire! You err! Sura 43 on the ornaments of gold states that God has given us an Arabic Koran so that we might understand clearly. It says the Koran is a transcript of the archetypal book of God! The Sura 2 of which we quoted already several times, says that any man who alters the Koran shall be punished! You must know so much! In Sura 33 of the confederates, the Koran states God appointed imams to guide, after God’s command. I am an imam! I can guide! Not you! Finally, in Sura 39, the Prophet and God said the Arabic Koran is free from tortuous wording, so very clear. Who are you to speak of contradictions in the Koran? Who are you to modify and interpret the verses of the Koran? That is blasphemy! You have no right to do so! Nobody has that right but me! I am the guide of Islam!’

‘The contradictions in the Koran are well known and accepted as such by scholars of the Book, Al-Faris!’

‘They aren’t! I tell you they aren’t, Commissaire Bikri. I consider you an infidel. All those who are friends with infidels are infidels themselves! So says the Koran in multiple places.’ Al-Faris stood out of his seat. He leaned with his arms and hands ever more on the table. His knuckles whitened. He was in a rage.

The imam shouted, ‘Sura 2 and many other suras tell that the curse of God is on the infidels, commissaire! Unbelievers deserve chastisement. The same sura demands of us to kill infidels wherever we find them. Is that not clear enough? Sura 7 of Al Araf calls the curse of God on evil doers, on infidels, and so do the suras 9, 28, 33, 47, and 48. These suras threaten with the curse of God on infidels! Youssouf Bikri, I tell you, I shall call the curse of God over Robois, as God curses the infidels!’

Commissaire Bikri could not accuse the Imam Al-Faris directly for having killed the former Imam El-Amin. The more Al-Faris shouted at him, the more Joseph Bikri became calmer and told himself he was getting somewhere. He saw the true nature of this man. Joseph Bikri was by then convinced he had a very dangerous man in front of him, a fundamentalist fanatic, an imam of the worst kind, a jihadi too, and a man who would use all the means at his disposal to proselytize and to proclaim the literal following of all verses of the Koran, whatever the context of those lines. There could be no peace between him, Joseph Bikri, and Al-Faris! He tried once more, ‘what you do, Al-Faris, is to take away liberty from the people. Yet, God has granted us liberty in deeds and in thoughts. You already took away liberty from the women, for what has remained of the nature of women when you imprison them in black abayas, refuse them to enrich themselves in self-realisation by work, or by engagement to the finest causes in our world? Now, you would also imprison the men in holding them off from thinking for themselves. No God who means well can have given such message to his people!’

Your own message is only of destruction, aggression, violence, cruelty, perversion, dominance, power, lies and injustice! Are you kindly submitted to God? You act terribly and bring horror among the people, among God's people!

Bikri considered for a few seconds calling the man yet to the Abbey for a formal interrogation, provoke him into the same kind of heated conversation, and have witnesses of the outbursts of hatred. He might succeed in evicting the man from Belgium for his words of hatred. It would not be an easy task. Bikri might succeed, but then he still had not solved the murder! He wanted to see men convicted for the assassination in his town! He would have to call more Muslims of the apartments to the Abbey and interrogate these too. Yet, he also feared the stirring up of tension and hatred such means would cause in the Muslim community of Robois and of the rest of Belgium. He found it too early to force the issue he had with this man to conclusion now. Bikri had too few proofs of wrongdoing. The Procurator of the King and the judges of Namur might not accede to his demands.

Joseph Bikri shouted a last time, 'who murdered the former imam of Robois? Did you deem him an infidel, because he had many friends in the town, outside the Muslim community? I know now why he was murdered. Who murdered El-Amin, Al-Faris?' Joseph Bikri saw Al-Faris once more constrain his face, grinding his teeth.

Imam Al-Faris sat down again. He took a few moments to calm his mind and his face. The imam said in a normal voice, 'I don't know who murdered El-Amin. And that is my final word. This conversation is over!'

A-Faris stood up and abruptly left the room. He hurried out. He did not slam the door, but left it standing open. Joseph Bikri stepped after the imam. He called out for him, but the imam did not look back.

Bikri shouted in the corridor, 'I am the commissaire of Robois. Anybody who transgresses the law I shall apprehend, put into jail, and offer to be judged by the Belgian justice administration!'

The imam reached the end of the corridor without turning. He fled. He disappeared in the room Bikri had seen the two men emerge from.

Commissaire Bikri went to the front door of the apartment building, opened it, glad to be out unharmed, glad to walk in the blazing sun.

'God, you who are mighty, God who enjoins justice, God who are the light of the heavens and of the earth, give me strength to win this battle too,' he prayed.

Bikri went to his car and drove home.

Joseph found Samia preparing sandwiches for lunch. He kissed his wife, but went to a cupboard in the kitchen, took out a bottle of red wine, an expensive Saint-Estephe wine he had wanted to spare for better times. He opened the bottle and poured himself a large glass. He noticed his fingers trembled. His nerves were still not calmed. He had to dull his nerves! Samia took the glass from his hand, drank eagerly, and then handed it back.

'That is what I call good wine,' she appreciated.

'It is,' Joseph Bikri agreed. 'Rivers of wine are promised us in paradise by the Koran. Why only in paradise? I don't suppose God will mind for us to create a little part of paradise here!'

'Neither do I,' Samia smiled, and embraced her husband.

Samia suddenly noticed her husband's pallor.

'You look as if you've seen a ghost,' she said.

Joseph Bikri didn't answer. He shook his head. He had seen far worse! He had seen a monster! He felt lonely and in awe by this perception of imminent danger, of threats he would have to handle all alone, like a Saint George waiting to confront the dragon.

'Am I becoming a Christian, now?' he grinned.

Joseph Bikri did not dare to tell his wife that noon what he had heard from the Imam Al-Faris. He did not want to scare her. He would have to talk to his assistant Dominique once more, for he did not want to keep the conversation, and what it implied, to him alone.

That night, Joseph Bikri turned and tossed in his bed and had it hard to find his calming sleep. He fretted about the conversation with the imam of Robois. He slept badly. His only consolation, he considered, was the knowledge Majdi Al-Faris too might not have slept well. Joseph wasn't too sure about that, though. Men like Al-Faris, be they Arabian or European, suffered little trouble from their conscience!

Samia must have noticed something important troubled her husband. She made no allusions to his being nervous in the morning. She had learned to recognise Joseph's moods, knew he would not talk to anyone except maybe his confident Dominique about what troubled him, until he had come to some sort of resolve. Then, Joseph would come up with a story. Samia also knew she should not worry about Dominique. She had learned to come to grips with the presence of Dominique. The woman was happily married, and had talked quite openly to Samia. The two women had made a pact. When Dominique knew something which Samia didn't, but which Samia should be aware of, Dominique would contact her.

Joseph and Samia ate breakfast together. Samia would bring the children to school and she would afterwards drive on to her office in Brussels. The Bikris had only one car, but Commissaire Bikri often rode with a police car. He could also go on foot to the Abbey, to his police station. Samia and the children left, and Joseph prepared to go to his office. At that moment, while he was putting his jacket on, his mobile phone rang. He did not recognise the number that appeared on his small screen. He took the call.

He announced, 'Joseph Bikri!'

'Commissaire,' a familiar voice began, 'I have not much time. We must talk.'

Joseph Bikri recognised the voice of the Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz.

'Yes,' Joseph merely replied. 'I hear you. About what should we talk?'

'You spoke to Majdi Al-Faris yesterday. Al-Faris is a dangerous man. You must have realised so much. Your conversation caused quite some effervescence in the apartments after you left. I heard them shout. I learned of some of their plans. You know the Imam El-Amin was murdered. Had I told you the drawing you showed me was of El-Amin, they would have killed me too. They would have made me disappear! That is why I may have seemed antagonistic to you, too. I am sorry. I had to protect myself.'

'Who is "they"? You speak in riddles.'

'The men around Al-Faris, and Al-Faris himself! I can bring you no hard proof, commissaire, but they are the murderers of El-Amin. I am convinced of that. They plan more crimes, acts of terrorism. I dare not see you in person, but I can phone you. They rarely allow me the

freedom to phone, but I can escape from their guard now and then. You must not phone me. Never do that! I will phone you. I have a phone they haven't found yet. Please do not try in any way to contact me. I am being watched. If we are seen together, I will disappear and you will never see me again, for they will have murdered me too. I am very serious about this, commissaire!

'All right, I understand,' Joseph Bikri agreed. 'I can arrange protection for you, Imam Bin Mahfouz. We can hide you. Come to the Abbey, and we'll bring you in disguise to a place where nobody will find you. We can give you another identity.'

Bin Mahfouz must have considered the offer, for there was silence on the line for a few moments.

'No, commissaire, no. Al-Faris and his group of men must be stopped. I walk the tightrope, but as long as I am able to, I will phone you and keep you abreast of what is happening here. These men prepare horrible things, more horrible than I could imagine until now. I will tell you. I have only little time. I am being watched. They won't eliminate me for the time being, because they would draw too much attention to Robois and the mosque. I will phone you again today. I know of their first plans. I overheard them. I could need another mobile phone, an even more anonymous one. Try to get me a small phone, really small, only for telephoning and messaging, no smart phone. Give it to Karim Khedis or to some other man who comes to the prayer hall. I'm afraid they might inspect this, my normal phone, and check out with whom I communicate. I have to go!'

The phone clicked, and Joseph Bikri had lost his correspondent. Bikri put his mobile phone back in his pocket. He would have to wear his mobile always with him, now. He had been negligent with that in the past. He would also not have to forget to load the batteries of the damn thing.

He smiled. He was finally getting somewhere, he thought with satisfaction. It was always like this with his investigations. The police pressed on, talk after talk, digging up information after information, until at a certain point something broke in the adversaries. It was as if asking questions to left and right augmented the tension, and tensions always had to be released in the end. His conversation with Al-Faris seemed already to have accomplished something. The tension had considerably increased. Matters would precipitate now! He should continue to build up the tension. His officers would have to continue interrogating the Muslims after all, discreetly but steadily. He could send two officers to have a talk with the men who exploited the mosque's cafeteria. He could send more police cars on the N11 road, in the environs of the mosque, show a car at the end of the Friday evening prayers.

Joseph Bikri continued thinking. What else could he do? He could give a call to the Special Services of Namur, and he should warn the National Security. While musing about the issue, he stepped out of his house, closed the door behind him, and walked to the Abbey.

'Wait,' he thought suddenly, and stopped in his tracks in the middle of the street. 'Don't be too happy too soon. Don't jump to the wrong conclusions. This could be a trap. Who says Bin Mahfouz is not playing Al-Faris' game? The imams might try ridiculing me, discredit me with the authorities and with the people of Robois, and eliminate me this way. I will have to be very careful.'

No, he decided a little later. The imams are not as subtle as that, and Bin Mahfouz sounded true. No, he truly had an ally within the new mosque. Now, that was an interesting thought! Commissaire Joseph Bikri smiled again. He relaxed. He was getting somewhere at last, and he had to admit with satisfaction he had not waited too long, this time!

Commissaire Bikri went to the Abbey, and immediately called Inspector Dominique Bussy to his office. At least one other officer of the police station should know what he had heard. He explained his conversation with Al-Faris to Dominique.

'Wow!' was Dominique's reaction. 'We start with a murder and we end up with a plot against our society, with a bunch of jihadi terrorists in our backyard. This case takes on unexpected dimensions I could not have dreamt of happening in Robois. We must be very careful, indeed, commissaire! We should warn the higher authorities!'

'I know,' Bikri replied, 'you take Namur, will you, Dominique, inform you husband, and I will have a word with Brussels'.

'Something is strange in all this,' Dominique considered, one hand under her chin, now. 'You threw verses of the Koran to and fro. You seem to know those verses by heart. That is not the way we, in Robois, live our religion. When we were young, before twelve, my brother and I, we had a few lessons in the Christian religion, called of the catechism. The priests told us a little about the life of Christ, and they exposed to us the fundamentals of Christianity. Later, during mass, we hear excerpts from the Gospels and from the Epistles of the Apostles, but we did not listen to those texts with better than half an ear. So, even while we grew up, our religion remained very diffuse, not precise at all, not directly linked to the texts. We know more or less the Ten Commandments, but we cannot recite them precisely and in order. We are reminded of the commandments when we are confronted with a problem associated with them, of course, and then we can call them to mind again, approximately. The Christian Faith remains something vague, and yet it is an example, a principle to venerate and to follow. We would not be able to recite verses from the Gospels. We have not read the Bible in its entirety, not even the Gospels, and certainly not the epistles of the Apostles. At best, we know a few stories such as of the parables and the miracles. Yet, this vague kind of faith seems to satisfy us and keep us happy most of the times. We also are rather proud to call ourselves Christians. We hold on to our church, to our baptism ceremony, to marriage in white in the church, and to our funeral ceremonies. We don't go to mass often, not every Sunday, but don't touch our village church, or you'll see what happens!'

Joseph Bikri waited. What was she trying to tell him?

Dominique continued, 'I wonder whether Muslims live their faith in the same way, or whether, like you and the imams, they can all recite particular verses from the Koran. Maybe that is where the problem originates from, with the literal interpretation by many Muslims of the Koran. Maybe it would be better if the Muslims did like us, and if they learned less the verses of their Book by heart. I saw instances on television when thousands of Muslims ran through the streets in some oriental city, brandishing the Koran and crying out their indignation when westerners seemed to insult the Book. More than half of those populations, however, are illiterate, don't know how to read and write. How many of those people have ever read the Koran. My point is, if Muslims live their religion like we do, not entirely reading the holy books, and with only a vague knowledge of the religion, then all can be for

the best, for we and them only remember entirelyly human, kind and good purposes. Maybe only the vague knowledge and the exclusive remembering of the verses and phrases that proclaim to do good acts, and not evil acts, allow us to live together without killing each other.'

'I think you are right,' Joseph Bikri said, surprised at Dominique's logic and wisdom. 'That is why the verses in the Koran that call for violence are so easily forgotten, or are not taken count of in the west, but not in the east. People want to live well, eat well, sleep well, and remain at peace with their neighbours. How many Muslims have read the Koran and have reread the texts so that they can recite everything from the Book? Islam remains a vague, though venerated state of mind. I suppose all Muslims have a Koran at home, but how many study it regularly? How many know the hadith, and wish to know those texts? Yes, only scholars, intellectuals and imams emphasize the suras and recite them literally. A man like Al-Faris tells the people he knows all the texts. He tells the people to believe, but to believe as he tells them. I cannot imagine one Muslim who has lived for a few years in Robois, and who has grown healthily suspicious of everything in this life, to believe without afterthought what somebody else tells him or her to do. God be thanked for our critical spirit. We, Roboisians, have grown so suspicious of what our leaders tell us!'

He laughed, 'for Roboisians, ijthihad is a second nature.'

'Amen,' Inspector Dominique nodded vigorously.

She concluded, 'whatever our religious beliefs, commissaire, in that way living together is quite possible. Now, how do we tackle our issues? What do you propose we do now?'

Commissaire Bikri told her.

2.4. Diego, Atsel and Deniz. Tuesday, 14 July

That same afternoon, Diego de Trioteignes sat peacefully in his living-room. He too was wondering what to do next. He was startled out of his darker thoughts by the loud ringing of his mobile phone.

A voice simply stated, 'Polyphemus'.

Diego almost puffed, but replied, 'Poseidon'.

The voice continued, 'you are to receive two guests in your house this afternoon. You shall provide for them as best as you can. A man and a woman will arrive. They shall know the passwords. Provide for them, all expenses paid, then wait for further instructions.'

The phone hung up without further explanation. Diego cursed. He had begun to cherish his loneliness, and he had been thinking of inviting Michelle for an intimate supper. Gone supper! More people in the mansion meant trouble, and putting up with alien habits. If he had to wait for others, though, he might as well do as he pleased and not rack his mind anymore about his next moves. He went to the library, fetched his handgun, stuck it in the nape of his back, between his belt and his trousers, and under his T-shirt. He noticed a book he had always wanted to read, Hemingway's 'For whom the bell tolls', and went back into the living-room with it. He began to read and lost his mind in the story.

Two hours later, at the beginning of the evening, he heard tyres screaming on the gravel path leading up to the house. He went to the window. A heavy, rather old Renault stopped near the door. Diego went into the entry hall and opened the door. At first, he remained half hidden behind the left corner, his right hand behind his back and on his gun. A man came up to him, drawing behind him a bag on small wheels. The man was shabbily dressed, in old jeans and a green T-shirt, fool's colours. The man grinned when he recognised Diego.

'Hi, man, relax,' Christian Trevanion called out while stepping to near Diego. You can take your hands off your gun. How are you, Polyphemus?'

'I am not Polyphemus,' Diego smiled back wryly. 'I might be Poseidon!'

Christian nodded. He shook hands with Diego, if only to be sure Diego's right hand was empty. Diego let Christian into the entry hall, and closed the door behind him.

Diego pointed to the stairs, and said, 'third room on the left side. Bathroom at the end of the corridor, left side. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be in the living-room.'

Christian Trevanion nodded, and without further ado climbed the stairs.

A few minutes later, Trevanion pushed his head through the door of the living-room, saw Diego in a sofa, and came in.

He whistled, 'nice outfit you have here. I thought we would be crammed together in one apartment or so. You have a fucking castle, here. Do you Belgians always live so splendidly in our business? Pretty lonesome place, though!'

'No,' Diego smiled. 'This is truly exceptional. Usually, they count every penny they let go off. This is one of my father's houses. My bosses get it cheap.'

'Right! Nice, nevertheless. Do you guys have something to drink in this joint?'

'We do, but we are on our own, the two of us. Tea, coffee, beer, brandy, soda?'

'Don't insult me with a coffee or soda, mate. How about a large cognac? You must have cognac in a place like this!'

‘We do. I discovered a bottle.’

Diego went to a cupboard, opened it, found the bottle, and poured a large glass for Christian. He considered, then poured a smaller one for himself.

Christian plunged into a wide, leather-covered seat, arms outstretched over the back of the leather. He was enjoying the good life.

‘I was ordered here only an hour ago,’ Trevanion began, sniffing at his brandy.

‘I was notified of your arrival,’ Diego acknowledged. ‘Didn’t know who would turn up, though. Never worked with a writer before. Some writer!’

Christian grinned, and drank one large gulp. He pushed his finger several times in his glass, indicating he could need another cognac. Diego served, and placed the bottle on the table. He guessed the bottle would be empty soon.

They drank at ease and in silence, waiting for the third person.

‘We are waiting for a bird,’ Christian said.

‘Right,’ Diego gave.

Half an hour had passed, and two cognacs later, they heard another car booming in on the gravel. Diego went up to the front window and saw an open Peugeot cabriolet drive in, open roof, a woman at the wheel. He smiled. He recognised her immediately. She had a waving silk scarf around her neck, a fashionable marine captain’s kepi on her hair. Christian Trevanion came to stand next to him, peered, his cognac still in his hand.

‘Well you ever,’ Trevanion said. ‘No surprise, and actually, I should have guessed. We’re going to have a lot of fun with that one!’

Diego went once more to his front door, opened, waited until the woman had parked her car next to the old Renault, and until she had activated the mechanism to close the roof. She then grabbed a large, fancy oyster-shell travelling case out of the trunk. Diego ran up to help her, but she gave him a disdainful glance and waved him away.

‘No need to help me, Polyphemus! I’m not handicapped.’

‘Poseidon is the name,’ Diego replied, and both smiled coolly.

Diego showed Denise Legrand the stairs in the entry hall.

He pointed upward and said, ‘first room on the right. Bathroom at the right end, for you alone. The third man has arrived. We’ll be waiting in the living-room. Do you need a help with the case on the stairs?’

Denise looked at Diego with amused eyes, ‘are you naturally charming and full of gallantry, my dear boy, or are you already trying to get me in your bed, sweetheart? You look still somewhat green to me for that!’

She again waved with her hand, dismissing Diego. She began going upwards, dragging her case behind her, making a boom at each step. The booms synchronised with the swaying of her hips and her legs, which provided for a quite erotic effect. Diego followed her with his eyes, and once more also liked her profile.

‘Will you stop drooling over my ass, darling?’ Denise shouted, but not turning back to Diego. Diego disappeared into the living-room. Denise’s legs and the rest of her were impressive, indeed, as fine and alluring as of a Hollywood star.

Trevanion had overheard. He was suppressing a smile. He shook his head.

'Told you we'd have a lot of fun with that one. Small world! Take care, though. She can bite like a snake, with venom and all, and scratch like a tiger!'

It took Denise Legrand quite longer than Christian to show up in the living-room. She had changed to a pair of green, chic, tight-fitting trousers and a bright red sweater, very low-cut at the neck. Christian frowned, snorted audibly, and then looked at Diego. The sweater was all the lady wore over her skin.

Christian stuck out his chin to Diego, as if meaning, 'she is out for you!'

'I should have guessed I would have to shag up with you guys,' Denise commented. 'We sniffed at each other like old dogs, last time at the hotel, didn't we? Is that cognac? Can I have a glass too, please?'

Diego jumped from his chair, took a glass, and served a drink to Denise in a cut crystal glass. Denise bent just sufficiently for Diego to notice her splendid, rounding, swollen breasts under the sweater. Diego hurried back to the other side.

Denise drank eagerly.

'Great,' she appreciated. 'Does somebody know what we are doing here, together? I'm afraid I know near to nothing. Can you gentlemen light my way?'

Trevanion looked at Diego.

Diego said, 'don't look at me! I don't know much more than you do! I was only told you would come to my house. Look, since we are going to work together, we might as well introduce our real selves.'

Trevanion hesitated, then nodded.

Before Diego could proceed, Trevanion stated, pointing to Diego, and talking as if he explained to Denise, 'our young guy, here, is called Diego de Trioteignes. The small word of "de" is important, written in small letters too. It means he is a Belgian aristocrat, one of a very, very wealthy, dignified and esteemed family of bankers, financiers, and who knows what more. Many connections to the Arab states and to the other half of the world! In for investment funds, diamonds, construction firms, heavy tools industry, and so on. The house belongs to his father. It was once a hunting lodge of the castle his family still owns and lives in. He was born here, so he is a local boy, know the environs like the back of his hand, I would say. That is an asset. He is a captain in the "Service Général du Renseignement et de la Sécurité", the SGRS, army intelligence. He has served in the Congo, in Mali and in Afghanistan, and made quite a name for himself. Even we know about him. He must be on loan, though, at the moment. On loan to the SE, the "Sûreté de l'Etat", the State Security Service of his country. He won a medal for bravery in the field. He must be courageous and efficient, which is what we will need. Congratulations, lad!'

Diego's mouth gradually fell open. He was young in the business. Denise applauded, and was smiling her finest, white teeth.

Denise said, 'don't be so astonished, my dear. You're cute. We know you are relatively new in what we do. Don't worry! We'll make a great team as yet! You may actually learn something. His name is Atsel Ben Asher! He is an Ashkenazy Jew. Polish-Prussian descent. Israeli nationality. He too is a captain, or something equivalent in his army, in the Israeli "Sherut Habbithon Haklabi", otherwise known as the Shabak, the equivalent of your unit, better known, however, as the Shin Bet, the two-letter abbreviation of Shabak. I guess he is on loan too, to the "Hamassad le Madi'in ule Tafkidim Meyhadim", otherwise called the

Mossad, the Institute, the national intelligence agency of Israel. I suppose you, my dear sweet Diego, are not under a false name in this town, because you would anyhow instantly be recognised by the townspeople of Robois. This is a nice place! Say hello to your father, will you, darling? Very nice man. Met him in Dubai, if I recall.'

Diego did not react. He was falling from surprise into surprise. He waited for the rest.

Trevanion, or rather, Ben Asher, first also waited, as if he were an innocent man. Denise gave Atsel a push.

'She is called Denise, indeed,' Atsel Ben Asher confessed in knowing her. 'She is actually called Deniz Sürkoglou. She is Turkish, a sophisticated oriental beauty. She can be met in the most chic restaurants, bars and fashion weeks of Paris and Munich. She is an international spy, of course. Her father was Turkish, her mother French. Both died in a Kurdish terrorist attack, many years ago. She was practically raised in our business! I would dare state she is probably more dangerous than both of us together. She is a sharp-shooter, a sniper, a killer with the rifle, with the dagger and with anything else that can kill, from explosives to her fingers. She must be higher in rank than we. Her past is darker than ours. She may have been originally working for the "Jandarma Istihbarat Teskilati" or JIT, for the Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation, but I think she has now been transferred to the more official "Milli Istihbarat Teskilati", or MIT, the National Intelligence Organisation of Turkey. Given the proper tools, she can kill at any distance, and blends well into the world of the people jet-set. I must admit, Deniz, sweetheart, that you look far more classy and attractive than on any photograph we have of you!'

'Why, thank you, Atsel, darling,' Deniz acidly replied. 'That must say something of the current quality of the Mossad. So, now we have introduced ourselves, why are we here? Just how much do you know, Count Diego?'

Diego sought to win time. How much of what these two had told was true? How had they arrived in Belgium, to accomplish what? They were far from their normal operations theatre. How come the Sûreté knew they were in Robois? Why had an Israeli agent and a Turkish female assassin, however attractive, been sent to him by the Sûreté?

'Come on, lad,' Atsel urged him on. 'It seems we are going to have to work together, however odd that may seem.'

'Atsel is right,' Deniz added. 'What we told you is the truth. We are taking risks by telling you who we are. We told you already much more than we would normally do in other circumstances. I told the truth because I could hide nothing from the Mossad, and Atsel can hide nothing from MIT. We are old hands, you know. We work in the same small territory. Our bosses would tell us to hide who we are, but in the field stranger things happen. We are experienced. All the operations in which I took part and in which my partners didn't trust each other, were dismal failures. We are few, just the three of us. We might as well trust each other and try to save our lives together. The information will not last longer than this job. Besides, our security services have more details on us in their files than we have been let to know. Believe me, knowing each other and trusting each other is a matter of survival for all of us.'

An avuncular smile drew in Atsel's face at this unsuspected support.

'You hear?' he said calmly, 'the English SAS, the Special Air Services, may not have taught you as much in the Brecon Beacons, but our business is not all negative and shooting out at

each other! We are in the same boat, now. No need to pull the plugs out from under our feet. Sharks in the ocean!’

Again, Diego stood amazed. How did these people know he had passed the previous months training in England and Wales? He felt like a naïve sixteen-year old boy. What the hell? What Atsel and Deniz told, made sense. If he was to live and fight and find things out from these two, maybe die with them, he might as well grant them his trust.

He explained, ‘Our Sûreté heard of large movements of money between Qatar and the Blouges factory, here in Robois. No obvious contract seemed to be linked to the money transfers. Additionally, it was found an apparently dangerous Muslim had been installed in Robois. Terrorist actions could be feared. The man was known for subservice activities in various places. My mission was to find out what the possible links were between the Blouges factory and that man. He pretends to be an imam of the mosque and has a team of various experts with him.’

Diego stopped talking. He looked expectantly at the others.

‘That is all?’ Deniz frowned her pretty forehead. ‘What were you to do with the man when you located him and found him engaged in terrorism? Were you to shoot him?’

Diego reddened.

‘Neutralise was the word, and that only if other means proved to be impractical,’ Diego replied with a hoarse voice.

‘It would most definitely be necessary,’ Deniz stressed. ‘We are after that same man for terrorist activities directed against the Turkish state. We had issues locating him in the past. He always was one step ahead of us when we tried to apprehend him. He is smart and devious, and he trusts nobody. He is well-known by my organisation, for he stirred up the Kurdish nationalists and he planned terrorist attacks in Turkey. He is a bomber, too! That is how he lost a few fingers on his right hand. I was sent to find out what he was up to in Belgium. Last I heard he was serving as imam here. The name he uses is Majdi Al-Faris! The Belgian authorities know I am on their territory, and they don’t seem to mind. They offered support. Of course, our authorities didn’t tell I also had permission to shoot the man. We don’t want him loose and possibly returning to Turkey. We seek revenge for the terror brought to Turkish families. I knew nothing about connections to the Blouges factories. Still, I got a phone call urging me to have a look at their testing grounds the other day. I saw nothing special, except you, guys. I took information about you two from that moment on. We also heard about money being transferred, but then to the imam, probably for a set of model airplanes. Model airplanes! What can one do with model airplanes? The amounts are substantial, could not have been sent for toys alone.’

‘Practically the same reasons for me,’ Atsel Ben Asher nodded. ‘The Mossad heard of the money transfers too. The Mossad may have told the Belgian Sûreté, but I guess the information originated with the NSA, the American National Security Agency. I was told the imam of Robois had been engaged in several terrorist attacks in the past, the attacks having been judiciously staged by him and the Hamas, the Palestinian movement that has vowed to the destruction of Israel. I am here with permission of the Belgian Sûreté. Imam Majdi Al-Faris is the name of the imam, indeed, and he seems to have been stirring up potential terrorists in several countries.’

'We too had hints of money transfers to a man called Al-Faris, but money sent from out of Riyadh,' Deniz said.

'And then, when I really wanted to start investigating, 'I got this call to come here, to this house, and work together with you, guys,' Atsel said.

'Same for me,' Deniz concurred. 'My issue was I had no idea how to begin my investigation. How do you infiltrate Muslim extremists?'

'I had the same issue,' Atsel Ben Asher told. 'But there is more that puzzles me! A puzzle that has to do with us. Why would our organisations put together an inexperienced young soldier – excuse me, Diego -, with two old but expert hands for a counter-terrorist operation in Belgium, so far from where we normally operate? Our mission was to find information first, but we were placed, all three of us, to an almost impossible task. Did they expect us to glitch, to force matters, and thereby call this Al-Faris out, into the open? We would be practice targets for shooting terrorists, then. Al-Faris must be of a very dangerous kind, but are we so expendable as to be used as bait?'

'We are here for the same reasons,' Deniz chuckled. 'Our anonymity must have been blown in one of our previous missions. We must have become more of a liability than of assets. We are people who may temporarily not be of any use anymore in the Near East. We had to be put on a side-track! The side track was Robois. Our careers in the spy-business are compromised for one or other reason. They placed two losers together with a boy.'

'You are right, Deniz,' Atsel accepted.

There was bitterness in his voice.

'Nevertheless,' he continued, 'we can still bite. What our organisations don't know is that we can place our knowledge and experience together. We have the dash of youth with us. We may yet surprise our bosses spectacularly. They must rather think we would hide things from each other and go our separate ways. So, that is exactly what we should not do!'

'Do you sometimes believe the naïve crap you utter, Atsel?' Deniz wondered. 'Yes, they placed us as bait. Yes, they will rather think we will be fighting each other, more than collaborating, but they will still believe we will get shot here, eliminated, lost, or return empty-handed. In fighting us, Al-Faris will be drawn into the open, and be eliminated by the proper services of this and our countries. He will be exposed. I rather expect us to be victims first. We shall be blamed for everything that went wrong.'

Atsel grumbled he had been serious, not naïve, and he said he believed what Deniz had told to be true.

'Why then did we confess and talk together so quickly?' he wondered.

'Because we can sniff a hoax from far,' Deniz said. 'They don't expect that! We know when we are being bugged by our own. We are professionals.'

Atsel, Deniz and Diego then kept their silence.

Deniz asked suddenly, 'what do we have as weapons?'

'Handgun,' Atsel replied.

'Handgun too,' Deniz told.

'Handgun for me, one P90 automatic gun, one precision rifle with telescope and night vision.'

'Ah, now we are getting somewhere. A precision rifle!' Deniz brightened. 'My kind of weapon!'

‘Way not enough to tackle a group of terrorists,’ Atsel declared. ‘I prefer the P90 and a lot of reserve bullet magazines. It is a beginning. If I understood well how matters stand, then, we are three doomed misfits, two probable end-of-career useless spies and assassins and a neophyte, put together because we are expendable, available and nobody believes we can pull our mission off. That is what we are. I suggest we work together as a team, use our respective abilities. That is our added and only strength. We had better not expect help from our organisations. We won't get much support from them. They will help us only when they must, but otherwise leave us to do what we can, and they will only enter the game when we suffer losses. We are therefore in the same boat, Deniz and Diego, to use that old saying once more, and we had better row in the same direction.’

‘Great,’ Diego jested, ‘we are the Super Mario Brothers with one sister.’
They all laughed.

Atsel and Deniz went upstairs again to unpack and refresh. After a while, first Deniz and then Axel came back to the living. They had supper together, and discussed a possible action plan. Atsel and Deniz would begin observing the mosque buildings and gather information about what happened there. Diego would continue his efforts to get into the Blouges factory. He also added his father might discover more about the money transfers to the Blouges family.

Late in that same evening, Diego Trioteignes received a phone call on his mobile. He still sat in the living-room with his two new conspirators.

He heard the dreaded, ‘Polyphemus,’ and he replied with ‘Poseidon’.

He listened without interrupting. He listened a long time, without saying a word.

Finally, Atsel and Deniz heard him ending the communication with, ‘all right, understood. I will want a few things, though. I want three genuine police passports on our names identifying us as police officers. You have our names and photos. I want three bulletproof vests with “police” written upon them in large, yellow letters, not forgetting one of us is a woman. I want two more P90's. I want plastic cloaks with “police” written on them, protection in rainy weather. I want three powerful spy-glasses, handcuffs, and secured communication gear so that the three of us can talk over distances of a few hundred metres with earphones and miniaturised microphones. You have our measures. I want sun-glasses and police caps. You ask me why? Are you guys out of your mind to set us loose there in an open field among thousands of people, unprotected, walking around with handguns only to confront assault guns? The damn police of Robois may start to shoot at us too when we enter in full action. Are you guys out of your mind? What I demand is a minimum! Add a few grenades. You will have to deliver us all of that by noon tomorrow morning, or we shall not set one foot out of the house! And don't think we wouldn't dare!’

Atsel and Deniz heard an angry voice shout something very loud, so that Diego withdrew his phone a little farther away from his ear. Diego, still at his phone, waited, looking at Deniz and Atsel, nodding his head and then bringing his eyes to the ceiling as if the person at the other end of the phone could see his lack of patience. Diego became red in the face, his eyes angrier by the second.

They heard him shout, ‘you know what I want! It will be either that, or we won't move a foot!’

With those last words, Diego closed his mobile phone and cursed anew.

Atsel and Deniz asked in choir, 'what was that about?'

Diego explained, 'there is a change in operations for us. Our Belgian National Security has just received information a terrorist attack might be planned during an outdoor rock music festival that is to take place here, in Robois, two days from now. The festival lasts for two days, but the attack is to take place on the first day in the afternoon. The Sûreté has no team available to intervene so quickly, for other teams seem to have been despatched to other sites. I say that is bullshit! There are no other interventions. They don't believe the information is correct, or they want to throw us in the arena as lion fodder. They have the agreement of your organisations to intervene in Robois. Those are the orders. It is all the information I have, but they must have other informers in our backyard. How else would they have heard of an impending attack? I refused to intervene with merely popguns in our hands against Kalashnikovs. You heard! I won't go in there without bodily protection, not without identifying us as allies of the police of Robois. They told me, however, the Robois police would be warned of our presence.'

'Yes,' said Atsel. 'We must be known to the police, very clearly, for otherwise the police inspectors of Robois may use us as target practice instead of the terrorists.'

'Why the hell would terrorists attack an outdoor music festival in a rural town of dull Belgium?' Deniz wondered. 'It does not sound very probable.'

'I have no idea,' Diego answered.

He didn't know anything about the music festival. It must have been organised after he left the town.

At that moment, the mobile phone of Atsel began to ring. He took the call. He listened, ended the conversation with a few phrases in a language that might have been Hebrew, and which sounded as a few hard curses right before he too closed his phone.

Then, Deniz's phone rang. She listened, interrupted a few times in Turkish, also cursing and shouting. She closed her phone and threw it angrily in a sofa.

Deniz and Atsel looked at Diego. They told they had received the same orders as Diego.

'Polyphemus?' Atsel asked.

'The password to identify me,' Diego replied. 'There is a joker in the Sûreté who has studied Latin at school. Polyphemus was the son of Poseidon. He was a one-eyed cyclops, as it seems our Imam Al-Faris is. Al-Faris lost an eye. He limps, too. He doesn't move much. There is a story in the Homeric epic of Odysseus on Polyphemus. The giant imprisoned Odysseus and Odysseus's crew in a cave. Odysseus managed to blind Polyphemus and to escape. He and his crew outsailed the giant, the blind Polyphemus, while the cyclops threw huge rocks in the sea to stop Odysseus' boat from fleeing. There is a famous painting of this scene by Joseph Mallord Turner, "Odysseus deriding Polyphemus", and a story of Polyphemus and his love for the sea-nymph Galatea. Polyphemus and Poseidon are the two passwords, and Polyphemus refers to Al-Faris.'

'Fruitful imagination you Belgians have,' Deniz remarked. 'So we become policemen and policewoman of this country? This gets funnier by the day. How, in earth, did my organisation agree with this?'

'And mine,' Atsel added. 'Our bosses know each other. The next time they will meet in Brussels, they will get to stay for free in the grandest hotel, eat in the best restaurants and in the evening drink XO cognac together. What happens with us confirms our theory. Do you

realise terrorists attacking an outdoor rock music festival, held in a simple, open field, can hardly be stopped by three persons without making a lot of victims? A team of fifty policemen at least would be necessary to stop an attack, and policemen armed with machineguns! Victims there will be, before we can neutralise the terrorists. Who will get the blame, you think?'

The three kept their silence, as the realisation set in.

Deniz sighed, 'you asked a P90 for me too, Diego, and that is sweet. But I would prefer that precision rifle with telescope. If we can find a high vantage point, I might eliminate those terrorists before they can even blow their nose. We'll have to reconnoitre the site tomorrow. I must choose my place.'

'We may have to force the police and the organisers of the festival to make some changes in how they receive the people,' Atsel said. 'How are we going to do that? Tomorrow, they will not know us yet as members of the police corps. This is hopeless!'

'Should be no issue,' Diego declared. 'The commissaire of the police of Robois is a friend of mine. I can phone him, and give you a paper signed by me. He'll know what we ask is serious. You two will have to reconnoitre. I will have to stay tomorrow morning to receive the guns and the rest. Is there some other gear you think off and that I should have asked?' Atsel and Deniz shook their heads.

The three used the rest of the evening to discuss an action plan, but they could not do much without having seen the site.

Early in the morning, Atsel and Deniz left in Deniz's car. They rode to the field of Turgoux, at the end of Robois, to visit the site of the festival. Diego had given them a paper, and he promised to reach Commissaire Bikri before ten o'clock. Diego stayed in the house.

Around nine thirty, Diego had tried five times already to contact Joseph Bikri and hadn't succeeded. He began to worry. Then, he heard a car riding up to the house. He went to a window, saw a police car drive to the door. He opened, and saw Joseph Bikri step out, from behind the wheel.

Commissaire Bikri called, 'hi, Diego! I have some items for you! I might have guessed you were not a simple young-man with a business career. I'm glad we're on the same side.'

Bikri opened this trunk. Diego went up to Joseph, to help him with the boxes.

Bikri continued in a low voice, 'I have the bulletproof vests you asked for, the police caps, the sunglasses, the rain-cloaks you will probably not need anyway, for the meteorological forecast is for continued hot, dry weather. I bring you the police identity cards too, declaring you, one Christian Trevanion and one Denise Legrand as police officers on a special mission. I was told you also wanted automatic weapons, spy-glasses and communication gear. Those will be sent by Brussels and should arrive in an hour or so.'

'You know about the terrorist attack, then,' Diego asked.

'We do,' Bikri confirmed. 'I am quite happy to have you three professionals with us. My entire force will be at the site too, also with bulletproof vests and the like. We have riot guns. In principle, we shall not intervene unless we are attacked first. We shall not impede your actions. When necessary, we shall help you, of course. My men and women know already you will be at the site. I insisted on total secrecy. Dominique Bussy, my assistant is at the site

now. She told me a man and a woman have identified themselves with a paper from you. She called me and is assisting them.'

Diego nodded. He helped Joseph Bikri with a set of boxes. They brought the boxes inside the house.

An idea struck Diego then, suddenly, as self-evident.

He said, 'you knew about all this earlier than we, didn't you, Joseph? You have a man inside, a Muslim. You warned the Sûreté for the impending attack. I'm here because of your warning, am I not? We were dispatched to the outdoor music festival because you had word it would be attacked!'

Joseph Bikri didn't answer. Diego had not really expected one.

Diego said, 'we'll do all we can to avoid victims, Joseph, but we cannot do miracles. We'll be at Turgoux. Don't get in our way. Tell your officers to hold a respectable distance between us and the shooters. You should contain the people of the festival, and contain the chaos that is bound to happen when the shooting starts. We shall keep the shooting as short as possible. Still, there can be a panic among the people. I cannot guarantee the terrorists to be neutralised before they can reach the audience. We are too few. Sometimes I don't understand my bosses.'

'They didn't believe me, Diego, that is what happens. I am not too sure I believe the story myself. They sent you as insurance, to ease their conscience in case of, but they didn't really believe me. They expect attacks on the capital, on Jewish synagogues and the like, not in a rural town that is nothing more than an outgrown village for them.'

Bikri sighed, 'still, we will do all you say. I'll be on the premises too. If you need help, I'll be there. My mobile phone will be active.'

'Why don't you just stop the festival, Joseph, annul the event, and go after the terrorists before they attack?'

'I don't know who they are, Diego! I may know the one who unleashes the terror, not the men who are actually going to execute the attack. I don't know where the attackers may come from. I don't know whether I can trust the source. The attack could easily be a hoax, with nothing ever happening, the message being merely a trap, a lure to ridicule and discredit me by. I think the attack will indeed happen, though. We don't know how many terrorists will come, but I doubt it will be more than four men or so, probably only two or three. We don't know whether they will come from Robois, from which direction on the N11 or from the smaller roads. It may be a cell from Brussels or Charleroi, or Liège sent here! We do not have the manpower, nor the firepower, to organise effective roadblocks. The only defence we have is your team. My men and women are not trained for operations like this. We have no automatic weapons of the kind we may be faced with. We very much depend on you!'

Diego drew a face. 'We'll do what we have to do. I suggest we sit together afterwards, to discuss matters. I doubt the men who attack will be caught alive. It may well be impossible to link them with anybody of Robois.'

'You are right in that! I'll phone you. Yes, we should sit together after the attack. I'll come with my assistant, a woman.'

Diego gave his mobile phone number to the commissaire.

'One last thing for what it's worth,' Joseph Bikri said, turning to Diego while he went to his car, 'the information I have is that the attack will proceed from the musician's scene on. That

is a very plausible place. The podium is higher than the audience. The terrorists can shoot down from there, maybe throw grenades. If they get to the podium, we will have a carnage on our hands! The car or cars of the terrorists should therefore arrive at the entry of the artists. We placed that entry already to the side, behind the podium, not in the field where the people will be. You might consider at first concentrating your attention to the podium and the artists' tents, the artist entry behind the podium. Please keep in mind this information too might be false and a trap!

'Thanks, Joseph. See you tomorrow. We'll be at Turgoux the entire day. We'll arrive early. Say hello to Samia for me, will you?'

'I will. I hope this finishes well for us!'

'I hope so, too.'

When Commissaire Bikri rode out of the courtyard, another dark, big car rode into the domain. Diego remained standing in front of the house. A man stepped out.

He came to near Diego, saying, 'Polyphemus.'

'Poseidon,' Diego gave him.

The man nodded, and helped Diego to place two boxes in the entry hall. Diego had to sign papers for having reserved two P90 automatic guns, and some unspecified items. The man saluted, stepped back in his car, and rode off with screaming tyres. Diego brought the boxes to the first floor. He also placed the items Joseph Bikri had brought in front of the doors to the rooms of Deniz and Atsel.

At noon, Atsel and Deniz returned. They were laughing all the way when they entered Diego's house.

'Why are you having such fun?' Diego asked suspiciously.

'We found out why the terrorists targeted the outdoor Robois rock music festival,' Deniz replied, still smiling.

'Why is that?'

'You'll see,' she said mysteriously.

Atsel and Deniz had received good help from Dominique Bussy. The news they brought from Turgoux was not good. Just the three of them would not suffice to guard the entrances. They would not be able to stop a massacre. They considered refusing to intervene.

Diego then told them about the additional information brought by the commissaire of Robois. Atsel and Deniz were excited about that, but not joyful. It might help, but not much. The added knowledge changed their plans. They would still be powerless if the terrorists did not come to the artists' entrance.

They ate, and then spent the entire afternoon over a large drawing of the site made by Atsel, based on a folder that presented the layout of the tents and the podium. They discussed their positions.

One issue that was easily decided upon was on whether they would try to take prisoners. Should they shout they were of the police and demand to lay down arms, or should they shoot straightaway when the first gun appeared? They would make no fuss! They agreed all three almost instantly that at the music festival, the first show of guns, especially automatic guns, was sufficient sign of extremely bad intentions. They would not summon to surrender! They

would as quickly as possible take out the terrorists brandishing guns. They would shoot to kill, as soon as possible.

They also agreed to the sad fact that if the terrorists would arrive at any other place than the one they would be positioned to, a massacre would ensue. They would be far too late to intervene! They would not be able to avoid a carnage. Still, they would not let the attackers get away unscathed. They feared such a scenario, but realised they could do nothing against it.

They decided the entry of the artists would have to be modified somewhat. Atsel and Deniz returned to the site to order the changes. They were well aware of the fact the information could be a trap. The attack could actually take place at the opposite end, at the tent camp of the festival, at the parking lot, and so on, but they could not guard all the entrances, and certainly not the grounds proper. They proposed to stick with the attack taking place near the podium, and plan accordingly.

Their main issue was the fence set up around the site.

If they positioned themselves outside the fence, they would shoot towards the podium and the site. They might intervene early. Still, they would shoot towards the inside and harm the people. It was here, however, they had the most opportunities to stop their enemies before these could do harm. But if the terrorists infiltrated the site, Atsel and Diego would be blocked out by the fence, and by the chaos inside.

If they positioned themselves inside the fence, but at the artists' entry, they would shoot to the outside, away from the audience and from the podium, but they might be late in intercepting the terrorists. These would then be shooting to the inside! The people at the entrance of the artists, who would be checking the artists, would be in the first line of the killing. Almost certainly, victims would fall at this place. Nevertheless, inside, the three defenders would be freer to move and protect the people. They could defend the entry. The three of them agreed the outdoor festival should have been cancelled. They found it irresponsible to not have cancelled the event after the information had been presented.

2.5. The young Muslims. Tuesday, 14 July

The same morning Commissaire Bikri delivered the bulletproof vests to Diego Trioteignes, he received once more a significant phone call. The caller was Karim Khedis. Joseph Bikri was surprised, for he had not expected a rather old man like Khedis to use a mobile phone, yet that was what the gardener of the Horse Bayard told Joseph he was using to reach the commissaire.

Khedis began by asking whether he could talk to the commissaire without being overheard. Bikri assured him nobody could hear their conversation. Khedis then explained slowly, in many words, about the young Muslims of Robois he had been discussing matters with. The young men had continued considering the issues concerning the Imam Majdi Al-Faris. They had decided they would have, after all, to speak openly and in person to the commissaire. They still insisted on secrecy, but they judged the situation so dangerous and preoccupying, they thought it necessary to tell to the police what was happening in Robois. They proposed a meeting with the commissaire at Karim Khedis' home. The commissaire should come alone, rather late in the evening. Eight o'clock would be a fine hour, after the last prayers. Khedis gave his address to Joseph Bikri, which was unnecessary, for Bikri had that address since a long time already, and the commissaire promised to be there at the agreed time, and to not to come in uniform.

At eight o'clock sharp that evening, Joseph Bikri rang at the bell of the house of Khedis in a side street of Robois' main shopping avenue. An old woman dressed in a beautifully coloured blue and yellow tunic opened for him. She peered suspiciously at him at first, the door panel opened only a few centimetres. But then, recognising Bikri, she opened the door wide and waved him in. He saluted the woman warmly. She told him she was Karim's wife, and led Joseph through a long corridor into what might have been the living-room of the Khedis family. The room was large, not very wide but long, much longer than Joseph Bikri might have guessed in a mid-town house. Bikri supposed he hall had once been a dining-room and a living-room, of which the separating walls and doors had been dismantled to make for one, ample space. Sofas and seats stood in the room, chairs and fine wooden cupboards, as well as a few small tables. The room was nicely decorated. Tapestries lay on the floor, pictures hung on the walls, and fine copper vases stood on the window-sills and on the cupboards. The room inspired an atmosphere of warm intimacy.

To Joseph Bikri's amazement, more than twenty people were sitting in the room! He had expected no more than five. When he entered, all sprang to their feet. The people were younger men and women. They showed him respect by standing up. Joseph Bikri came forward, and went up to his friend Karim Khedis first, shaking the old man's hands. Karim beamed but kept a serious, solemn face, demonstrating the grace of a village amir. He took Joseph Bikri at the sleeve, so that Joseph had to turn to the audience, and he presented one by one the people who were standing in the room. Karim knew all the names and surnames. Joseph Bikri shook hands, smiled and said a warm hello. He told he recognised some of the men and women he had met in the streets and in town reunions the last years. He knew quite a few among the young men and women present. He found it a good, though somewhat surprising sign that women were present.

The young men and women were young to Karim Khedis. Actually, most of the people were way over thirty, a few were even in their forties! When all hands had been touched, some hands having been warm and firm, other cold and only touching with fingertips, Karim invited everybody to sit. Karim sat in a chair close to where he stood. The chair allowed him to sit somewhat higher than the men and women who sagged in the soft sofas and seats. Karim showed with an open hand a chair of the same model, next to him. Bikri thanked, and went to sit. He thought meetings in villages of the countryside of his Moroccan homeland would have been organised the same way, the amir of the village presiding with the commander of the police! He looked at the people in the room. He understood he had the most respected men of the Muslim community before him, the ones who had been delegated to speak with him. The men and women studied him too with intelligent, slightly sceptic eyes.

The women held their head high, their foreheads frowning, as if meaning to say, 'let's first see what this commissaire has to say, then we'll judge!'

Bikri was a little intimidated by their stares. He knew these were men of authority, and women anxious to live well in Robois.

Commissaire Bikri scraped his throat, but Karim introduced the conversation before Bikri could say anything.

He said, 'brothers and sisters, we have gathered here to talk about what is happening in our community of Robois. I would like to state first, Commissaire Bikri, we like the work you do in our town and we are happy to receive you in this house. There is less and less crime in our villages, we can live in peace, we see more officers walk in our streets and protect us. We have no real issue with the Christian community, and also not with the people who do not believe in a god. Generally, we live in peace with our neighbours. We use the same bakers and butchers and grocers. We choose our meat, we ask for clean, decent meat, but we are not refusing meat that is not entirely halal. Not everybody in Robois is very friendly, of course, but we noticed the bullies are bullies also with the other townspeople of Robois, and therefore shunned by all. The people of Robois help us when something is wrong, and we help where we can. Our charity goes to Muslims and Christians alike. We like the feasts of Robois, and we participate in them.'

Karim Khedis halted for a few seconds at that point, but Joseph Bikri saw faces only nodding in agreement, in front of him. Khedis was pleased not to be proven wrong with what he had said.

He continued, 'we also had a really fine imam, Imam Dhakir El-Amin. El-Amin taught kindness to his more scholarly assistant Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz. Bin Mahfouz was a lot younger when he arrived, of course, but he proved to know the Koran and the Hadith well, explained the suras properly, and we soon learned he too was a pious, kind man, who did good to our community and who preached peace. He did not speak of violence, helped our children respect their parents, and encouraged them to become friends with the other youths of Robois. Thanks to him, our children did not run aimlessly in the streets. They participated in the soccer clubs and in other associations of our town. This situation changed entirely when the Imam Majdi Al-Faris came, with the building of the new mosque. Now, I have spoken sufficiently. I want our young men and women to speak out for themselves over what

lies in their hearts about the Muslim community today, and especially about what they think and know about Imam Majdi Al-Faris and his group.'

The men looked at each other. None decided to speak first. Some awkward moments of silence followed, which Joseph Bikri finally wanted to break with a joke. A woman began to speak, however. She had been holding a laced handkerchief to her eyes, but now she spoke out, haltingly, but loud enough for everybody to hear.

'My name is Adila. I am here with my husband. I have learned from the women of Robois to speak frankly when none of the men dare to open their mouths,' she began, throwing defying looks at a man who was probably her husband. 'I am afraid for my boys, commissaire! Meetings are held outside of the prayers' hall, to which our boys are invited. An assistant of Al-Faris announced after an evening prayer session special conferences would be held in a room above the cafeteria, intended for the young and for the men. We are pious Muslims all, so we sent our children and our men to the new imam. We thought he was a wise man. All of our men and boys attended the sessions. They heard Al-Faris speak and they watched videos on a large television screen in the room. I'll be brief, commissaire. After many sessions, my boys changed. They refused to give a hand to the Christian women we met and talked to in the streets. My boys brought with them documentation, brochures with terrible texts about the differences between Muslims and infidels. The brochures held cruel pictures of jihadists. They spoke of a revenging, resplendent Islam that would be victorious in arms throughout the world. The Koran promised victory over all infidel armies, the imam said. My husband has a few of such brochures with him. Give them to the commissaire, Rafiq, so that the commissaire can see for himself what rebellious language is in those brochures, how many phrases of hatred are written in them.'

The man Rafiq stood and handed over three brochures. He also gave Joseph Bikri two video discs, said these too had been received by his boys. Joseph Bikri browsed through the pages, and saw much publicity for the jihad against infidels. Photos of men brandishing Kalashnikov guns were spread over the pages. The booklets held photos of jihadists triumphantly entering conquered territories in American pickups on which were mounted enormous machine-guns. Joseph knew this kind of publications. He had hoped never to see them in Robois.

The woman continued, 'our sons are still very young, but they demanded I dressed in a scarf when I went out of the house. I refused, and even put down the shawl I usually cover my hair with. My sons began to tell me I should not drive a car, never be left alone in the streets. There is not one verse in the Koran forcing us, women, to hide our faces and our hair from decent people, commissaire. At least, I found none! My sons, however, began to treat me as a slave, as an inferior person to them! They did that to me, their mother! Their father corrected them, but then they started citing verses from the Koran about women, how women must serve men, should inherit less than men, and the like. I love my husband, commissaire. He is a good man. My husband and I, we do everything together, he takes counsel with me and I ask for his advice. We live as equals. We respect one another. In this country, I don't want to be treated as a slave!'

The woman began to cry. Her husband placed his hand on her, soothing her.

A man then spoke, 'two boys of less than twenty years old disappeared from Robois, commissaire. Their parents were friends of mine. They did not dare go to the police. After two weeks, a man from the new mosque came to tell them the boys had arrived together in Syria. They had taken on a new name, and were fighting for Islam in ISIL. They had become jihadists! Their fathers are not with us this evening, but they allowed me to speak for them. Their families are ashamed to show up, commissaire. They are ashamed for not having better protected their sons. These families only go out of their houses when they cannot do otherwise, when they must. They have cut themselves off from our community too, and they grieve in silence. They dare not explain their sorrow to the police, for fear their sons would not be allowed in the territory again, or be imprisoned when they would eventually return. What are those men at the new mosque who turn the minds of our children to hatred and violence? They are telling radical Islamist organisations are being unfairly demonised. The parents of those young jihadists now wait for the men of the mosque to come and tell them their sons have died for Islam in faraway Syria! The boys were intelligent, and could have been the pride of our community!'

Joseph Bikri was appalled. He too was ashamed, for he had not known this had also been going on in his town.

'I was at several such meetings organised by Imam Al-Faris,' another man exclaimed. 'Those meetings are not at all ordinary meetings! Only Al-Faris speaks, and then he asks people in the audience whether he is wrong and whether they agree with what he says. Everybody says they agree, of course. Who would dare contradict an imam? Al-Faris told the Koran says not to be friends with infidels, and the other people of Robois are infidels, he claimed. He said to leave the other people of Robois aside, not to greet them, to shun them, not to allow our children to play with the Christian kids. He said God's curse was on the infidels. Infidels should be killed if they did not convert to Islam. He read aloud from the Koran the verses that refer to the holy war against infidels. Infidels should be killed, he cried. He told us to read the Koran verse by verse, and thus to learn what Islam truly means. We submit to God, commissaire, and we try to be good Muslims, but we do not want violence in our town! Our fathers have told us many stories of the harsh life of cruelty they escaped from when they arrived here, in Robois. All of us, we or our fathers and mothers, left our homelands to make of this country our new homeland, because we sought good living. How can one find God and be good in times of war? How can one justify suicide bombings? We came here to find peace, to live happily. I am satisfied with my life. I do not earn much money, I am a plumber, but I have enough to eat well, to feed my wife and children, to return once every while to our homeland. My children go to school, learn well and may even get to university, God help us, if they want to. I wouldn't dream of returning to countries at war or to villages without schools, without the fine hospitals we have here, without the social institutions we have. I will have small a pension when I must stop working, commissaire, and can live decently, also in old age.'

The man spoke louder as if he also wanted to convince the other people present, 'look at what happens in the world! In all the countries where radical Muslims are in government, there is cruel war. Hundreds of thousands of refugees flee from those countries. They are all countries with extremist jihadists! The Muslims flee from Libya, Tunisia even, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan! Tyrants are chased to be replaced with other tyrants. All the former ones and the

new ones, call themselves good Muslims! In every country where fundamentalists reign, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, terrorism was welcomed and evil men sent out to the world! In Egypt itself, the military took over the extremist religious government. I am not Kurdish, but in Turkey, matters are not getting better, they are getting worse! Investigative journalists are thrown into prison, the president's son has been named in a corruption scandal, and homosexuals are pursued. Corruption is on the rise, also in government circles. Guns and other armaments are delivered to ISIL together with pharmaceuticals, and the Turkish state is profiting from the terrorist ISIL's oil. Brothers and sisters, we don't want horrors such as happen all the time in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan to happen here too! God preserve us, here in Robois! We are Islamists, but we abhor violence. Yet, brothers, our beloved Imam Dhakir El-Amin was murdered atrociously, his head cut off, in this town! We have no proof, but we all know who instigated the murder! If we let all of this happen, we will send this country into horror. Are we going to let this happen? This is not anymore a matter of hurting infidels, the Christians of Robois. It is a matter of how we want to live! When we let the imams come into power, into military power also, then they become tyrants! They will tolerate no man above their power, for they have the best excuse of all: their power is God's power, they say. That statement, however, is a lie, and we all know it! Has God spoken to them? Of course not! The Christians have fought for centuries to stop such power of the priests and bishops. They too have known such battles.'

'Yes, yes,' the other men shouted, and became quite excited.

A scholarly, thin man of about forty years considered, 'our neighbours were born in this country. Their forefathers lived here for many centuries, and their forefathers fought for their freedom, for democracy and peace. We, Muslims, have come from the immigration movement. We were not born here. Nevertheless, I ask you, who has more right to be called a citizen of this country, the one who was born here and who has roots of forefathers in this country, but does nothing to advance it in economy and culture, or the one who has come here because he wanted to build a future, desired to advance the country and feel spiritually linked to its values? Also commissaire, take care. We, who have come from the lands of our forefathers, have left those lands because living was atrocious and without hope on better. There is war in our countries of origin, strife, dictatorship, forcing us into a religion in which we are not allowed to think by ourselves, oppression and lack of respect by the politicians for the people. We are grateful to build a future here, in this land, in peace. We do not earn much money, but we live better than where we came from. We can vote, and have a say in how we live. We do not want to lose that, now. Al-Faris, however, spreads his evil messages like a disease, like a cancer.'

Yet another man objected, 'Our sons and daughters, do not know how it was to live in the lands we came from. They feel the segregation. They feel the differences. They would like to profit from modern life, and like many young people of this country, they think they can get rich quickly, have much money, a fine house, big cars and televisions and diamond rings, without working till their backs break. We know otherwise. Life is hard, everybody has to work hard. And we also see how our neighbours work hard, and formulate the same complaint about their children. Our neighbours have more money, because their wives work too, whereas in many Muslim families the wives stay at home. Our women have not had the education needed for a decent job, and our Muslim values demand the wife stays at home!

So, our sons and daughters feel frustrated, as money is scarce. They have it difficult to find a good job, and they seek to blame someone. A cause is readily found! They believe they are set back because they are the children of immigrants. Like all youngsters, they have violence in them. They also have not much to be proud about. They are rebels without a cause. There is nothing in our home countries we can be proud of. So, when on television they see day after day how the communities of Europe seem to be scared of acts of terrorism, they feel attracted to this sordid kind of pride. Finally, finally, there is something our young men feel they can be proud of, even if for all the wrong reasons, as we know but too well! When then an imam comes to preach more violence, talks of the pride of winning over the infidels, of violence towards the infidels, our neighbours, then our youngsters, lend their ears to his talk of hatred. From rebels without a cause, they turn into rebels with a dreadful cause, the first cause that allows them to kill with impunity, and a cause that guarantees them a place in paradise! Such an imam channels all the frustrations of modern life in our young people to his aims of violence. He should tell our children the values of a life of hardship and work, of diligence and dedication, of kindness, and not of vengeance and hatred! Our sons and daughters now seek their pride in how radicalised Muslims kill and cause distress. The infidels deserve the sadness and fear, they feel, because they have set back our young people. That is a lie, of course, but the message works!

Have you followed the latest news on television? Many acts of terrorism have been committed! Have you noticed how these heinous acts have been perpetrated by very young men, who had been petty thieves and small criminals in their earlier youth? Most of them did not really become terrorists because they had studied the Koran for years and years on, and become convinced of the most violent verses in the Koran! They were no radical Muslims at all! They were small criminals, angry against our current society as a whole, who suddenly discovered Islam as an excuse for worse crimes. They were scoundrels, angry young man, unworthy of much attention, who sought revenge and hatred and could now, as fundamentalist Islamists, commit the cruellest crimes with the blessing of the imams of supposedly our God. We don't want our sons to be exponents of hatred!

Talking about the imams and the leaders in religion. What about them? Some, also in Robois, preach cruelty. They cite the verses of the Book which lead to violence. They work on the minds of the very vulnerable of our young men, on the desperate, the confused, the not too intelligent, the one who are violent by nature, the ones who cannot cope with reality, the ones who hoped for riches without effort, the ones who feel they are not respected, and the ones who even their own people avoid. These, the so-called leaders convert to radical Islam. But have you read in the newspapers, or have you seen or heard on television of one, only of one of these preachers of violence, having blown himself up in a suicide bombing attack? I have heard of no such name! They simply do not practice what they preach! Why do they too not eagerly seek the so splendid paradise they speak of? Why do they not act according to what they preach? Why do they scream then of verses written in times of violence, hundreds of years ago, when men lived like fierce animals, like predators? Have we not gained the least wisdom from ages of useless violence? Hypocrites they are, I tell you! How can we follow their words? Who wants to follow them, he or she who has still a little bit of decent good sense in him or her?

The men and women present shook their head.

‘There are over two hundred and fifty Koran Schools in this country, one per mosque,’ another man began. ‘Our children go to these schools from when they have reached the age of five. I know of at least one Koran school that has over nine hundred pupils! Can you imagine what might happen when our children, who learn many Koran verses by heart, come upon verses that demand to decapitate infidels and that tell them never to be friends with infidels? We know better, we know how to relativize these verses, and the Imams El-Amin and Bin Mahfouz knew how to explain these verses, but imagine what such phrases could do to the minds of our children? No wonder Belgium is the land with the highest number of young people gone to Syria to fight and lose their life over there! Is that what we want?’ The men bowed their heads.

Everybody then wanted to tell stories about Al-Faris and his men. Karim Khedis had to bring his hand up, for all the men and women talked together. Karim Khedis pointed to Hakim, and then to Jamal, to Mahmud, to speak, and each man then spoke his mind. The stories came to the same conclusion. Imam Al-Faris was preaching violence in Robois. He was preaching the holy war against the infidels of Robois. He had called God's curse over Robois.

Commissaire Bikri listened patiently to all the stories. Each witness added his or her horror to the list of misdeeds, instigations to violence, and calls of hatred and death for the habitants of Robois. Joseph Bikri had brought no recorder with him. His mobile phone sat closed in his pocket. He would never have recorded the conversations this first reunion. He listened patiently, took note of the grievances in his mind, and knew he would have to make a substantial report on his return to office. The allegations were too important to be left without response. His head sunk. He was struck with grief at the stories he heard.

When the men had more or less finished, he said, ‘friends, you know I am a Muslim. I try to be a good Muslim, a kind man, submitted to the one God, a compassionate man, as the Koran teaches us. You have not seen me much in the mosque, because I have learned from very early youth on to remain very suspicious about what certain imams tell us. In doing that, I shut myself off from the Muslim community, and I may have been wrong in that. I should have known much more about what was happening at the mosque and in our community. I confess my failures and my errors. I left you alone! It was very good and very courageous of you to come to me and explain your distress.

Listen attentively to what I am going to say, now! If Islam is to be a way of living in the respect of God, and a law handed over to people who want to live in peace, to enhance the liberty of each man and woman to be able to develop his- or herself in kindness, Islam must be non-violent towards other-minded people. Do not to others what you do not want others to do to you! Such is also the aim of the secular law of this country. I am the guardian of that law. The Imam Al-Faris does not have his place in Robois, if he preaches against the law of this country. I think you all concluded to that.’

Joseph Bikri let these words sink in. Some might not entirely have agreed with him. He continued, ‘however, I cannot really succeed in chasing the imam out of Robois and in doing so re-establish our peace of mind, without your help. You spoke, and I know you spoke honestly, of the ways he used for exciting our community to cruelty. We do not want that, but

I need harder proof to intervene. Our law of the country does not allow me to intervene on hear-say. Our law is fair and demands hard proof. That is the right way to act!

He said, 'I heard you. What you said helps me on, but not way enough! I'll think of what you told me, and with God's help find ways to stop Al-Faris. Nevertheless, I need you too, desperately!'

Joseph Bikri waited anew, looked around, and looked at each face.

He continued speaking, 'here is what I must propose. What the Imam Al-Faris says in public must be recorded. His speeches must be recorded, and the recordings given to me. I cannot do that, for the imam knows me too well. My officers cannot do that, because they are Christians or lay people. If some of you are willing to help me, then I propose you think my plea over, and contact me, or contact Karim Khedis. I can provide you with miniaturised recording gear, much better than your mobile phones. The devices I can give you are very small, and hard to find on a body. The recording is always risky, I know! We can work something out to protect you as best as we can, to protect those who would like to help us actively, not just with words. I would also like you to continue giving to me exemplars of the brochures and videos that are distributed by Al-Faris and his assistants.

Remember indeed, the Christians of this country fought long to win their freedom and peace. It is our turn now to fight that battle. I would prefer you to go together to the imam's meetings with two or three men together in small groups, so that you can also thus protect each other. Think about what I ask of you. Do not start this evening what you cannot hold as promise tomorrow. Warn me or Karim Khedis of your willingness, and we, the police of Robois, will deliver the recording devices, and organise protection just outside the mosque buildings. We can work out something that is the safest for you. Now, do you have more stories? What is it you may still have to share with me?'

A cacophony of voices rose in the room. Order was once more bought by Karim Khedis. Joseph Bikri let Khedis, the old gardener, exercise his role as amir of the Muslim community of Robois. Amir was the honorary name he would now have to instore on Karim!

The women at that point disappeared into the kitchen. They came back with sweets they had prepared in advance, and they served hot tea with Moroccan mint leaves.

The Muslims and Commissaire Joseph Bikri spoke till late in the night. The women also spoke and emphasised what they wanted. The women urged the men to act. They confirmed several times they were thinking of their children. The men remained more cautious. They sensed the danger.

Joseph Bikri appreciated what the men said, but he was not at all sure the men would tomorrow massively agree to help him and the police. He couldn't be angry with them. The risks were high. One murder had already been committed, more crimes might follow. Recording the speeches of Imam Al-Faris could prove dangerous. Bikri had to explain and explain again how such recordings could be made safely.

Finally, when the tea had been drunk, Joseph Bikri stood from his chair, stretched, and said he had to leave, for he would have a strenuous day tomorrow. He did not want to leave too late, for the men and women would have to work out on their own how they might help the

police of Robois. Joseph Bikri thanked Karim Khedis for his hospitality, and went home on foot in the dark night.

While walking, he thought, 'I must write a report on this evening, show it to the Prosecutor of the King in Namur, and ask for putting the Imam Al-Faris and his men under telephonic surveillance. We need to scan their telephone conversations and thus find out whether they plan some misdeed.'

Joseph Bikri was distressed by the danger the Imam Al-Faris and his assistants presented, but also happy to have a way forward, to be advancing in his investigation, step by step.

Commissaire Bikri had not left his house for more than two minutes to walk to this meeting with the young Muslims, when someone rang at his house bell. Samia Bennani opened the door, to find Hamza Al-Harrak at her doorstep. Hamza didn't smile, rather sheepishly said hello. He asked in a subdued voice to speak to Khadijah.

'Come in,' Samia agreed.

She did not like Khadijah running in the streets in the evening, so she preferred the two to discuss at home. Hamza guessed her thoughts, for he said he had been working late, and he apologised for the hour. But he still insisted, in the corridor of the Bikris, to talk to Khadijah. Samia brought Hamza to her living-room, telling the young man she would call her sister. She gave him a courageous look. She also said she would leave the two alone, for she wanted to watch a television documentary. Hamza went to sit in the sofa.

Samia called loudly for Khadijah at the stairs. Samia shouted somebody wanted to see her. Khadijah cried back she would be down in a minute.

Khadijah was surprised to see Hamza sitting in the living-room, but her heart leapt for joy.

'He has come to apologise,' she said to herself, 'I have not lost him, after all.'

That was exactly what Hamza had come for. He jumped up when he saw Khadijah enter, but they sat again, the one in front of the other.

Khadijah, Hamza remarked, sitting there, her hands on her knees, was one of the most beautiful girls of Robois, and by far the prettiest in the Muslim community of the town.

Hamza knew she was intelligent, going to university and all. Hamza was truly very much in love with her. He had been thinking hard about their last conversation, having not a little on his conscience he had been a brute to leave her standing in the street like that. He should dominate his temper!

He had also considered what he had been doing at the new mosque, for Khadijah had stirred up feelings with which he too had become uneasy these last months. He had spent quite some time looking up things on the Internet, and looking through Khadijah's eyes. He had changed his attitude. He was now confused about what he had been doing. He needed more advice, sound advice, someone to talk to, and he absolutely didn't want to lose the most beautiful girl of Robois. He knew for certain also only Khadijah could make a better man of him. She was everything he wanted in a woman. He desired a lot more than a pretty face, a nice body, and sex. He was crazy about Khadijah, and crazy to have quarrelled with her! He felt ashamed of his last words the other evening, and ashamed of having left Khadijah on her own so late and in the dark. If he was supposed to be her man, he was supposed to protect her, not to leave her standing alone in a sombre street at that hour. If she would wish him now to hell, he wouldn't be surprised.

Khadijah asked Hamza what he had come for.

'I'm terribly sorry for the other day,' Hamza clumsily confessed. 'I should not have run off like that. I was stupid. It will never happen again. I'm sorry.'

Khadijah drove the dagger deep.

She made her position quite clear, 'I don't want a friend or a husband who is a fundamentalist. I want no radical Muslim at home. I want a family that respects God, but which also respects our neighbours, be they Muslim or of any other faith or of no faith. That should be very clear. I want my children to grow up as tolerant human beings. I want my husband to look at me as his equal. I want my children to love me and to obey me till they are grown-ups. I don't want them to treat me as a slave or like a person of lesser value. I refuse henceforth at all times to wear a hijab, but that does not mean I will not try to be a good person in Islam. I read the Koran and I like it when God says he is compassionate and merciful. That is the God I can acknowledge and venerate. I have Christian friends, and I want you to respect them too. So, now you know my conditions. I have many more of that kind, but those are the most important ones.'

'You sound like Leila Bekhti and Hafsia Herzi in Radu Mihaileanu's film "The Source", "La Source des Femmes"', Hamza smiled. 'You are right, though, and I never really wanted anything else. Not consciously! I want to be proud of my wife. I wouldn't settle for one I could not respect because she hadn't a mind of her own. You see, I am but a technician. I am a good technician, I am trying to be an engineer soon, so I can only prove myself by the project I am working on. I had my project in mind, and I cared for little else for a while – except you, of course, - but that was wrong, too. I mean, only thinking about my work.' 'I am happy to hear so,' Khadijah replied, still with a stern voice. 'I want a man who has eye and ear for other subjects in the world but mechanics and electronics, but I sure admire men who can accomplish something with their mind and hands. There is more in the world than a small project.'

'This is not a small project we are working on, Khadijah! We have been working on it day and night, the three of us, me and my two friends, working for almost a year. It is not a revolutionary project, but nobody on this earth has yet built something like we did! We are describing what we are building, and we will present our years' end thesis on the project. It will succeed, of course, we are in the very last test phases, but without it we won't receive our diploma of industrial engineers. Only when our project is a success will I also leave school in September and have a job waiting for me! I can start in the Blouges factories if our thesis is accepted and if the prototypes work! My parents cannot pay for university, but I can get a degree in engineering from university after my working hours. I will have the money with my job to study on, and be able to be someone in town. Later, when I'll be a civil engineer, I may find an even better paid job in one of the very large consortiums, work in research and development, grow to become a manager and give you much money.'

'I can take care of myself,' Khadijah declared. 'I'll have a job of myself. I'll earn my own living. I don't want to depend financially on my husband. Still, I would like to live well. I'd rather you earn good money than only a little,' she smiled.

They held a silence.

Khadijah smiled her most beautiful face then, 'so, you came to make up with me?'

'I didn't break up. I apologise,' Hamza told, looking at his feet on the tapestry of the floor. 'I never broke up either,' Khadijah smiled, seeing him sitting there so miserably and meekly. 'There is something, however, you must do for me. I heard that imam of yours, that man called Al-Faris, he might be a dangerous man. He is a Wahhabist, a radical Islamist. He stirs up the young Muslims of Robois. You must keep a distance from that man. He must not influence you with his radical ideas about Islam. Why isn't he fighting in Syria himself, if he thinks that war for Islam is justified? I don't want you to fly to Syria, Hamza! If you do something like that, I won't be waiting for you! Keep away from that man!'

'I know. I realise what he is,' Hamza assured. 'I heard you the other day. I already don't go to his meetings anymore. I have to keep a balance, though, for if he cuts me off from the mosque's workshop and from my friends, then I can say goodbye to my work, to my diploma, and to the promised job in the Blouges factories. The imam works together with the Blouges factories, you see.'

'Just stay away from him. Lie if you must. Don't let yourself be influenced by the radical ideas he seems to be preaching.'

'Of course not,' Hamza protested. 'I'm not stupid. I read about the sect he represents. Can I see you again, then?'

'You can even kiss me, stupid,' Khadijah laughed.

Hamza sprang from his sofa, went over to the seat where Khadijah sat, and the next instant the two were lying on the sofa together, kissing passionately.

Khadijah ended the passion a little later, before she was doing stupid things too. Samia was near!

'You'll have to explain me some more about your project,' she wanted afterwards. 'Would you like a tea, now?'

'Yes, please,' Hamza replied. 'Maybe Samia wants one too.'

Khadijah smiled back. The two of them went into the kitchen. They made tea, brought a cup to Samia, and watched television together.

Joseph Bikri found them there, sitting on the same sofa. There was no place left for him.

2.6. The Blazing Devils. Wednesday, 15 July

Diego de Trioteignes stood at the imposing entry gate of the vast site of the rock music festival of Robois. He stood there, and remained standing for a few moments, utterly amazed. He was looking up, under the amused eyes of Atsel and Deniz who had already been there. The gate was an enormous structure of metal tubes, on which had been placed a gigantic panel resembling a medieval, bevelled stone gate. Above Diego soared a ten metres high, painted wooden panel representing a human skull surrounded by red flames. The writing under it read, 'Welcome to Flaming Hell'. Side panels descended from this central panel, also painted in garish colours, in which the red of blood and fire dominated. 'Jesus, Mary,' Diego let go.

'That was the surprise we mentioned,' Deniz Sürkoglou laughed. 'The festival is actually called the "Robois Blazing Devils' Rock Music Festival", or in short and affectionately the BlaDev! This is its third edition, we were told. You have seen the gate to hell, but that is nothing compared to what is inside. Hell is inside! The festival is unique in its kind in the world. Aficionados from all countries flock to it. It is a true devils' festival. Inside, you will only see people disguised as devils, vampires, torturers, pirates, werewolves, djinns, dibouks, ghosts, executioners, and the like. The Gothics of the world assemble here. Everybody is covered with tattoos, pierced multiple times with rings and small staves, bald or black-haired, and faces painted with masks of skulls. They wear metal chains about everywhere. The women run half-naked.'

Atsel added, 'the stage is grander than the gate, and there are two podiums for the music bands. The central stage is in the form of a giant cave with much red light and special effects of red flames spewing every few seconds out of giant metal mouths. Girls covered in blood – I suppose red paint or ketchup – dance around. When we saw this circus yesterday, we wondered why we should bother. I proposed straightaway to help blow up the entire structure with Semtex or C4. That was when we understood fully why the radical Muslims had chosen to attack this festival, here! It is a rock music festival indeed, but the music bands are dressed as dangerous freaks and they bring exclusively Heavy Metal sounds, but then of the heaviest metal ever heard. They merely shriek something nobody understands, and yet the spectators get in a trance! It is a satanic festival! We heard not only the Muslim community protested against its installation, two years ago, but also every other religion! It is much fun really, a reunion of all the dark freaks of Europe and abroad. To many this may seem entirely ridiculous, and hence harmless, but I guess also more drugs and alcohol are sold here, these two days, than during the rest of the year in the entire province. Behind the gate are grass fields kept free of grazing cattle until now, the tent camps, and so on. You'll find a complete medieval village, with black knights and all. Watch out for the vampires!'

'The small police force of Robois is powerless,' Deniz mused. 'We met the commissaire of police, a nice man. He told us he had tried to stop the organisation of this black orgy since its inception. He protests each year. For one or other reason, probably for the money and the foreign currency and taxes the festival brings to the region, the politicians refused to cancel it. They also forbade the commissaire to take more security measures. The commissaire could

not use additional police forces from surrounding zones. The organisers have their own vigilantes, a private security force of their own. Those men are impressive, but they are unarmed, except for some baseball bats. They look like members of bodybuilders' associations or of boxing clubs. The guys are over a metre eighty tall, have chests like barrels, muscles like ropes, and hands like spades. I bet, though, if I kick one in the balls, he will not get up anymore. They actually run around to impress, for the show, but one Kalashnikov can shoot down a dozen of them in a few seconds. They are untrained, but at least impressive to the audience, inside. Most of them are untrained benevolent men. The local police feel powerless faced with these private stewards, and powerless also in front of the numerous gangs of black-leather and latex covered bikers that arrive continuously and have already arrived in force. When I say leather-covered, well, many women wear close to nothing more than the tiniest string below and a few strings above, and some not even so much! I had to restrain Atsel from raping a few on the spot!

Atsel grinned, and Diego remained speechless. Groups of girls passed him and ran to under the gate, faces painted in grey makeup, with black eyes, black hair, black or deep purple lips, rings of shining metal in their ears and noses and lips and navels. A group of men dressed in furs as Vikings, brandishing plastic axes, walked to the gate, entry tickets in their hands. Beyond the gate stood the kiosques where entry tickets had to be shown. A queue formed. Diego looked at another such group, equally painted in the face as International Gothics, with white skulls, but dressed in former German grey SS-like uniforms. Swastikas were forbidden, but other sun-symbols replaced those.

Diego and his friends had arrived only at about ten o'clock, which was early for a rock festival in which most of the better known bands would only bring music in the late afternoon and evening. The terrorists, if they would come, would attack in the afternoon, when the largest crowd had gathered.

Diego, Atsel and Deniz had parked their car, Atsel's big Renault, along the N11. A stretch of several kilometres had been foreseen at both sides of the National Road, to place the cars, camping cars and motorbikes. Young stewards walked up and down the lines. Most of the terrain on which the festival would take place lay in the village of Turgoux, on the eastern side of the N11. When one arrived by car from Robois, one saw first a large tent camp, left of the N11, endless rows of tents in which the festivallers might seek a few hours of sleep. Between this tent camp and the pastures in which the festival would actually be held, lay the artists' entry. This was merely a broad earthen path that swung away at straight lines from the N11. It circled around the festival terrain. The actual festival terrain had been arranged with its longest side parallel to the N11. The podiums stood at the other end. The terrain was huge, for at least ten-thousand people were expected to come and hear the music.

Diego could not imagine the music to be fine or interesting. The spectators would hear incoherent screams and rattling, shrieking guitars and hellish drums, no melodies, and no harmonious sounds. The artists' vans would have to make the tour of the site, on this path, ride to the farthest rear gate, behind which lay another terrain of tents, of very large tents. The artists disembarked their instruments there, and had to wait for their turn to arrange a scene to play in. The festival organisation had built two huge of such scenes on one long, high podium. While one band played in the hell's cave, the other band prepared on the second podium, an equally ugly scene of blood and horror of skulls and masks. The bands on the

second podium served as intermezzos. They were generally lesser groups, who showed what they could give in between the representations of the most famous groups of the first podium. What they offered was possibly more noise and harsher sounds! Hard music non-stop was guaranteed in this way.

Through the enormous entry gate, Diego saw two long rows of bars that offered fast food in separate tents, a row of the administrative and vigilante tents, the Red Cross team, and the inevitable long containers with the girls' and boys' toilets. The site had been transformed into one gigantic hell, for the tents, the bars, toilets, and so on, were placed behind large panels painted with scenes of satanic orgies, of hells, of vampire scenes, of pirate ships, and the like. Diego had never seen something more weird and absurd!

'The Belgian soccer team is called of the "Red Devils",' Atsel remarked, 'the female soccer team are the "Red Flames", other teams are called the "Red Dragons", and so forth. I guess Belgium is a country of and for devils. I almost felt some sympathy for the terrorists who want to blow this madness up.'

He sighed. Deniz was laughing.

Diego, Atsel and Deniz then stood in the middle of the arrival zone, right in front of the entry. They were dressed in black jeans, black bulletproof vests with the word "police" printed in yellow letters on their chest and back. They wore sunglasses and dark blue police caps. Under their bulletproof vests showed their T-shirts, white ones for Atsel and Diego, a yellow one for Deniz. They didn't realise they blended in well with the groups of people that ran to hear the music!

Atsel and Diego relaxed. They hung their P90 automatic guns on a sling around their neck. Deniz wore the long precision rifle with the telescope. Their handguns hung at their belts. They had decided Deniz would climb on top of the metal structure behind the podiums, sit or lay there on wooden planks, and cover the area behind the podiums like a sniper. From there, she could see the entire space of the artists' entry, the accesses to the area, and the open terrain behind the podium. Deniz, Atsel and Diego expected the terrorists to attack at that area first. They supposed the armed men might drive their car or cars up to that place, where the artists were welcomed and identified and shown a place in one of the huge waiting tents. The terrorists would make their first victims among the people who received the musicians. Then, they would run, shooting wildly, to reach the podium, from which they would throw their grenades into the massed spectators, and empty their magazines of bullets with automatic guns on the crowd. Without resistance, their operation should only last a few minutes. Hundreds of victims would be made in seconds! The only real resistance could come from Diego, Atsel and Deniz.

Diego was not sure the terrorists would want to escape after the carnage. Would they blow themselves up among the crowd, or would they try to reach their cars and flee to the N11? 'That question makes no sense,' Atsel replied quite rightly, 'don't fret about that issue, for we won't let them reach the podium alive, or let them run off unharmed.'

So, there they stood, the three of them, earphones and microphones active, so that they could communicate. The phones worked. They had tested them when they had stepped out of their car.

When they had parked, they had met policemen of Robois. These were very astonished to see the newcomers, especially with the sophisticated guns they showed. They wanted to know from which unit the three officers were. First Dominique Bussy and then Commissaire Bikri had run to them, reassuring the Robois inspectors and officers these three were good guys too. Together, they had considered the site. Joseph Bikri told them his force had coordinated with the festival vigilantes. Together, they would contain the festivallers beneath the podium. Diego and Atsel doubted the police and the stewards would be able to contain the panic, but Joseph Bikri argued along. The police would also cover the entry gate. Commissaire Bikri remained convinced his inside informer had tipped them off correctly, and foretold an assault at the musicians' entry. Bikri recognised Diego. He did not control their identity cards. He presented Diego, Christian and Denise to the officers and to the stewards as three special agents.

Diego, Atsel and Deniz walked slowly through the excited crowd to behind the podiums. Here also, nobody seemed particularly interested in them. Maybe they were considered as one more disguised group of the festival. The noise made by the Heavy Metal bands was ear-deafening. Very powerful loudspeakers magnified the tones of the horrible, shrieking music to terrible noise. The sounds worked on Diego's nerves. Communication would be difficult. Once behind the giant screens of the Blazing Devils' podium, behind the caves of hell, Deniz immediately climbed up the metal tubes, to the top of the screens. The construction seemed stable, and held her weight. She would have the toughest place of the three, stretched out long on wooden panels, exposed to the hard noise, in the heat of the sun, lying immobile with her precision rifle in front of her. She was hidden from the main site of the audience by the devils' screen, but had an excellent overview of the artists' field. Atsel and Diego could at least move a little, walk, take a look in the artists' tents. Soon they too, however, took up positions from which they would not move, and stayed there. Diego was posted to the left side – for him – of the entry, Atsel to the right. The terrorists' car, if it rode up to here, would drive in between them.

The entire site of the BlaDev festival was surrounded by an iron fence of two metres fifty tall. The fence was constituted of modules of three metres long, placed on heavy concrete blocks. The modules clicked one into the other to form the continuous fence. A car could hardly ram into it and hope to pass. Without a fence, also, the organisers would not have been able to control the entries. Along the fence, no vigilantes or policemen patrolled, but the fence sufficiently deterred groups of young men and women from escalating. Nobody climbed over the fence.

The artists' vans drove to behind the rock festival site proper, along the entire length of the BlaDev site, to the end, here. There, another, less imposing gate, declared to be the place where the artists' vans could enter. The entry was merely an opening in the fence, with a large, white band on top, indicating the musicians' area. The organisers had placed a tent at this entry. In the tent, a table had been placed, and two people who had lists of the invited music bands sat there to welcome the artists. They showed the musicians to which tent they could drive to unload their instruments, loudspeakers and electronic amplifiers. The vans could unload, but they had to drive out again, and wait in the near parking lot reserved for them, to pick up the artists after their performance. The musicians would wait in the larger

tents. A press tent had been set up close by. There, journalists and cameramen could interview the groups, in front of the hell screens.

The stage behind the podium was separated from the public by high fences equally. Only the musicians, the organisers, a few vigilantes, and some journalists remained behind the podium. Technicians ran around to help. Two small, fence-like steel doors between the public and the musician's area, guarded by stewards, allowed people to pass between the two zones. Everybody who was allowed behind the podiums had to show a special badge. Once every while, Diego moved from the entrance to the part of the fence from where he could see the spectators. He controlled the badges. He urged the people to hang their badges clearly visible on their chest.

For Diego, Atsel and Deniz, this entry point of the artists was the first point where victims would fall. They could not alarm or warn the people who received the artists of a pending attack, for all had to look normal. Diego and Atsel nevertheless sent away as many people as possible from the area, scaring them off. They could not avoid one man had to stay in the middle of the road to halt the vans and direct the music bands to the checkpoint tent. This vigilante might be the first man to be downed by the bullets that would be shot from one side and the other. All Diego could do was tell the man that in the event of an attack, he should lie down immediately when he heard shots, and not try to play the hero. To the man and woman in the check-in tent, he told them to topple the table behind which they sat in the event of an attack, to lie down, not move anymore, and hide. The vigilantes and the reception people looked incredulously at him, as if he were an overzealous fool. Still, they listened, when he repeated several times what they should do. Gradually, past noon, when the most famous bands arrived, more and more people huddled together at the reception tent. Diego repeated his message and asked as many people as possible to go farther away, inside the artists' field.

Nothing happened for hours. The time advanced to four o'clock, so that Diego began to think he and his superiors had acted on false information. He felt glad about that feeling. He thought that by then Deniz might have fallen asleep on top of the podium, but she responded well and regularly to the messages he and Atsel exchanged. She seemed to be all right. The sounds of the bands grew in the later afternoon, the decibels staggered higher and higher. Diego was getting wary with the infernal sounds.

It was close to five o'clock, when a black BMW van with darkened windows rode up to the musicians' entry. The van wore no publicity for any music band on its doors. It drove very slowly on, as if its passengers were looking where to ride to. It stopped at the vigilante. Diego saw the right window be rolled down, and some discussion took place between the vigilante and the men inside the van. Diego looked already absent-mindedly elsewhere. Nothing special ensued. Then, Diego saw the vigilante shake his head vigorously and repeatedly, which made him aware something special was on-going. He called a warning in his microphone. The vigilante waved the van back. The driver did not follow instructions given. The vigilante looked more and more irritated. Diego became very alert. His muscles tensed. He stood by then leaning against a tent-post to the right of the entrance, looking from the left to the van. He had no protection but his bulletproof vest. Diego made himself smaller, went to his knee, and unslung his P90. He cried for attention in his microphone. Deniz answered she had seen the van. Atsel acknowledged. The companion of the driver opened the

front door. He stepped to close to the vigilante, who refused him entry. Another man, another man accompanying the driver, came out of the van. He stomped the vigilante violently with a handgun on the head. The steward fell to the ground.

Diego cried in his microphone, 'terrorists here! Terrorists here! Take care! Watch the entry!'

Diego advanced to before the van, remaining at a respectable distance. He saw Atsel on the other side dive to the reception table, draw it over, and force the people in the tent to duck. The man with the handgun stepped entirely back to the front of the van, but a bullet lodged in his head. A spray of blood spat on the front of the car. The sound of Deniz's shot vibrated in the reception space, but the noise was lost against the background of the deafening sounds of the rock band on the podium.

The spectators had entered a stage of complete ecstasy, shouting and jumping up and down on the other side of the fence.

The side doors of the van slid open, and two men ran out to Diego's side. Their assault guns fired in all directions, towards the artists' area. Men must have run out on the other side too, for Diego heard the typical sound of automatic guns firing, there too. The people who had remained in the area of the reception tent went down. Diego saw open space between him and the attackers. The attackers ran to the podium, coming on his left side. Diego shot with his P90. Two men were mowed down. The two others ran on, spewing bullets around him. The men ran to the podiums. One of them was stopped instantaneously by a bullet in his head.

The windshield of the car exploded. Deniz shot several times through the windshield into the van. A head reddened with blood sagged forward. Deniz had taken out a man at the driver's seat. Also Diego emptied his P90 magazine into the van. He shot the last man he saw.

Yet another man emerged from the van, went to his knees, placed his Kalashnikov to his eyes, and wanted to shoot in the direction of Diego, but Diego was already emptying his second magazine at the man. The terrorist threw his hands up, dropped his gun, and fell in the grass. Diego heard more bullets of automatic guns being fired, but on a side he had no eye on. He heard also continued staccatos of the P90 of Atsel. Diego cautiously stepped to Atsel's side of the car.

The shooting on that side continued. More men must have run out of the van on the right side of it. He stood, almost certain the action on his side had ended.

Then, an enormous power lifted him from the ground and threw him back. Less than a second later he found himself neatly sitting on the grass, still facing the van, but three metres from where he had stood before. He had been pushed back by an unseen but terrible force. His ears sizzled. A red flame burst very high above the van. The van became engulfed in flames. It was lifted in the air. Diego saw it fall heavily back. The petrol tank of the BMW exploded too, and the van erupted in more flames. Diego saw how the reception tent was blown tens of metres farther, the ground cleared of bodies. The van burned in high flames and spewed out stinking, dense, dark clouds of smoke, which were drawn upwards by the fire.

Diego fell. He felt a little dizzy, and then crawled back on his feet. He saw in utter astonishment how a heavy fence module had been thrown high into the air and now landed partly on the car with a loud boom of torn metal. Diego went forward, to the other side. He skirted the car, counting the bodies of attackers that lay there. He went round, reached the end of the van, wrung the back door of the van open with his hand and a foot, and sent a last burst

of P90 bullets into the van. Nobody had remained inside. He saw furious flames consuming the front seats. The body of the driver still hung over the dashboard, completely blackened by the fire.

Diego looked around. Where was Atsel? Nobody still stood or was lying there for at least ten metres around. The torn fence blocked Diego's way partly, but he stepped over the wreckage and advanced. He saw much blood, and more corpses. Then, a first body came to its feet. Diego placed his P90 at his eye, but he saw Atsel groping around, bloodied at one leg. Atsel saw Diego coming to him, still with his P90 ready. Atsel waved Diego to come nearer. Diego lowered his weapon. He didn't see any terrorist anymore, and a strange silence, broken only by the sizzling of the fire and the smoke behind him, set in. The heavy metal music sounded terribly high in the far.

Atsel said, 'the last man to jump out of the van was a suicide bomber! I realised too late what he was. I hit him with a P90 burst, but I must have shot in the explosives, or he had still just the time to blow himself up. I cannot hear what you say. My ears are deafened. Have a look at the reception people? How are they?'

Diego stepped on. He saw now many stunned people move around him, trying to stand. They had all been blown away by the deflagration of the exploding bomb. They seemed hurt. He saw the oak table a little farther off. Diego saw much blood, but only blood stains, no flow of much blood. He thought the people had been blown off their feet. Many people had been wounded. Shrapnels of the bomb had been sprayed around. Sacks of nails and other pieces of metal must have hung near the explosives. Diego had been protected by the van. The people stood up, one after the other, some drenched in blood, so Diego supposed many had been wounded, but none killed. Nobody remained lying on the ground, except the killed attackers. Other vigilantes and police officers came running to the site.

Diego could not believe his luck. He had expected a very hard fight, a battle that would have lasted minutes. The exchange had not lasted more than a few seconds, though! He felt the elation, now, the joy of the right decision, for the attack had indeed taken place at the music bands' entrance, as Joseph Bikri had told him. His thoughts then went to Deniz. Where was she? Had she been blown off the metal construction of the podium?

He shouted in his microphone, 'Deniz, Deniz, how are you? Are you OK? How are you? Come in!'

Deniz replied calmly, 'I think the excitement is over, lover boy. I am coming down! We have to get out of here! All the police of the kingdom is going to assemble here! They must not find us! Wait for me, I'm coming down! Guard!'

Diego saw Deniz climbing down the metal tubes, her rifle slung on her back. More and more people came running to the flaming car. Red Cross people dressed in white also converged to the scene. An ambulance rode by. Behind him, Diego still heard the shrieking of the electric guitars and the thumps and jingles of the drums. Maybe the festivallers thought the explosion and the fire behind podium were part of the special effects of the band that was playing! The spectators could not see what had happened behind the podium.

When Deniz reached Diego and Atsel, both drew Atsel on his legs. Diego had already knelt to the Israeli, and pried a piece of metal out of Atsel's leg. He told Atsel he only suffered of a

deep flesh wound. Deniz ran to a Red Cross nurse, grabbed the woman rather roughly by the arm, and asked her to look at her friend. The woman had a wooden box with her. She knelt to Atsel, and began to disinfect the wound.

The Red Cross nurse said, 'he must see a doctor. We must drive him to the hospital. There may be more pieces inside. The wound must be sown together. Somebody should have a look at his ears.'

The nurse waved to the ambulance, which drove to near Atsel. Already another wounded man was being pushed on a stretcher into the ambulance.

Diego looked at Deniz, and said, 'you drive back to the house. I'll go with Atsel to the hospital and come back later.'

Deniz nodded and ran off.

Atsel could limp to the ambulance. He sat next to the other wounded man. Atsel seemed to falter, saying his head spun. The nurse pushed him on another stretcher. Diego jumped in the ambulance, and the ambulance rode off to the musicians' space exit with blazing blue lights and the characteristic noise shouting out of its loudspeakers.

Diego accompanied Atsel to the hospital. There, nobody really asked for Atsel's name. A doctor immediately examined him, gave Atsel two syringe shots, one of which served to dull the pain in his leg. The doctor once again disinfected the wound, sought for more metal pieces but found none, and stitched the wound closed. He then looked at Atsel's ears, concluded the eardrums were not damaged. Atsel would temporarily lose hearing, but nothing irreversible had happened. The doctor left.

'Get me out of here,' Atsel hissed.

Diego looked around the corner of the room, saw only hurrying nurses and other people being brought in on stretchers. He let Atsel lean on him, and together they walked as fast as they could through the corridors, out of the hospital. Diego would have taken a taxi to bring Atsel to the house, but he hesitated. He did not want to leave clues behind as to where they stayed. He called Deniz by his microphone. She was not too far off, the communication reached her. She answered. Diego asked her to come to as quickly as possible to the hospital and pick them up. He gave her the address. He waited long minutes with Atsel, standing about a hundred metres from the hospital entry. He placed Atsel behind him, so that not too many persons would notice the blood on Atsel's trousers and leg. Atsel held on to him, and closed his eyes, for he felt very unsure on his feet.

A few moments later, Deniz rode up to them. She turned the car. They pushed Atsel in the back seats, and Deniz drove off. A little later, they reached the hunting lodge of Trioteignes. Diego helped Atsel up the stairs. Atsel could walk, but he lost his balance. Diego helped Atsel to his bedroom, and dropped the Israeli on the bed. Atsel asked to leave him alone for some time. He had to close his eyes. Deniz stood behind Diego.

'He should catch some sleep,' she said, 'but his dizziness will last the entire evening. There is nothing we can do for the moment. Some cognac might help.'

Diego sighed, 'I would like to go back, Deniz. I must be sure there is no second attack.'

'There will be no second attack,' Deniz replied. 'Too many men ran out of that van! There must have been at least eight or nine men in there! I shot several. Nevertheless, yes, you

should have a look. Keep your P90 ready. Do you have a small camera? A few photographs of the scene would be interesting to have.'

'Yes. I have a small camera. I'll be back soon.'

Diego left the house.

Diego returned to the festival site at Turgoux. The police were blocking the N11, but he was allowed on. He parked his car, went back to the still smoking van. He took photographs. Nobody noticed him specifically. Commissaire Bikri came up to him. He thanked Diego and his friends, but told Diego he should disappear now, return to his house. Bikri stated he had sufficient policemen now to ward off any new attack. The investigation for clues as to where the terrorists came from would begin. A team of experts was on their way from Namur. Diego nodded. He said he would want to speak to Joseph Bikri later on, maybe tomorrow. He would walk slowly back to his car, but make a tour of the area first.

At the Trioteignes lodge, Deniz Sürkoglou took a shower. She came out, dried her body in a large towel and wanted to dry her hair, when she heard the bell of the front door ring. She cursed, let her hair drip, ran to a window, and saw a woman standing at the doorstep. Deniz took a handgun and ran down the stairs. She opened the door with her right hand, leaving her left hand behind the panel, her handgun at the height of the woman's head.

'Yes. Can I help you?' Deniz asked.

The woman looked at her, amazed. The woman saw Deniz standing there, dressed only in a towel, hair wet. Deniz was quite attractive, tall, exotic and sensual, with a slim body, a thin waist, nice female curves, a finely chiselled face, and elongated, dark eyes, wonderful, luxurious, thick silky hair that fell low below her shoulders.

The woman said, hesitantly, 'I came to see Diego Trioteignes. He does live here, doesn't he?' 'Yes,' Deniz answered rather roughly. 'He is not in, though. He may be back in a couple of hours, not earlier. Can I leave a message?'

'No, I don't think a message is quite necessary,' the woman replied icily. 'Yes. Please tell him Michelle Bazaine called, will you? He'll understand! By the way, do you live here too?' 'I do,' Deniz replied, defiantly.

Deniz looked at the woman, saw how elegant and handsome she was, and suddenly understood. This was Diego's girlfriend! Deniz couldn't say one word more, however, for Michelle turned on her heels and almost ran to her car. Michelle drove off, as fast as the gravel path allowed. She skidded with her tyres in the bend, small stones flew up against the walls.

Deniz closed the door, turned the key and bent over from laughing. The laughter chased the last stress of the shooting. Deniz had seen the face of Michelle change! Of all days, of all times, Diego's lovebird had called at the worst possible time! Diego would have some explaining to do! And Michelle would never know she had a few seconds ago a gun poised at twenty centimetres from her head, a finger trembling on the trigger.

Diego Trioteignes lingered longer than he had expected in the festival compound. He wandered around, his fist still on his P90. He avoided all journalists. He spoke again with Joseph Bikri and with Dominique Bussy. All the other policemen assumed he was one of theirs. Nobody in particular embarrassed him with awkward questions. The BlaDev site was

soon overwhelmed by policemen coming in from all directions. Ten, the journalists flooded in.

Diego returned home late. Atsel and Deniz slept. The doors of their bedrooms were closed, they were not in the living-room. Diego ate a sandwich and then went upstairs, and slept. His last thoughts went to how amazed he was of how short the exchange of shots had sounded. The assault had been extremely short, energetic, and astonishingly powerful. The terrorists had thought to surprise, but they had been taken out before they realised what was happening to them. Atsel, Diego and Deniz had given them not the least chance to do terrifying harm. The terrorists had made the great tactical mistake of staying all into the van. They should have run out of the van and spread, long before they reached the gate. Now, they had to jump all out of one point, one by one, to be mowed down in the crossfire of P90's and of the precision gun. What if they had acted and prepared otherwise? Don't think about the ifs, Diego thought, and slept.

2.7. The imam's arrest. Thursday, 16 July

The next morning, Atsel woke up and felt much better. He could get out of bed without staggering on his legs, the dizziness of the previous day had abandoned him. He felt a ravenous hunger. He dressed, and went down first. He began making himself scrambled eggs in the kitchen, and put water for a pot of coffee.

A few moments later, Diego stumbled into the kitchen. He added two eggs to Atsel's pan. They ate together. Diego reported not much new had happened after the attack on the festival. Diego turned the knob of the radio. In the eight o'clock news, they heard the attack had made nine victims, eight of which were supposed terrorists. The steward of the festival who had stopped the terrorist van, had been killed too. In the explosion, about twenty-five people had been wounded by the shrapnel thrown around with tremendous force in the artists' area. No life was in danger, but the Robois hospital lay full with the wounded. According to the reporters, special service police had been present at the site and had thwarted the attack. The terrorists were considered to be a seven-man team from Brussels, all radical Muslims, among whom also men arrived from France and Germany. A spokesman of the National Security Agency came to the microphone, interviewed by a Walloon journalist, saying the vigilance of their teams and their intelligence had stopped a massacre. The terrorists had been eliminated without further damage to the rock festival spectators.

'Damn', Diego concluded, 'they didn't want to believe Joseph Bikri, the commissaire of Robois, and the local police, but they take all the credit for the stopping of the attack! They didn't want to send a full intervention team on site, but they brag about the outcome! I bet nine out of ten of the Sûreté men didn't even know who intervened!'

'Right. No different from Israeli politicians,' Atsel replied cynically. 'It is all part of the job. How are you feeling?'

'What do you mean?' Diego answered, a little surprised.

'You killed a few people, yesterday. How are you feeling about that? Were those your first?'

'No, not my first,' Diego conceded, 'but I never shot so many in one day! I did my duty. It was a matter of simple calculation, what made the fewer victims, and how many of them were shot, or me. I don't know where all the bullets came from, however. I just stopped the men who kept coming. They did not really have much chance. They ran in the open. I stood in the open too, but I knew exactly from where they would be coming, and I gave them no occasion to find out where I was!'

Diego propped a piece of bread with the eggs in his mouth.

'You shot quite a few too,' he continued, looking at Atsel, head bowed. 'Maybe Deniz killed most of the attackers. You know, I don't think those guys had proper training. They just came rushing out of that van and shot around, without looking.'

'Yes,' Atsel granted. 'They were very young too. But, come to think of it, no, they had no other choice but to rush out and shoot wildly. It was amazing, wasn't it? We eliminated the attackers easily. If we truly shot seven, we got them quickly, only the three of us. The fight only lasted seconds. The P90's are tremendously effective, like machine guns, but accurate too. P90's are wonderful.'

'True,' Diego agreed. 'We didn't give them much chance. I had no issue with the killing, no. I had no time to think. I just saw the menace, and shot. I did what was right. I am convinced

of that! We should not let killers loose in our community. Had we not taken them out so rapidly, they would have had the time to reorganise and be more lethal. We surprised them totally. They thought they would shoot at unarmed people, but they were wrong in that. I cannot have any consideration for terrorists. They are simply cowards, to attack unarmed people. At Turgoux, they ran into a wall of armed, trained men and one even more effective woman.'

'You should warn that Commissaire Bikri,' Atsel told. 'Bikri had a prime informer among the terrorists. The remaining terrorists, the men who ordered the attack, may be temporarily stunned, but they won't stay so for long. They will suspect an informer hides in their midst. That man should be given protection, now!'

'I already told Bikri as much yesterday evening. Bikri had to stay at the festival site yesterday, but today he will make a raid on the new mosque of Robois. It took some time convincing the judges to issue warrants. His informer will be taken in custody, hidden and protected. Bikri admitted to me he had a man inside.'

Deniz Sürkoglou entered the kitchen, still dressed in pyjamas. She stretched, asked for scrambled eggs too, but none were left. Atsel grinned when he showed her the empty pan.

'I'll make you some,' Diego volunteered.

He began breaking the eggs, showed her the bacon. She nodded to the bacon.

'I appreciate your zeal, Diego,' she whispered. 'You are a sweet guy. The girl who gets you will be a happy one. How are you, Atsel?'

'Fine, fine,' Atsel replied. 'I'm feeling much better. I can stand on my two legs. My leg throbs, but my head and my hearing are fine again. I got blown right off my legs by the deflagration, you know!'

'Yes, I know,' Deniz smiled. 'I actually saw you and Diego being thrown backwards. For a few moments, I feared you had left me alone. Then, I heard Diego shout in the microphone. Anyhow, I'd say we did cope, didn't we?'

'We sure did. Killed seven terrorists, the radio said,' Diego commented from near the furnace.

Deniz then seemed to remember something, so she continued, grinning, 'a woman rang at the door yesterday afternoon. She asked for you, Diego. She didn't want to leave a message. She just told me to tell you her name, one Michelle Bazaine. You would understand. I came to the door, you see, but I had just walked out of the shower! I stood there, half naked, with only a towel around me, wet hair and all. She must be your girl. She reacted rather ugly. I only got the meaning a few seconds later, but she had already ran off by then. You may have some explaining to do!'

Atsel smiled at the table, 'our lover-boy is going to get slapped on the cheeks! If I were you, Diego, I wouldn't wait too long, and I would take care! That girl may be waiting for you with a shotgun in her hand! I didn't know you had a girlfriend here! I rather thought you fancied Deniz!'

'Atsel, shut up!' Deniz cried.

Diego stood, picking in the pan of eggs and bacon with a fork. He blanched. He didn't leave immediately. He hesitated.

Deniz looked from Atsel to Diego and back.

'Go on,' she said, 'off with you! Take a shower, get dressed, and hurry to your Michelle. I'll finish the eggs. I do appreciate the bacon, I'm afraid I'm not always a good Muslim. She looked a nice girl to me, that Michelle. Much woman! Go on, hurry!'

Diego reddened in the cheeks, gave the wooden spoon with which he had now been scrambling the eggs to Deniz, kissed her on the cheek, grinned, and ran out of the kitchen.

'Kids!' Atsel shook his head in wonderment.

'Yes, yes,' Deniz agreed. 'You know, we should have a look this afternoon at the festival. I suppose the festival has not been cancelled. We should patrol this afternoon, lest one or other terrorist wanted to repeat yesterday's work.'

'We should. The two of us?' Atsel asked.

'Yes, our lover-boy will be busy,' Deniz remarked.

Atsel and Deniz did not expect a new attack, though. Their mood that morning was not very cheerful. They had killed people, young people, untrained people, and they sat still more or less in shock. Diego stood in the opening of the door. He said he would pay a visit to Michelle Bazaine, but he also told he wanted to patrol again at the festival site in the afternoon. Deniz said she might come too. Atsel finally refused, saying he would not be of much use the rest of the day. He did not believe more attacks were to be feared.

'Policemen will be crawling all over the place, now,' Diego chuckled. 'Deniz, you will be useless over there. You can only get yourself be remarked. An over-zealous officer might challenge you, ask for your papers and the like! Better not show yourself so soon! I'll go alone. You two rest. No policeman can have an issue with me. I have a card of the Sûreté, my identity can be checked. I'll be back before six o'clock in the evening.'

With that plan, Diego ran upstairs to change clothes. He showered, and dressed. He placed his police gear and his P90 in the trunk of the car, and hurried to the Lady of the Lake.

Diego de Trioteignes rode to the lake, bought a bouquet of flowers on the way, parked his car and stepped on to the ferry. He was dressed in blue slacks, white shirt and a smart blue pullover, his shirt open at the neck. When the ferry platform reached the other side, he ran to the restaurant. The front door was closed, so he rang the bell for a long time, indicating somebody insisted and sought entrance urgently. The door finally opened, and the familiar young Indian girl opened. She recognised him, waved him in. Diego would have pushed her aside, but the young woman let him immediately into the corridor.

She said, 'Madame Michelle is in the kitchen, Monsieur. Take care, though! She has been throwing pots around this morning, and I suppose you might be the cause of her bad mood. She is in a very bad temper, I must tell you. It was good of you to come! I'm not sure those nice flowers will help. In case you would want the police or an ambulance, I shall be around!'

Diego smiled, and ran through the restaurant hall into the kitchen. At this hour of the day, Michelle was alone in her very white, very clean and shining space, standing with red eyes and sniffing at a stove, turning with a spoon in a pot. Diego wondered whether the broth in that pot was boiling hot, and how it would feel having the contents of that pot over his head. When Michelle saw Diego arriving, he half hiding behind his roses, she held the long, wooden spoon in front of her like a sword.

She cried, 'don't touch me, you scoundrel. I should have guessed! You have been ridiculing me. I can take it! Are you happy to have abused of Evelyn's sister? You succeeded! Have you got your revenge? Get out of my eyes, then!'

'Michelle, you jumped to all the wrong conclusions!' Diego shouted back, waving with his bouquet.

'Wrong conclusions? Which wrong conclusions? What conclusions then should I have drawn? You live together with some oriental slut, and I should be drawing wrong conclusions? I appraised the situation quite rightly, you disgusting Don Juan! You did an ugly thing! You seduced me and abused of me!'

'No, no,' Diego said. 'Deniz is a colleague. We are three in the house, now! Deniz is a colleague, I tell you. She is Turkish. She is in the country only for a few days! We work together.'

'Colleague? Bah! What are you going to try to tell me next? You sleep with a Turkish belly-dancer, you miserable worm! Don't come near me!'

'Michelle, stop it! I'm a soldier, and a secret agent for the Sûreté Nationale. Haven't you heard the radio? Nine people were killed yesterday in Robois, at the rock music festival. We are three agents. We form a unit that had to stop the killings!'

'What? Were you at the rock music festival yesterday?'

'Joseph Bikri had not even enough inspectors and officers to ward off an attack at the front gate of the BlaDev. The attack came at the musicians' end. The terrorists wanted to reach the podium and kill a lot of people from there. They came at us with assault weapons and explosives. The three of us stopped them. We received orders to halt them. Deniz was one of us. You'll have to cope with the fact that I'm a soldier, working in intelligence. I would have told you later, of course, there just wasn't time! I finished some rather dangerous missions in half a dozen foreign countries where our military are operating. I've killed people, but only in self-defence. I'm a soldier. For you, I'll quit the army. I have a contract, but I can end it. I can ask my father for a job in one of his companies. For you, I would end my work for the army. For now, however, I am in a hurry! I have to return to the festival site and talk to Joseph Bikri. Forget about Deniz. She is one of the agents with whom I work, and that is only on a very temporary basis.'

Michelle was obviously confused. She was not only confused about the lovely Turkish woman, but also trying to decide whether she could believe Diego telling her he was a soldier and a secret agent. She was grasping with the knowledge he had killed people. All that seemed so alien to her world.

'I did my duty,' Diego continued, 'and I'm good at it. I even got a reward, a medal for valour.'

'A medal won't make sweeter the fact you killed people,' Michelle sneered.

Diego bowed his head.

'That Deniz is not your lover?'

'No! No, she isn't!' Diego shouted, obfuscated. 'She was sent here by Turkish intelligence. The Belgian Sûreté knows about her. She is a sniper, a sharpshooter, Michelle. She shot at least three terrorists yesterday!'

'You haven't given sign of life the previous days,' Michelle complained. 'First you ask me to marry you, and then you disappear. If you love someone, you could at least have called.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. I should have. We were so busy! We were planning our defence against the terrorists. I was never alone. We had to have weapons and the kind. We had to discuss positions and ways of action.'

'I don't believe this, I just don't believe this,' Michelle cried, drawing her fingers through her thick hair.

'Would you believe me if I showed you a bulletproof vest with "police" written all over it in the trunk of my car, a police cap, binoculars, and a P90 automatic gun plus a handgun in a holster? My car stands in front of the Lady!'

'Yes, yes. I believe you. How could this be happening to me? This sounds more and more like a bad film, Diego. You'll have to explain a lot to me, really a lot! That Deniz is nothing to you?'

'No! Well, she is a friend, but in a few days she will return to Ankara. She is a Turkish agent. Please don't mention this to anybody, Michelle! Our operation must remain a secret.'

'Good God! I simply can't believe this! You ran a terrible danger, then.'

'We did, but all went well for us. We were prepared. We are trained marksmen and we had an expert markswoman with us. We did not give the terrorists a chance. Ask Joseph Bikri if you want. Michelle, don't refuse me now, please! I love you and I was completely honest at our previous meetings. We'll have much to talk about, and I have much to make clear to you, to apologise, of course, but I could not tell you all the previous times we met. Please, don't refuse me!'

Michelle began to weep again. She grabbed the bouquet of roses out of Diego's hands and sought a vase. She cried. While she put the roses in a vase, she took a paper handkerchief out of a well-used box above her on a shelf, and blew her nose. With yet another handkerchief she wiped at her eyes. She was thinking, considering, weighing, willing to believe yet still incapable to grasp the enormity of what Diego told her. Then, she thought Diego had never been a young man like any other.

The next moment, they were in each other's arms. Michelle wept. She made Diego promise to see her more, and to take care. They stayed a long time together in the kitchen.

An hour later, Diego stepped out of the kitchen, walked through the restaurant and went to the door. Several kitchen helps and cooks entered. They looked at Diego with curious eyes. The Indian girl opened the front door for him.

'No ambulance,' Diego grinned.

'No sir, I see you narrowly escaped being molested. I guessed you would make up. Nobody can be that perverted and wicked! Madame Michelle likes you very much, you know!'

'How do you know that?' Diego wondered.

'Oh, I know everything, Monsieur. Everything! You take care, sir. Don't forget to come back soon!'

Diego patted the girl on the back.

'Watch out on her for me, will you?' he asked. 'Yes, you'll be seeing a lot of me in the next weeks!'

'I will, sir. Don't worry!'

Diego ran back to the ferry, walked to his car, took off his pullover, put on the bulletproof vest, placed his P90 in the front, put on his police cap, and went to sit behind the steering wheel. He put on his dark glasses. Were Michelle and the Indian girl spying on him from the widows of the Lady of the Lake?. They probably would. They would be staring at him with

incredulous eyes. He grinned and waved from behind the wheel. He rode back to the festival site.

Minutes later, Diego de Trioteignes arrived at the rock festival site. He proceeded to the huge front gate, found it as ugly as ever. He heard the atrocious sounds of a band in the far. He heard the shouts and screams of the excited audience. Diego walked slowly, unchallenged, as he passed under the archway. He met there Joseph Bikri and Dominique Bussy, who were leaving the site. Bikri stopped when he recognised Diego.

'We are going to arrest the Imam Al-Faris,' Joseph Bikri stated without saying good day to Diego. 'Care to join us? We are going to interrogate the man. There are more policemen on the site now than for a football match between the Red Devils and the English national soccer team. You are not needed here, but I would like you with me, for your connections to other services I won't specify. I want to interrogate the imam, and try to find out what he knows about the attack of yesterday. I am not forgetting the young men killed here.'

'The man will deny everything, and we have proof of nothing,' Diego gave gloomily. He too was sad and angry because he had not advanced much for what this superiors had asked of him.

'I know that,' Joseph Bikri replied, 'but I can make life quite more complicated for him in the next days. I want him out of Robois! I can also arrest everybody in the mosque buildings, and that might unsettle him somewhat. When you put five men to the interrogation room, one is always bound to admit this or that fact or information, and one plus one makes two.'

Diego didn't argue anymore. Commissaire Bikri was right. They had to try, even if the chance to discover something was small. He turned, and went to the parking lot with Bikri and Bussy.

'Are you here with your own car? Put that gun in your trunk and follow us. It's a pity we don't have those weapons,' Joseph Bikri said, admiring the P90 with eager eyes.

Diego did as suggested.

Diego Trioteignes followed Joseph Bikri's car to the new mosque of Robois. When the car in front of him stopped a hundred metres from the mosque, he brought also his car to a halt. He went up to Bikri. Bikri and Bussy waved him in.

'We are waiting for the Special Services,' Bikri told him. 'They are sending a dozen heavily armed men to make life easier for us.'

A little later, two black vans rode up to the mosque.

'That will be our forces,' Bikri told.

They saw policemen in bulletproof vests, protected from top to toe, step out of the vans, shotguns in front. Bikri and Bussy also took bulletproof vests from their car trunk. Diego followed them.

When the leader of the Special Services saw Commissaire Bikri, he saluted and said he was at the commissaire's service.

'Fine, let's go,' Joseph Bikri said sharply. He was nervous. 'We go in and arrest everybody in the apartment building, behind the prayer hall. Stay away from the imam's house behind the hall, unless I order so. Disperse. We'll simply ring the bell, but we probably will have to bust the door.'

So they did. Bikri rang the bell. Nobody answered on the interphone. The Special Services men, all heavily armed, made themselves very thin against the façade. Joseph Bikri supposed the video cameras had already spotted them and transferred the images to the PC screens inside. He would not show much patience. His policemen had the building surrounded. Nobody would escape from the windows, behind. Bikri rang again. Ten seconds later, he ordered the man with the iron ram to slam the door open. This took three more seconds, but then the door cracked open. No sound broke the silence that ensued. Joseph Bikri let the Special Services men run into the corridor. There followed a sudden pandemonium of shouts, of men and women and children shouting and crying, as the policemen erupted into the various rooms downstairs and upstairs.

Commissaire Bikri opened a door which led to a meeting-room.

From there, he shouted, 'bring all the men in here. Guard the women and children, bring them outside and take their identities. Make sure nobody escapes!'

The room in which Joseph Bikri, Dominique Bussy and Diego Trioteignes stood, was rather large. It was a community meeting room. A long table stood in the middle, chairs around it, not unlike the room Bikri had last been in. Bikri, Bussy and Diego went to sit at the head of the table. Gradually, men were brought in. All were dressed in long, white djellabas.

Among them was an imposing, black-bearded, heavy man, to which Joseph Bikri said, 'ah, Majdi Al-Faris! Have a seat!'

The man went to sit very calmly, arrogantly, behind the table, as far away from Bikri as he could. Four more men, all dressed alike, sat around the table. The Special Services policemen continued to open door after door on the premises, on all the floors. Through the window in the room, Diego could see how a small crowd of women and children had assembled in front of the building by Special Services men. A little later, also the leader of the policemen came in. A last Muslim was brought in.

Joseph Bikri asked, 'found anything?'

The leader of the assault team shook his head, 'no weapons, no explosives, no drugs, a few brochures that may be worth looking at, personal computers, and papers.'

'Good,' Bikri appreciated.

This time, he was the master of the situation.

'Majdi Al-Faris,' Joseph Bikri addressed the imam, 'I arrest you and your assistants, here assembled, in the name of the Belgian Law. We are going to bring you to the Abbey to be interrogated for your involvement in a terrorist attack perpetrated yesterday. At the Abbey, you will be allowed to phone for your lawyers, but until the lawyers have arrived and until you have all been interrogated, you will stay in the Abbey under guard. You will stay in custody for as long as all your lawyers have arrived and until the interrogations and the confrontations will last. Do you understand?'

The imam nodded.

Joseph Bikri continued, 'I shall need to see your identity papers. If you don't have those on you, a police officer will go with you to your apartments, one at a time, to get them and bring them here.'

'You can't arrest us, Commissaire Bikri,' Al-Faris spoke.

‘Yes I can,’ Bikri replied. ‘You are arrested on suspicion of acts of terrorism at the site of the rock music festival of Robois. You are accused of being the instigator of the attacks. You will be interrogated at the Abbey, as well as your assistants.’

‘No, we won’t,’ Al-Faris smiled. ‘You see, commissaire, we are no Belgian citizens. What is more, we have Saudi-Arabian passports, and our passports are diplomatic passports. You are a man of the law. You must know you cannot arrest diplomatic personnel! You would be creating a serious diplomatic incident with the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia!’

Al-Faris put a hand in his pocket, and placed a passport on the table. The leader of the Special Services opened it, but handed it to Joseph Bikri. He did not understand the Arabic characters.

Joseph Bikri opened the passport and ran through its contents. He blemished. Diego saw him clench his teeth.

‘You should call the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of your country if you wanted to arrest us without any proof whatsoever,’ Al-Faris calmly explained. ‘The Ministry will tell you to hurry as fast as you can out of these buildings. You will have to pay for the damage done to our premises, for the anxiety caused to our families, and you will have to face an official complaint of the Saudi-Arabian embassy. Goodbye, commissaire!’

Commissaire Bikri refused to go so soon. He knew he was powerless with the imam, and he doubted not a second what the man told was true.

He said, ‘I want to see the diplomatic passports of all the men around this table.’

Bikri was hoping only Al-Faris was protected by the diplomatic immunity.

Three men placed their passports immediately on the table. Two men said their passports were upstairs in their apartments. Bikri allowed these men to go to their rooms, accompanied by two Special Services men.

While they waited for the officers to return, Bikri and Diego looked in silence at Al-Faris. The man avoided looking at the commissaire. He was studying Diego, who he had never seen before. He sat, began to grin anew, but said nothing. He smiled at his three companions, saying lastly a few phrases in Arabic.

Both Diego and Bikri understood Arabic.

Al-Faris had sneered, ‘we fucked them well, these three!’

The other men laughed. They were mocking Bikri, Bussy and Diego. The two men in white came back, passport in hand. They too placed their papers on the table. Commissaire Bikri took one passport after the other, read it at length, and took note of the particulars in a small book. He took his time to verify all the details.

Joseph Bikri sighed when he had finished with the last passport, stood from his chair and left the room without a word. Bussy and Diego followed him. Bikri gave the order for all policemen to go outside, to leave the building and even the entire mosque complex. Diego followed him.

‘We are defeated,’ Diego dared to whisper to Joseph Bikri.

‘Never,’ Bikri murmured back. ‘This is merely a temporary setback. I can’t arrest the man, but I’ll kick him out of our country soon. I’ll get the proof for what will happen to him. He may not be set on trial in Belgium, but he’ll not stay around for too long. In the meantime, we can observe him. He’ll be cautious. He’ll not make a wrong step, but we’ll get him!’

Joseph Bikri went to the block behind the mosque. He rang at the bell of the door. He had asked still two Special Services officers to accompany him, and also Diego and Dominique stayed there. Soon, a man dressed in normal clothes, opened the door.

'Imam Bin Mahfouz, you are under arrest,' Joseph Bikri shouted.

He took the imam at the arm, and drew him with him. Diego said nothing. He hid his surprise. Joseph Bikri ordered the Special Services team back to their offices, thanking them. Bikri and Bussy took Bin Mahfouz between them. They did not handcuff the man. They went to Bikri's car and made the imam sit in the back. Bussy went to sit next to him.

'Come with us to the Abbey,' Bikri told Diego. 'We have to talk, also with this man.'

Diego rode in his own car.

At the Abbey police Station, Joseph Bikri and Dominique Bussy brought Imam Bin Mahfouz to a meeting-room. Diego Trioteignes was also directed to that room. Diego was surprised Bin Mahfouz was not made to sit in the interrogation room.

When Diego entered the room, Commissaire Bikri was asking, 'would you like a tea or a coffee, imam?'

'I'll have the same as you, commissaire,' Bin Mahfouz smiled.

'Imam Bin Mahfouz helped us by warning us of the attack on the music festival,' Joseph Bikri explained to Diego.

To the imam, Bikri continued, 'Diego Trioteignes is a policeman, or something like it, imam. You can trust him. What is said here will remain among the four of us.'

Dominique Bussy was also still with the commissaire.

Dominique went to fetch coffees.

'Imam Al-Faris and his assistants have escaped under diplomatic immunity. Did you know they were protected by diplomatic passports of Saudi Arabia?'

'No, I didn't,' Bin Mahfouz regretted. 'I am astonished. I knew they were Saudis, yes, not diplomats.'

'I thought so. Some diplomats they are! Can I count on your testimony concerning the planned terrorist attack? We can take note of the testimony, so that you only have to sign it, but you'll have to tell the story in your own words.'

'Of course, commissaire. My testimony alone won't suffice, though. It will be Al-Faris' word against mine.'

'True, but we'll have other testimonies. Added up, the reports will prove hard to refute together. I'm sorry, I cannot yet tell you what those other declarations will be about, I'm not even sure I'll really get them.'

'I understand.'

'You told me already you think the Imam El-Amin was murdered by Al-Faris' team, but you have no proof of that allegation. Why would Al-Faris want the former imam of Robois be killed?'

Bin Mahfouz drank his coffee before he started.

'There were two main reasons, commissaire.

The first was that El-Amin was in Al-Faris' way. El-Amin was still the official imam of Robois. He had authority over Al-Faris. Only El-Amin could sign the most important papers and accounts. Al-Faris did not accept that. He hated it. He wanted El-Amin out of his way.

The second reason was a much greater danger for what Al-Faris wanted to accomplish. You see, commissaire, Al-Faris is a Wahhabi. The Wahhabis believe they are the only Islamists to continue to support the true Islam, the Islam of the Prophet and of the early khalifs in its purest form, the Central Arabian Sunni Islam. The Koran is sacred. It is the word of God, and hence God itself, they believe. Nothing can be changed in the Koran, one cannot reason and argument about the verses. That is what they believe, and in that they are radicals, extremists, fundamentalists.

Since a long time, from before Al-Faris arrived in Robois, I had been studying the Koran and applying my logical reasoning to it. It is well-known the Koran contains apparent contradictions, verses that contradict each other or seem odd when placed next to other verses. Also, the Koran contains very violent verses, verses calling to the holy war, the jihad, against the infidels. I could not accept the contradictions and also not the verses that called for violence, even when explained in a spiritual or transcendental, symbolic way. So, I contrived to explain these verses, to solve the contradictions, and to explain how verses of violence came to be written in the Koran although God declares himself to be the merciful. I made a list of them first, of the verses I needed to explain. Then, I began to write behind each verse what I thought of them. Most of the calls for violence can be explained by the wars the Prophet had to wage against the infidels of Mecca. Early Islam, the Islam of the Prophet, had to fight for its very existence, so that war could be justified in the seventh century. The verses seemed to me to prove God merely inspired and encouraged the Prophet to resist the Meccans and fight for his faith, at that particular place and time. The verses cannot mean God desired to slay the infidels, forever, and on earth. Other verses in the Koran allude to this view. I argued all punishment of God would happen in the heavens. I argued I could not accept how someone who did not know of the existence of the Koran, or somebody who could not read or not understand the verses, could be called an infidel and had therefore to be killed. I looked for arguments in the Koran to support my conclusions. The contradictions could be solved easily, but my arguments led me also to draw into doubt some of our most ancient and most entrenched Arabic-Islamist traditions, mainly those concerning women. I felt and proved the sharia, our Islamic Law, was too often the expression of old habits, maybe necessities of the times, rather than forced upon us by the Koran itself.

In short, I developed a more reasoned, modern view of the Koran. In doing so, I defined an Islam that was more modern, more reasonable, more human, more tolerant, gentler, and – of course – more European in spirit.'

Commissaire Bikri interrupted bin Mahfouz at this point.

'What did this have to do with El-Amin?' he wanted to know.

'I showed my conclusions to the Imam El-Amin, and he corrected me at places, making the whole more consistent. He was a wise man, commissaire. He became quite excited about the project, and said the book – once finished – could be very important for the future of Islam in the world. We then proceeded to solve the issues El-Amin thought would be surely dismissed by looking at the history of Sunni Islam. We built a text that was hard to refute! El-Amin also helped me modulate my voice and enhance my style for more efficiency. In the end, we arrived at a book of a thousand pages or more, a book that would be a definite way of reconciling Islam with our modern ways of living, of reconciling Islam with science, anthropology and history. We proved Islam could also be a call for tolerance and for non-violence in our world.

Imam El-Amin held a copy of the text on paper, and one in his personal computer. Al-Faris found out about the text. I guess he searched the rooms of El-Amin while the imam was leading the prayers in the mosque.

I heard of a very violent dispute between El-Amin and Al-Faris, a dispute that stayed in words at that moment. Al-Faris clearly reproached El-Amin for having modified the word of God. He called Imam El-Amin a heretic and worse, a dangerous infidel. El-Amin told me of the altercation. I also overheard a part of the dispute, which took place in the prayer hall. Imam El-Amin and I had by then determined what a kind of man Al-Faris was. El-Amin never mentioned my name, although I was the true author of the arguments.

Two days later, El-Amin disappeared, and Al-Faris told me the imam had travelled to his homeland. I had taken my precautions by then, commissaire. I had made copies of the text. I placed three copies on memory sticks. I hid those at various places, one even enveloped in layers of plastic and placed in a hole in the ground, near a rosebush of red roses. I am a little the administrator of the mosque, you see. Al-Faris may have found files of the text on El-Amin's computer. The paper version had also been printed on El-Amin's laser printer. Had he searched on my personal computer, however, he would have found nothing at all. Al-Faris subsequently interrogated me, but I lied consistently. I told him I knew nothing of Imam El-Amin's work. You could call me a coward, but I was not really lying, for it was my work. And my work is far more important than I am!'

Bin Mahfouz waited here for a while, drank and then continued.

He said, 'the book we wrote together is of the utmost importance, commissaire, for it will teach other imams how to preach tolerance and not be proven in error by verses of the Koran. The imams can preach kindness, the good, as in fact the Prophet always told us in the Koran. My book undercuts the more violent sects of Islam, and denounces them for what they really are: groups of ambitious men who abuse of Islam, who abuse of the gentle submission to God, with the aim to easier and better use the credulity of the people to grab power in their regions. My book is a grand victory of the ijihad over obscurantism. It could reconcile our European society with Islam.

Convinced in the end that I knew nothing of El-Amin's text, maybe considering me something of an idiot, Al-Faris must have eliminated the beloved El-Amin, but kept me in place as the façade of the mosque of Robois.

When you visited me, commissaire, I understood I might have an ally in you, and so I decided to help you. We must recuperate my book! It must be edited! I'll tell you where the memory sticks are hidden. If something happens to me, you will have to ensure the text gets printed or be divulgated electronically on the Internet. That will be Imam El-Amin's revenge on all radicals! The text is complete, but it should be reviewed in a few places with better formulations. I guess an author never believes his book to be finished, so it could also be edited as it is! If I die, the book will anyhow have to be printed as it is now.'

'You can tell me later where to look for the copies of your texts,' Joseph Bikri promised. 'I will see to it that the book gets edited. You will not die, however. We took you in our custody. You are free, but we must hide you. You are too valuable to us all. We cannot let you run any risk. We have secret safe houses. We'll bring you to one of those houses, and guard you, guaranteeing your safety until Al-Faris and his men have been evicted out of this country. The book can be edited anonymously if necessary. Would you like that?'

‘Yes, please, Commissaire Bikri. I cannot now offer my name on the book. Not only might I be killed, but I am afraid of what notoriety might do to my character. The book would make a famous man of me and of Imam El-Amin. We might put the name of El-Amin on the text, the name of a martyr of true Islam. In the end, I might prefer to remain anonymous, and to serve as a simple imam for my community of Robois.’

‘I think I might even return to the mosque prayer hall in that case,’ Joseph Bikri smiled. He added, ‘we will drive you in disguise to the safe house, and provide you with everything needed to write your report on what you know and suspect of the man Al-Faris. You will have to sign that declaration with your own name, but I can guarantee you your name will be kept confidential, courtesy of the Sûreté Nationale.’

When Joseph Bikri said these last words, he looked at Diego de Trioteignes. Diego understood then Bikri had been in contact with the Sûreté, and all these measures had been agreed between them and Joseph Bikri, also with the Prosecutor of the King and with the judges, without him, Diego, having been informed about the negotiations. Or maybe he would hear of it later, for Commissaire Bikri must have been very active these last days with the case.

‘I am curious. Telle me imam,’ Commissaire Bikri continued the conversation, ‘what generates the difference between a terrorist intent on killing innocent people in the name of religion, and an imam preaching tolerance and moderation in that same religion?’

‘Ah, commissaire, that is the crux of the issue, isn't it? I did not just study the Koran, you know. I also applied the kalam, my own humble insight. Why, I asked myself, did God create the universe? Was it a whim, a moment's idea or a necessity? Why did God fill the universe with such teeming life? Had he not the vast void, the eternal greatness of the darkness? I had to conclude His motive must have been he created because He found the darkness dead. He had nothing but eternal darkness! He must have desired light and life! God cherishes life, not death! Therefore, it is a sin to kill, to take life. When one starts thinking in this sense, one cannot but start interpreting the Holy Scriptures like the Bible and the Koran in an entirely different perspective. It changes the way one has to look at the holy books entirely. Maybe that was the inspiration God gave me. Terrorists do not reflect about the intentions of God. By some, they are also not allowed to do so.’

‘And I, imam bin Mahfouz,’ Commissaire Bikri replied, ‘have been thinking along the same lines since long. I wondered why delinquents, people who committed vile crimes, even if for some only petty crimes, could suddenly turn into zealous believers of their religion. Indeed, all the terrorists I heard of were criminals before they committed terrible acts in the name of Islam. I came to the inevitable conclusion they could not have suddenly become zealous converts who changed their ways in a matter of days or weeks. I simply do not consider such a turn-around probable at all. The criminals who have become Islamists merely found in radical Islam an outlet for their anger and hatred. In their terrorist actions, they remain the criminals they once were, merely expecting the admiring or fearing eye of the world on them. Their perfidious actions, they think, will make them famous. And with the agreement of the radical preachers, they believe they are assured of a reward in heaven, whereas here, in our community, they can expect nothing. We are fighting evil, pure evil, anger and hatred, imam, nothing more, nor zeal for religion. Isn't that sad?’

'Yes,' the imam replied. 'It is sad indeed, commissaire. Here lies our responsibility, too. How to give hope, solace, a reason to live for, to these young men. A true Islam can do that, as can other religions, I surmise, and social care. We have much work to do, we both, you and I'

'So,' Joseph Bikri wanted to conclude, 'we will wait a little, and then drive you out of here. Is there something you would have liked to add, Imam bin Mahfouz?'

'No, no, commissaire. We have discussed everything that needed to be. I would like my hiding to last as short as possible.'

'So do I, so do I!' Joseph Bikri exclaimed.

'Wait!' Diego intervened. 'There is one point that bothers me. What do you know, Imam Bin Mahfouz, about the links between Al-Faris and the Blouges factories of Robois?'

Joseph Bikri turned in surprise to Diego. Joseph Bikri was clearly not aware of the Blouges family being involved in any way with Al-Faris.

Bin Mahfouz hesitated, and then said, 'I honestly don't know. The Blouges factories produce toys. What harm could toys do? I have seen the head of the Blouges factories, Léon-Jules de Blouges, come to meetings with Al-Faris in a room above the cafeteria. I recognised him, because he was introduced to me at the new-year reception organised by the mayor. At times, another man came with him, I suppose also a man of the factories, maybe an engineer.

Blouges does work together with projects of Al-Faris for the mosque's workshop, a kind of laboratory the man and his assistants have set up. It seems rather innocent. It is good to keep the young Muslims off the streets and out of the pubs in the town. Young Muslims of the École Technique, the technical school, come to work there. They are young men, really, of from sixteen to twenty-three. Al-Faris mentioned to me once the young men came to work on toys. They may be designing new toys for de Blouges. They are not many, though, maybe five to eight young men. What exactly they do in the workshop, I have no idea. Al-Faris and his assistants blocked me out of all the buildings of the complex, except my house and the prayer hall and the library. These are all situated in the building of the mosque proper. Needless to say, they also took over the administration of the site, as well as the accounting. Accounting is not done anymore by a Belgian accountant, as El-Amin had organised.'

'When actually, did Al-Faris and his assistants arrive at Robois?'

'About two years ago. Again, I'm not sure, but I think Al-Faris arrived as a kind of general administrator for the works of the construction of the mosque. I assume, but actually I don't know, the arrival of Al-Faris was one of the conditions for Saudi sponsors to provide the money for the building of the mosque. Al-Faris stayed after the mosque was built. More was built than I would have thought truly useful. All the buildings, the apartments and the meeting-rooms, the workshop, are used, of course. They attract many Muslims, which I suppose is a good thing. Also Muslims from other towns come to Robois. Iman El-Amin told me he would have been satisfied only with the mosque itself and the house behind it. He got a lot more than he asked for!'

'Do you have a warrant to search the other buildings?' Diego asked of Joseph Bikri.

Bikri hesitated, thought a little, and then sighed, 'no, not really. I have a warrant to arrest people, not to sniff around in all the premises. It is not a search warrant. I must be careful, now, with what I do. I don't want to create a diplomatic incident. It is preposterous, of course,

but that is how matters stand. Would we find anything interesting in the other buildings? I doubt it! Al-Faris is a very careful man. He will have left no clues.'

Diego then addressed again Imam Bin Mahfouz, 'you overheard the men about the attack planned on the outdoor rock music festival. Have you heard anything about what Al-Faris might be doing with the de Blouges family, something specific, other than designing toys? Have you heard anything about what exactly the young Muslims do in the workshop? Think hard! This may be important.'

'No, no, not at all,' Bin Mahfouz replied. 'I overheard Al-Faris and two of his men because I had been allowed in the apartment building with two of his other men. I went to the toilets, and heard voices. I put my ear to a door, and overheard. They have video-cameras everywhere, but the cameras are only active at certain times. The cameras are activated manually. I know so much for having visited the premises when they were opened. When I heard of the attack on the festival, I knew the cameras were not running. As I told you, I was not allowed into the cafeteria building, except the cafeteria itself, which is open to the public. All the other rooms, also in the apartment building, have doors protected by devices for which a magnetic badge is needed. I have no such badge. Your suspicions are justified, though. Whatever Al-Faris does has a wicked aim! He is using the meeting-rooms there to talk to the Muslim men of Robois. He indoctrinates them, tries to make them warm for his Wahhabi radical view of Islam. One of his favourite preaching is on not to be friends with infidels. Does Al-Faris use the workshop merely as a place to attract youngsters with games and modern electronic gear, or is he using the youngsters and the place to build something dreadful, a bomb maybe, I don't know! I do suspect Al-Faris to be a bomb manufacturer, by the way. How else would he have lost his fingers? But would he use the young men of Robois to the same aim? No, I don't think so. I doubt not one at least of the youngsters would have come to ask my advice. Our boys are good boys, here!'

'I don't think he produces bombs up there,' Joseph Bikri smiled. 'The younger men would have reported to us what was going on. Several of the youngsters are sons of families that are on our side, and who are helping me.'

'What are the assistants of Al-Faris doing?' Diego continued, not giving up.

'One is the accountant, one manages the cafeteria, one organises meetings for Al-Faris, one is the librarian, and one seems to be the secretary, the personal assistant of Al-Faris. They are really not occupied for more than a couple of hours a day.'

'Have you ever seen weapons in the buildings?'

'No, never, none. They may have weapons, but I have never seen any. I doubt there are! Not here!'

'Hmm. Then I have no more questions,' Diego told.

He straightened in his chair.

'Fine,' Bikri agreed. 'Neither have I for the moment, imam. I thank you for your precious cooperation. You have saved many lives. You must know I met several families among our community. They told me they respected you and appreciated your work and your kindness. I hope that you will choose to stay in Robois when all of this is over. I guess we may differ in opinions on certain subjects, but I'll make sure I'll keep better contact with the Muslim community in the future. I too have things to say to them. Talking is really what we should do more!'

'It would be my pleasure, commissaire,' Bin Mahfouz smiled. 'If there is anything I can do, please do not hesitate to call on me.'

Joseph Bikri nodded to Dominique Bussy.

She stood from her chair and said to the imam, 'Imam Bin Mahfouz, I will bring you to our safe house in my car. You will have to lie down a little in the back seats. I hope you don't mind being led by a Christian woman?'

The imam smiled, 'your reputation and beauty is also known in our community, Inspector Bussy.'

Bin Mahfouz and Bussy left the room.

'What now?' Diego asked.

'How did you know about links between the de Blouges and Al-Faris?' Bikri asked.

Diego smiled. Joseph Bikri had not liked that information.

'From the Sûreté,' Diego answered instantly. 'I was sent here because suspect movements of funds had been spotted between Near-East countries, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States on one side and the Blouges factories on the other. Al-Faris seems to have been involved. I was sent here to investigate. Two other agents received the same order. We are teaming up. I guess we should talk, we two. The Sûreté has given you some data, me other data. You know a lot more about Robois and what is going on here than I. I can get deeper into the Sûreté. Do you agree we should exchange information?'

'I'm glad you begin to realise we should work together,' Joseph Bikri reproached.

'In the beginning, I was ordered not to,' Diego added in his defence. 'The attack changed everything, I guess. I repeat: what now?'

'I have a few reports,' Joseph Bikri stated. 'I will have the testimony of Imam Bin Mahfouz. I have the attack on the music festival and Bin Mahfouz has warned us about the attack, meaning Al-Faris knew all about it. I will have recordings made by Muslims of the incendiary preaching of Al-Faris. I have no proof linking the man or his assistants to any tangible misdeed, but inciting young Muslims to radical Islam is something our government doesn't trifle with. It may take a month or so, but Al-Faris will be evicted and pushed out of the country. He will not go to jail, but our Foreign Minister will have to have a friendly chat with the Saudi ambassador and ask the ambassador to send Al-Faris back to where he came from. In the meantime, I am going to put a surveillance team on Al-Faris and his helpers. They will not be able to move without us knowing about it. The man is a prisoner, but he doesn't realise it yet. His life will become more and more difficult. I must make sure, however, I don't step over any line, for the embassy will intervene. I tell this also for you. I don't want violent actions of whatever kind on the territory of Robois without me knowing about it. Al-Faris will be sent back to the Arabia of a thousand and one nights, or was that Persia? - but he will return in disgrace. I wouldn't be surprised if he just disappeared, the same way maybe as the former Imam El-Amin!'

'As to me, I don't even exist,' Diego grinned.

'What will you do now, then?' Bikri wondered.

'I must get into the Blouges factory. I have an invitation to visit and be shown around by Léon-Jules de Blouges. I will ask him to show me the entire premises.'

'Don't expect too much from such a visit,' Bikri mused.

'I know. Just wandering around, have a look at the hangars, see how the workers are inside, may provide useful information. I will get the atmosphere of the factory.'

'Ask them what they produce for the Near East,' Joseph Bikri said. 'There lies the clue. I wish you good luck!'

The two men stood and left the room. Diego rode back to his house of Trioteignes. He explained to Atsel and Deniz about the aborted arrest of Majdi Al-Faris, and about what he intended to do next.

Diego phoned Léon-Jules de Blouges, and made an appointment with him to visit the factory the next day. The three secret agents discussed about a plan, about a list of questions to ask, how to visit all of the factories, how find out what happened inside the hangars Diego might not get access to. They decided together to have Deniz go with Diego. Deniz could use her feminine charm to entice Léon-Jules to show them everything. Léon-Jules's tongue might loosen to her.

After the discussion, Diego announced he would not spend the night at Trioteignes.

Atsel and Deniz tossed Diego about, chanting the Beatles song of 'Michelle, Michelle, my belle. Ce sont des mots qui vont très bien ensemble! I want you, I want you, I want you!' Diego reddened to behind his ears, but it was exactly to Michelle he rode to in the night. He rode to the Lady of the Lake, though not to have supper at the restaurant. He had one more torrid appointment upstairs, in the bedrooms of the Lady.

Chapter 3. The National Day

3.1. The factory visit. Friday, 17 July

Diego de Trioteignes woke up early in the morning, but Michelle had already gone from the bedroom. Her place felt still warm, but empty. Friday was a hard day for her restaurant, she had warned Diego. The restaurant lounge was fully booked for noon with business lunches, which meant the prospect of new customers, so she would have to parade and cajole. Friday evening was traditionally one of the most important appointment evenings for family suppers. Diego stepped out of the bed. He imagined Michelle already standing in her kitchen, calling out orders to her assistants.

Diego had experienced one of the most remarkable, wonderful nights of his life. When he had taken Michelle for the first time to bed, they had both been tired and at the same time famished for love and sex. Now, they had taken the time to discover each other. Diego had let his fingers travel from Michelle's naked shoulders over the curves of her spine to the hollow where her back ended in her buttocks. He had found out with marvel how beautiful Michelle's body was, how harmonious her curves, how elegant and slim, and how well-formed her long legs felt when his hands ran over them. Michelle's legs had remained hidden most of the time in the moments he had looked at her. She had always worn long clothes, the white robe of her cook's aprons, or the evening gown at the Bazaine supper. Now, he could move his hands over her, gauge their volumes, take their measure. Then, he had felt her magnificent breast against his chest, and been grateful for the trust she had granted him to touch her, to allow him deep inside her, until she felt him shudder his orgasms. Diego had learned to trust nobody, to rely only on himself. The way Michelle had abandoned her being to him, was an ardour entirely new to him, which brought him to raptures of gratitude and love, sentiments he swore henceforth to honour and never to betray. The intimacy he developed with Michelle that night would have to remain unique. These were feelings not to seek and repeat with any other human being! Diego had suddenly become certain he would not have been able to find such emotions with any other woman but Michelle, not with Evelyn Bazaine, not with anyone else. Diego discovered a new purpose for life, feelings that were worth while living for, however simple and non-adventurous the life with Michelle might become.

Diego also experienced a strong missing of more, and knew it was the lack of children that now haunted his dreams, a haunting desire for a family! He smiled. His life had drastically changed in prospect and hope, in so few days! He had a mission to fulfil, maybe months more to still remain in the service of the government, but then he would have to leave and talk with his father, and start another life. In the bedroom of the Lady of the Lake, Diego recalled with a warm heart his father and mother, his sister too, and the other members of his family, however remote and even if many of the people close to him did not have the same blood as he in their arteries. His family extended from Belgium to England and Germany. Even in Belgium he could take pride in links to people from Ghent and Antwerp to Wallony, as well

as to so many dear friends in Robois. It was high time he told them he loved them and wanted to care for them!

Diego dressed and sneaked out of the restaurant. Of course, he met the pretty Indian girl on the path to the ferry. She came from the other direction this time, pushing laboriously a heavy cart loaded with boxes of vegetables. She refused his help.

'Good morning,' the girl threw joyfully at him. 'We are going to have one more fine day, Monsieur Diego!'

Diego's happiness knew no boundaries, so he grabbed her at the shoulders and gave her two big kisses on both cheeks, the Belgian way.

'Take care of Michelle for me, will you?' he asked.

'Sure I will, sir,' the girl agreed, nodding, and holding her cheeks with both her hands as if she would cherish those spontaneous marks of affection forever.

Diego wished her the best, and he ran on. He rode to his house in Trioteignes for breakfast.

Atsel and Deniz sat rather morosely in the kitchen. They already had taken their first meal. Diego prepared a sandwich with cheese and ham, and got the rest of the tepid morning tea. At first, Atsel and Deniz simply sat there, saying nothing. The looks they exchanged, amused smiles, told all. Diego began to explain once more everything he had learned the day before. 'Majdi Al-Faris is sheer horror,' he told. 'The man is quintessentially evil! I fought evil before. I killed evil before. Still, I was never confronted so directly with raw evil. Why and how can there exist on earth such a man, who would want to hurt so cruelly other people, to death even? Where there is peace, he would bring strife! Where there is love, he would bring hatred. In whose name? You, Atsel, who would be a writer, how can people like that exist in this world?'

'Does he know otherwise?' Atsel mused. 'You don't really know, Diego, how it is to constantly live in violence and cruelty since you were born! In Israel, we tend to ignore the horror in the countries around us. We know of the horror of course, but we place that knowledge in compartments of our mind, place barbed wires around them, and do not think about them except when it becomes absolutely necessary. Haifa and Tel-Aviv are heavens of peace! You can bathe in the sea and lie on the beaches. We guard that peace with thousands of soldiers, with long periods of our time, but cherish it when we are on holidays there. In the Palestinian territories of Gaza and Cisjordan, violence, hatred, strife, and everyday horrors of terrorism against innocent citizens are continuously present.

People like Al-Faris, whether originating from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and so many other countries, or radical extremist Jews, live in the stress of cruelty every second of their lives. Such environments breed hatred, and nurture pure violence. When people are at peace for a while, they think about how to revive hard feelings one against the other. The environments breeds hatred, tear hearts apart and nurtures more violence! I feel compassion and pity for the belligerents who must live in such hell, but I cannot but fight on the side of my people, in this state of mind.

A man like Al-Faris, has lived all his life that way. He has only his religion, his Koran, as sole comfort. Therefore, don't touch his Koran! A man like Al-Faris knows only how to hate and to kill.'

Atsel drank his tea, then he, continued with rage in his words, 'a man like Al-Faris kills for one of three reasons, Diego. He kills for money, for women or passion, and for power. Money he has not, but he knows perfectly well where to get it, not for himself but for his cause, but he uses the money eagerly enough. The Saudis are immensely rich. They have so much money they don't know anymore what to do with it. They give to the Wahhabis generously, to be left in relative peace. The radical Muslim terrorists do not attack the Gulf States for the moment, because that is where their money comes from. Al-Faris does not have to kill to get his funds. He asks, demands, and money is given to him plentiful!

Al-Faris also does not have to fight for women. Since he has money and power, the women flock to him. Give him a woman, and your family shall not be harmed by terrorism! I bet he has far more women than the two officially acknowledged. The women are given to him by Saudi families not because he will love the women, but because of what he is. His women do not give him any anxiety, for they are his slaves. The Koran allows him that, if he reads certain verses quite literally, which of course he does. He gets sexual satisfaction, but he could not care less for them, for empathy is a feeling he does not recognise. The women fear for their families, later for their children, but they were offered in sacrifice.

What Al-Faris really seeks, is power, though he shall never acknowledge that fact. He kills to gain power and consideration, and to get power is his true religion. He can do whatever he wants in the name of his religion, a claim every Muslim will find justified and even holy. God should reign over the earth, he shouts, over all the people. I must therefore rule, he claims, for I am the representative of God! I do the work of God! You don't know anything about God! I have studied the Koran and the Hadith, and the Sharia Law, so I know! You should not reflect about your religion! Just do as I say! I studied the Koran, the word of God! I studied the sayings of the Prophet, so I alone am entitled to know what God wants! God must reign over the world. He is the ultimate king. No terrestrial ruler can tell how people should live. Only God can do that, and I represent God! I can say what God wants! You cannot!

What better claim on power? Al-Faris wants to install a theocracy on earth, everywhere, in his region and in all countries. The Koran justifies Islam, he says, and does not Islam mean humble submission? To God, and to Al-Faris!. Now, a theocracy is essentially a dictatorship, of course, for one must lead, not two! The people who wield the power of theocracy are appointed by themselves and by an oligarchy of the imams all, who aspire to become at one time the supreme leader too, to gain absolute power. The imams of Al-Faris' religion form an oligarchy that installs the dictatorship. A theocracy is the contrary of democracy. There is no vote for the men who wield theocracy! They are appointed by God, they claim! Even in a theocracy one has need of a President to represent the state, of a Prime Minister, of an administration and of a parliament. These can be elected democratically, but the ultimate power remains firm in the hands of the hierarchy of the imams. Theocracy is a dictatorship. And the theocracy wields the power over all! Men like Al-Faris hence seek the power of theocracy.

Why do other people let them? Simple! Once the Al-Faris of our world wield power, they can unleash the forces of the police and of the army. They can do with somebody who protests

whatever they want, kill him or her, make him or her disappear. On the other side, when you kiss their hand, they can grant you well-paid jobs and favours. The dictatorship creates corruption. Theocracy is utterly justified, the imams must claim. It is justified in the Koran! Who will dare challenge the word of God?

When people like Imam El-Amin and Imam Bin Mahfouz attack the basis of the power of the El-Farises by interpreting the Koran, and therefore they become the worst enemies of men like Al-Faris! Such scholars, thinkers, philosophers, theologians, anthropologists and the like, are considered in every of their countries the scum of the earth, the first and foremost to be eliminated, though they are of their own people. The murder of the Imam El-Amin was therefore simply of the utmost necessity, a logical and unavoidable, compelling requirement!

All should become very clear now, Diego! Don't think this is a force that exists only in Islam, and only for the time being! It is a universal force that has existed since hundreds, thousands of years, in all countries! It has existed in your Christian medieval times until the kings of your countries had learned to wield more power than the popes, and it has existed in our Jewish societies, where the radical, extreme rightists, orthodox Jews, would want to conquer the Promised Lands for their only own! In your countries, lay governments have developed, and even the popes have accepted democratic rule. Don't forget, however, canonical law, the law of the Catholic Church, still prevails for many over civil law!

Diego continued to eat. He nodded. Deniz said nothing, but she listened eagerly to what Atsel said. She too nodded. She knew well also in Turkey such forces existed.

'Kemal Atatürk fought against such men,' she added. 'The spirit of Atatürk is being mocked nowadays. The Muslim leaders of the Turkish parties in power destroy bit by bit the heritage and the spirit of the state of Atatürk!'

They kept a long silence.

Diego then sighed, and said they should prepare for the visit of the Blouges factory.

'We have to get inside,' he urged. 'We may not learn much, for they will hide whatever interesting there is to be seen and known, but we should nevertheless have a look for ourselves.'

'Indeed,' Deniz said. 'But how should I dress? Should I dress as a businesswoman or as a bitch in heat, as you westerners like to say so denigratingly of oriental women?'

'You should dress as you feel and like,' Diego evaded. 'I have no idea, really. Maybe by looking sensually attractive, de Blouges and his directors – if any show us their factory – might be tempted to boast, to open up and tell things they had better kept silent. Sorry!'

'Only a Diego de Trioteignes could say he is sorry when I display my assets and wiggle my breasts and buttocks!' Deniz concluded warily.

Atsel burst out in laughter.

An hour later, Diego and Deniz rode to the Blouges premises.

'There are maybe a few things you should know before we arrive,' Diego exclaimed. 'The de Blouges are an aristocratic family. They are of small but old nobility. My father is a count, a member of the highest nobility, but the de Blouges are noble nonetheless, and they have more

than we cultivated the arrogance of their state. They are wealthy both of old money and of new money won with their factories.

Léon-Jules de Blouges is arrogant. He thinks I am somewhat stupid, a lesser human being than he is. He is a man who believes he has a right on more than common people. Also, I must tell you I was once, when I was very young, very much in love with a woman called Evelyn de Bazaine, Michelle's sister. Evelyn dropped me for Léon-Jules. I experienced at that time my first devastating blow to my self-esteem, so that I fled from Robois. The blow did me much good, I suppose. I learned the true value of things. It withheld me from becoming such a sanctimonious bastard as Léon-Jules has become! Anyway, Léon-Jules will continue to impose his will and his vision of all matters. He will try to demonstrate to you and to Evelyn – who should be present, I surmise – how superior a being he is, as compared to me. He will show how powerful, rich, inventive, smart, prosperous and aggressive he is. We can play on this feeling, for I will act the innocent, naïve, credulous, admiring fool to please him. He will be satisfied and may explain more than he originally intended to. He will try to impress you too, Deniz!

'Good!' Deniz smiled. 'Good! Thank you for having warned me. That gives us a leverage over him. His father gave him the names of the king of the jungle of the animal world and of the first Roman emperor, one of the greatest conquerors! We are going to play this lion like the fool he really is.'

'Take care, for he is also intelligent and cunning. Let there be no doubt about that too!'

'Then we will give him the tigress of Anatolia against his lion,' Deniz smiled. 'Don't worry! I can devour that kind of guy in a blink of my eye!'

'You seem to speak out of experience,' Diego tried.

'Oh, it is confession time, isn't it, sweetheart! Well, yes, I too once fell in love.'

'I must imagine a huge, moustached Turkish warrior, a power of nature, one man twice as broad in the shoulders as I, an oiled wrestler, a head taller, a real Ottoman,' Diego smiled.

'Something like that,' Deniz replied, and her smile faded from her lips. 'He sure impressed me! I was very naïve when I was young. I lay at his feet unrolled, open, like a Persian rug. He trampled with his feet on me! He abused of me, until I understood and fled. I am not married, though at one moment he insisted we married. By then I had become utterly disenchanted. He could have bought me from my family. My parents would have been only too willing, so rich and powerful was he. I fled. I had friends. They too abused of me, but not in the same way. I ended up in the JITEM, and they became my new family. Same story, probably. I had a wild life afterwards. Now, Diego, one of these days, I am going to melt me a bullet of an alloy of silver, file that bullet to perfection, and chase it with my rifle all through his head.'

Diego shuddered, for he thought Deniz perfectly capable of doing so.

They kept a long silence.

Deniz took up the conversation, 'I suppose this Léon-Jules will display the easy contempt of the criminal for his victim. I know about such attitude, don't worry.'

She waited some time. Diego didn't answer.

She mused once more, 'If I am right, the instruments of your revenge on Evelyn are that Michelle woman, Evelyn's sister, and your investigation. You were also so keen to investigate on the Blouges family, to find your revenge on Léon-Jules by proving he is involved in some illegal scheme with Al-Faris. I don't care why you are doing what you are doing, but if such is the case, Diego, it doesn't seem fair on that woman Michelle. She looked

a decent lady to me, one I might at one time have wanted to be. I wouldn't wish my kind of life on any other woman. The worse that can be done to a woman is to destroy all her illusions and turn her into a cynic.'

Diego looked at her, surprised.

'No,' he said decidedly after a short while. 'No! I met Michelle and I fell in love with her. Evelyn doesn't compare to her. I have been asking myself that same question you mentioned. But no, I'm not seeking revenge on Evelyn. I don't care for Evelyn anymore. A first love burns and remains in your mind forever, but compared to Michelle, Evelyn now looks flaxen, faded, uninspired. As to Léon-Jules, I didn't particularly seek him out either! He is part of a job given to me. I didn't ask for the job and wasn't taken in by it! I was chosen because I was born here, in Robois. I feel no pleasure in pursuing Léon-Jules. I have this job to do. I have to find out what he is involved in with the Gulf States, with certain investors of the Gulf States anyway.'

'You still would be satisfied to see him ruined!'

'No, I wouldn't. It would hurt Michelle. It would hurt Robois. I would have a lot to explain to do to Michelle, and like with you, I would run the risk of her not wanting to believe me. I care not a bit for the Blouges men, but finding out some dark, nasty scheme would not give me pleasure, but a sea of troubles.'

'We'll play our roles. Nevertheless, darling, I'm going to make that Evelyn as jealous as she has ever been with a man, and I don't believe she will be jealous over her husband. That will be my gift to you! You'll see! You're too nice!'

Diego laughed. He glanced back to Deniz, saw how beautiful she was, how elegant, and lethally dangerous.

'You are a tigress indeed,' he concluded while he drove into the private road that led from the N11 to the Blouges Castle, which stood next to the Blouges Manufactory halls.

When they stepped out of the car, Diego looked at Deniz. She had dressed up like a business woman in a chic, tight-fitting *deux-pièces*, of a short grey skirt and a vest. The skirt emphasized her long legs and her slim profile. Deniz wore dark grey silk stockings. Under the vest she wore a white shirt. When Deniz opened her vest, Diego swallowed, for her shirt was of a flimsy, almost transparent material, and her brassiere underneath minimal. Her nipples stood easily out. Deniz opened a button more on her shirt. The cleft between her breasts and the swelling of her breasts were even more exposed than before. She wore a golden necklace on which glimmered in the sun a very strange, modern piece of gold with enamelled pearl-like pieces intricately forged together. She wore golden bracelets on her wrist, and now also put on tiny golden earrings. Diego thought to recognise oriental, maybe Turkish excellent craftsmanship on those jewels. The piece of her necklace hung heavy in the cleft of her décolleté, so that it inexorably drew deep the eyes of any man. Deniz had made up hair high, in a demure, strict bun, but anybody could see how luxuriously her hair could fall to under her shoulders when undone. Her white face contrasted sharply with the dark dress. She wore little makeup, except for her flaming red lipstick. Her long, narrow neck invited to caresses with trembling fingers, and her very blue eyes were set like fine patches of colour in her pale face. Her waist was slim, her arms and legs elegant but muscular, her pelvis broad enough to be inviting, yet still harmonious with the rest of her body. She wore high-heeled shoes, which gave her an even more elegant charm. Her breasts were pushed forward and sharp, enhancing her alluring femininity. Diego acknowledged she was of the most strikingly

beautiful women he had ever met, yet he would not have preferred her over Michelle. Maybe the interior beauty of a woman also showed in her profile. Michelle had stirred his soul as much as his desire, and touched him otherwise than Deniz did.

Diego too had put on a dark costume, but his costume looked rather shabby, creased and not of a sophisticated cut. It was not the best suit he had ever bought, but in line with the dress of his pals of the English Special Services with whom he had passed the last months. He had now chosen it intentionally.

Diego and Deniz went slowly up the stairs to the imposing front door of Castle Blouges. Castle Blouges was a classical mid-of the nineteenth-century, Laurent-Benoît Dewez style mansion of the new rich industrialists of the time. Diego had always considered the Dewez style country houses of Wallony rather tasteless. He rang. Léon-Jules de Blouges, impeccably dressed in a deep blue Italian-style suit, opened the door in person. Instead of letting Diego and Deniz in, he came out and said hello. He announced they would walk immediately to his factory halls. He said this while he could not keep his eyes off Deniz.

‘Yes, ah,’ Diego started, ‘I told you I would bring a friend. May I introduce you to Denise Legrand? Denise is a colleague of mine, and my friend!’

‘O, hello,’ Léon-Jules said, devouring Denise, ‘I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.’

‘Diego,’ he continued, ‘you seem to change women frequently. Did you not come the other evening with my sister-in-law to Castle Bazaine? Welcome, Madame Legrand, or should I say Mademoiselle?’

‘Mademoiselle,’ Deniz answered in her best Parisian French and giving Léon-Jules her devastating flirting looks with her almond eyes drawn long and flashing. ‘I am not married, Monsieur de Blouges.’

‘Call me Léon-Jules! Fine, fine,’ de Blouges said, enraptured, putting one arm around the shoulders of Diego and of Deniz, drawing them back to the stairs. ‘Evelyn is coming down any minute now. She too will join us. She has not visited the halls in a very long time, so she proposed to accompany us. I will invite you to dinner afterwards.’

They went down the stairs again, and stood in the garden. De Blouges showed them the vast garden with a gesture of his hand. All this was his! He began to explain how rare the trees and bushes were, but then the door opened again, and Evelyn de Bazaine appeared.

Deniz had not met Evelyn before, and Diego saw her again only for the second time after many years. Deniz studied Evelyn as if she were an adversary, soon to be torn to pieces. She understood why Diego preferred Michelle, for the years had sharpened the traits of the woman she saw in front of her. Evelyn was elegant, but age had tarnished her beauty. Some women became softer, warmer, happier and more sympathetic with age. Evelyn had hardened, and hardened much in a few years. She had sacrificed beauty to sophistication and superficiality.

Something, Deniz was sure, had disappointed Evelyn, so that now the lines around her mouth showed she did not laugh much. Her long, slim legs, slim waist and otherwise angular, elongated curves, emphasized that look. Evelyn also wore very high heeled shoes, which seemed inappropriate for a walk in the garden and in a factory hall. She looked a dried-out, starving version of Tippi Hedren. Deniz also wore high heels, but not the needle-like ones Evelyn would have to walk on. Léon-Jules didn’t bother with his wife, and drew Diego and

Deniz to the left of the castle, to his factory premises. Evelyn tipped behind them, without ever catching up with them. Léon-Jules continued to flirt with Deniz.

In the actual visit, the four of them walked through noisy hall after hall, guided by one of the Blouges' directors. They saw first the hall in which tons of plastic and other materials arrived, unloaded from trucks. Hundreds of enormous sacks and boxes filled with small plastic pellets the size of pearls were brought in, loads of cloth, of balsa and other wood, aluminium bars of all sizes, zinc, and great quantities of big pots of paint besides other materials. The storeroom was in use. Several forklifts were bringing pallets with boxes to and from the factory. Toys were placed in carton boxes, and the variously coloured boxes took much space, even when stacked high.

Deniz gasped in raptures of admiration, 'wow! This is enormous! You have a grand factory, Monsieur de Blouges!'

'Call me Léon-Jules,' he said. 'Yes, we are a very successful company, one of the big three for toys in Belgium! And we are still expanding!'

The outboxes were placed in the hangar next to the one where the materials arrived, so Diego and Deniz saw these two first. In the export warehouse, towers of boxes stood neatly piled the one upon the other. The director-guide cited figures of how many tons of boxes of which value were sent to the countries of Europe, America and Asia.

Then, they walked on to the machine room, where the plastic raw materials were melted, extruded and pressed into forms. Here, the toys began their life. Diego and Deniz showed themselves very impressed by the noise and yet also the cleanliness of the hall.

The director smiled contentedly, 'something we learned from the Swiss! We receive every week buyers, usually from the large distribution chains. These people want to see for themselves how we produce our toys. We prove us therefore obsessional with order and cleanliness, because, after all, we deliver to children! We don't have to prepare our halls for each outside visit, as these can be asked unexpectedly. We keep everything constantly in pristine order. It has become a mark of the house!'

The director also indicated charts of quality statistics everywhere on the walls, with curves of ever less quality defects.

'We have groups of personnel sitting together, discussing how to lower defect levels,' the director explained. 'The principle of quality circles has been applied in our manufactory since a decade and a half! We also defined strict procedures of work, and thus leave nothing to chance. Our quality control system and our end tests are rigorous, as they should be! Our customers truly appreciate that.'

In the production hall, the machines were versatile, all-purpose automats. Moulds and forms and methods could be changed rapidly. One machine could be transformed in only seconds to produce a batch of dolls and then a batch of aeroplane wings.

'"Just-in-time production",' Léon-Jules proudly claimed. 'In the past we had one machine per figurine. Not so anymore! One machine can produce whatever figure we are in short supply of, very rapidly.'

Diego and Deniz were brought to the assembly hall. Here, the plastic pieces and the pieces in other materials were painted, dried in huge hot-air ovens, and then led to long assembly-lines more or else working on Taylorian principles to bring together several parts and accessories to a finished toy. This work was done mainly by women. Toys of all sorts were thus produced: dolls of various sizes and looks, figurines of soldiers, medieval warriors, Viking figures, cowboys, space aliens, you name it. Also animals, houses, farms, railway stations and aerodromes, cars, trains, and so on ended from the assembly lines. The Blouges factories seemed to be a thriving industry, which proved a success story in view of the Chinese and American toy industry.

‘We do not produce each toy with profit,’ Léon-Jules de Blouges explained to Deniz. ‘This figurine, for instance, the shepherd, costs double the price at which we can sell it. It is produced much cheaper in China, because it necessitates much manual work in the assembly. However, we sell it in one box together with our farm, pastures and animal series. The entire box brings a nice profit. We are considering producing this particular piece in a new factory in India, importing it, but have it be produced to our standards, and then we will introduce it and similar ones in our farm for young children. Business is global, you see, in these times. We are constantly looking not only where we can sell our finished products, but also where we can produce them at the lowest cost.’

Deniz looked at Léon-Jules in amazement, bording on adoration for how clever he man was. De Blouges had been explaining many things to Deniz, darting around and under machines, into the painting and assembly lines, drawing Deniz with him, telling her this or that detail with grand gestures of arms and hands, and demonstrating to his personnel he was the big boss.

‘I am not the Chief Executive Officer of the works,’ Diego heard de Blouges tell. ‘I am the owner, the President of the Board. We are not an enterprise quoted on any stock exchange, and our Board is mainly constituted of family members and persons of confidence, so the president has a somewhat larger role than in other large, private companies. We have account managers to sell our products, but I participate in and lead even the most important negotiations with our largest customers.’

The director led the group on. He walked a few paces in front of the four. Léon-Jules de Blouges had taken Deniz next to him. Diego and Evelyn followed. Evelyn must have found herself a little humiliated for having been forgotten. Léon-Jules hardly ever addressed her. He was taken in by Deniz. Evelyn only said something to Diego once every while. She looked anxiously and sadly at Diego and then at her husband, whose behaviour she obviously loathed.

She suddenly said to Diego, ‘you seem to know Michelle quite well. I wondered whether you held contact with her after you left Robois. She never told me she knew you so well.’

‘No, no! We did not write or phone each other,’ Diego replied. ‘We met each other by chance, recently. We became good friends instantaneously.’

‘You made quite a stir when you arrived together at our supper at Bazaine, the other evening. Rumours ran you and Michelle were a couple.’

‘I don’t deny we like each other,’ Diego replied, but then kept his silence on the matter.

‘I suppose you are not a couple with Michelle since you came here with this Denise. Is she your girlfriend?’

‘No. She is not. Like I said, Denise is a friend and a colleague.’

‘What does she do for a living?’

‘The same as I,’ Diego remained vague.

Diego actually had wanted to add a few words on this subject, but Léon-Jules called them to him, saying, ‘you have seen the main halls of our factory. I will show you one more hall, which is the assembly line of our model aeroplanes and helicopters. We have also a quite extensive assortment of cars and trains that can be guided wirelessly, and those too are put together in the hall we shall visit now. This is a special branch of our Blouges toy factory. The hall where we assemble our model airplanes is our most sophisticated line. Putting together model airplanes and helicopters from hundreds of parts, devices that actually have a motor engine, also produced at the Blouges enterprise, is the most complicated process! We shall just walk through here rapidly, for you have seen the most of our halls already. I draw your attention also to our laboratory. You can see the laboratory offices in the back. Some of the windows are blocked from the view there, because we design our newest models there. We want, of course, to keep those a secret. Our model airplanes and helicopters are our most lucrative business, because they are the most expensive toys. They do remain toys, although also intended for adults. A top model of our historical combat planes can cost from a few hundred to a thousand, to two thousand dollars!’

Léon-Jules de Blouges and his director lead the group through the largest hall so far. They passed rather rapidly in the middle of the assembly lines. Here too, mostly women, dressed in the same light blue overalls, worked.

‘The air is purified in these halls,’ the director explained. ‘In this hall, we have the strictest norms of dust levels. Our engines and moving parts are so far miniaturised, we cannot tolerate the least particle inside the parts!’

Airplanes of different models, from biplanes to more modern jet planes were being assembled in the hangar.

At the end was a smaller space where copter drones were being assembled.

‘Yes, we have also gone in the drone manufacturing business recently,’ de Blouges explained. ‘Copter drones are an area in expansion, they are the new paradigm in modelling.’ He showed several models of bicopter, tricopter and even quadcopter models with as many small rotors. One of those models was being tested in the hall. It hovered above their heads, and also above the heads of the women of the assembly line, drawing smiles on the faces of the workers.

‘Do you also produce the remote control devices for these?’ Diego asked.

‘Oh, yes, we do!’ the director replied. ‘We have another hall next to this one for those devices. We have quite an experienced team in electronics! Actually, we produce only one remote control device, but then one that is so versatile! Simply by changing the front plane we can manipulate airplanes, helicopters as well as drones by changing a little the same device. All is computer-chip and software controlled! Our remote control devices are computers actually, with a small screen and all, programmable devices. We place another software program in the memory of the computer, depending on the model we want to control.’

'How far can the model airplanes be controlled? How far can the airplanes, helicopters and copter drones fly? What is their range?' Diego wanted to know.

'Oh, we use the 2.8 Giga Herz frequency band. The range is about 1.5 kilometres, to maybe 2 or 3 kilometres at the farthest, in the best of conditions. The range is limited, actually, to eye-vision range. If you can't see your model anymore, your copter, plane or drone, then you cannot know into or against what the models fly, so you may lose them. Many wires in the air in our European countries!' the director smiled.

At that moment, they had reached the end of the hall and they all came back together.

'So,' Léon-Jules de Blouges concluded, 'you had an overview of what we produce in the Blouges Toy manufactory. As you could see, we built a quite successful, modern business in a very competitive environment. We have been able to hold our own by being smart, by making of innovation a factory slogan, and by applying automation to enhance productivity. We must enhance our productivity constantly to construct, assemble and put into boxes at the same final cost as the less expensive manual work third-world or BRICS factories enjoy, the companies in Brazil, Russia, India and China. The level of competition is of course ever shifting, so we too have a constant battle to wage to stay ahead of competition. New models, automation and quality also, are our prime slogans!'

Before leaving, Léon-Jules de Blouges then began to talk in a private conversation with his director. Diego and Deniz walked a little on. Evelyn stood abandoned for a while, on her own.

Deniz whispered to Diego, 'that was all extremely dull stuff. There is nothing, here, that might interest us in the least, nothing special, nothing that might link to the gulf States beyond a normal business investment. It seems all so innocent and plain to me! What have we come here for? We lost our time!'

'Keep on walking, slowly, slowly, but keep on going,' Diego whispered back. 'Léon-Jules is leading us to the exit next, but walk on, a little farther, then to the left. I noticed there is one more hall on the brochure he pushed in our hands. That last hall we didn't visit at all. You see that door on the left? If it isn't closed, we go through that door and have a look before de Blouges stops talking to his director.'

Diego and Deniz went on, a little faster, followed by Evelyn. They came at the door. Deniz took the latch, pushed, and the door opened. They looked inside. They saw yet another assembly line before them, a line of what looked like model drones. They stepped inside, as if they could visit this hall too.

'Hey,' de Blouges called from the far, behind them. 'Come back! The exit is the other way! We must go on here!'

Diego and Deniz pretended not having heard Léon-Jules the first time. They pushed on, as if they had not heard the shouts of the man. Léon-Jules sounded angry, then. Diego and Deniz went on, closed the door behind them. They took a few more steps in the hall. They hurried on, went deeper.

Diego and Deniz saw another assembly line in a huge hall, the largest they had been in of the entire enterprise so far. The line here was organised in a U-form, which came back to this end, so that they could see both the beginning of the assembly and the finished product at the end.

The model that was produced here appeared to be a quadcopter drone, one with four rotors inside a metal-and-plastic frame. It was by far the largest model they had seen, a model of at least a metre in diameter, a metre high. It consisted of a round disk platform of metal and plastic, in which hung four horizontal rotors. Around the rotors stood flaps to change the direction of the thrust of the copter rotors. The platform gained its rigidity from two sturdy aluminium bars, beneath which hung several boxes. The boxes no doubt contained the electronics, a camera maybe, the receiver control circuits, and sensors. Diego also saw two antennas protruding on top. The antennas could be folded down. The four slim feet in which the structure stood, could also be plied up, so that the entire model drone could be placed in a rather flat box of a square metre, maybe half a metre high. In the last stage of the assembly line, the platforms were stocked in boxes against the wall, to the right of the door. Léon-Jules came running up to them.

‘We are not visiting this hall too,’ he said, painting for he had been running. ‘There is nothing interesting here, just more of the same. They are the same models as the ones you saw in the previous halls. I hadn’t planned the visit too long, and this is just more of the same, really!’ Léon-Jules took Diego by the shoulders, pushing him gently but firmly back to the door. While doing that, he could not stop Deniz from continuing her walk. She began to read the text labels on the boxes, and that seemed also to perturb Léon-Jules. Contrary to the boxes prepared in the other halls, these had no grand, gaudy pictures on them, no shining and boasting covers. Diego saw Deniz reading a simple text on a white sheet glued on to the boxes. Léon-Jules noticed to where Diego was looking, so he released Diego and ran to Deniz, who was slightly moving one of the boxes, feeling its weight. Diego went back up to the circular drone model on the assembly line, and studied it. ‘Come back with me,’ Léon-Jules demanded. ‘We are late. We must go back to the castle, now. Dinner is waiting for us! We have little time left for our reservation.’ Léon-Jules drew Deniz more roughly away from the stacked boxes, back to the door, grabbed also Diego back, and pushed them through the door.

‘That was quite a large model you are assembling in there,’ Deniz remarked. ‘Is that your latest?’ ‘It is,’ Léon-Jules gave, not smiling anymore. ‘We produce quite some of those drones, now, but there is nothing special or different about that model. It is just one model more!’ ‘It looks pretty big for a model,’ Diego pushed the knife in a little more. ‘What is it used for?’ ‘Some of our models are used for the inspection of pipelines, for agricultural purposes, for meteorological purposes, or simply for fun. You can film your house from above with these unmanned vehicles, and so on,’ de Blouges explained while he led them on to a door marked with exit. ‘These drones can hold a video camera and other sensors to film or survey fields of different crops. Agricultural engineers and farmers can have a view from above, and find out which of their parcels are best suited for a particular crop. Yes, we are also seeing a few industrial applications for our flying models. We really should call them UAVs too, for “Unmanned Aerial Vehicles”!’

Léon-Jules smiled now, relaxed, and led them out of the halls. They went on foot back to the castle. Léon-Jules monopolised Deniz again, leaving Evelyn to trot behind. She reached Diego.

Evelyn tried to take up a conversation, 'I have phoned for the Lady of the Lake. I reserved a table for four. May we invite you to dinner? Maybe we can talk of common memories from the times when we were young?'

Diego first looked at Deniz, who had heard. She nodded.

'Why not?' Diego replied, though he kept thinking about what Michelle might do when she saw him entering with Evelyn and Deniz. 'Thank you, you shouldn't have invited us also to dinner. Nevertheless, we would be delighted. We did not expect you to invite us to lunch too!'

'Oh, it was all planned,' Léon-Jules intervened. 'We always invite our guests to lunch or supper, and usually at the Lady. We are good clients of my sister-in-law. We keep business in the family, so to say, for you see, Michelle is the cook of the Lady!'

He laughed with Deniz's surprised face.

They went two by two to their cars. Diego followed Léon-Jules's large BMW.

'On the boxes of the last drones was written "Made in China",' Deniz mentioned in the car.

'Now, why would somebody construct and assemble models in Belgium, and glue a sticker on them with "Made in China"? I looked more closely at one of those quadcopters. It also had such a sticker on it. That is the only illegal bit I noticed in the halls.'

'They don't want it be known the drones are assembled in the Blouges factories,' Diego guessed after a while.

'Why in hell would they want to do that for? The machines would sell better with a sticker "Made in Belgium" on them! Why don't they want it be known they produce those platforms?'

'Maybe they ship the platforms as they are to China, to have them refurbished further with all kinds of devices, so that the entire finished device is then sold on, out of China.'

'The Blouges factories produce them in large quantities, Diego! I saw hundreds of the boxes. If they are destined only for agricultural purposes, this factory alone would be swamping the market.'

'I have no idea,' Diego answered. 'There is something to think about, though. Have you noticed all the other models were nicely painted in harsh colours? This particular model wasn't even painted in the least colour! It was not attractive at all. It was crude! It was ugly! It was primitive! It cannot be a model for children, not even for amateurs of drones.'

'So, what would it be, then?' Deniz asked, 'something is not right. Why should that hall hold such a great secret? More than twenty women employees, engineers and directors work in there. With so many people, you cannot guard a secret for long.'

'Oh yes you can,' Diego thought out loud. 'The employees have confidentiality clauses in their work contract. They are not allowed to talk about what goes on in the factory. They fear losing their job. There is not much industry in Robois. People here don't like having to drive one hour or more to get to their daily work.'

'Maybe we can have a chance to talk to an employee, a woman preferably. Rumours must happen. Do you happen to know somebody from inside the factory?'

'No,' Diego declared, 'but I might know somebody who knows somebody else. Robois is a small town. The idea is worth its while pursuing. Rumours must run, even if only concerning those labels. That might be our next action, talk to some of the women in that hall.'

'Fine, let's do that,' Deniz concluded.

They arrived rapidly at the Lady of the Lake. When they entered the restaurant, the young Indian servant welcomed them warmly, bowing reverently.

‘Welcome, Monsieur Léon-Jules and Madame, nice to see you again. We have held a fine table for you. Ha, Monsieur Diego, you bring us surprising company!’

She referred to the two splendid ladies she saw walking at that moment on either side of Diego, Léon-Jules having hurried on.

She grinned and made eyes as if saying, ‘you, naughty boy!’

Diego was embarrassed, blinked with his eyes, and knew he would have to explain once more a few things to Michelle.

The dinner lasted, and was excellent, the conversation superficial. Léon-Jules continued to flirt with Deniz. He continued to try to impress her. Evelyn didn't say much. Deniz was the queen of the table. Diego tried to know more about the large drones in the last hall, but Léon-Jules waved all his further questions away, saying one did never discuss business at a good table. He also remained vague over his connections with the Gulf States.

When the lunch was finished, Léon-Jules asked for the bill. A little later, the door to the kitchen opened, and Michelle Bazaine stepped into the hall, dressed in her impeccable white cook's chef robe. This time, she went straight to the table of her sister, but she stepped to Diego, who stood. Michelle placed a hand behind Diego's neck, and they kissed, standing both. They kissed on the lips, and Diego brought a hand around Michelle's waist.

When the kiss finished, Michelle looked at the table, primarily at Deniz. Léon-Jules's mouth lay open. Evelyn sat grim and unsmiling. Deniz grinned, drew her mouth to the side. She laughed inward at Michelle's taking thus openly possession of Diego.

‘Well done, girly, you have decided to fight for him,’ she thought in her head, but said nothing.

Diego stayed with Michelle, holding his arm around her. Everybody began to shove awkwardly on their seats.

Michelle broke the tension somewhat, ‘well, our family has assembled today,’ she said, ‘you wanted to surprise me? How was the food?’

Everybody answered Michelle was a great cook.

The conversation then continued more relaxed, but everybody knew how matter stood between Michelle de Bazaine and Diego de Trioteignes!

The group chatted, but rapidly Léon-Jules stood and told they had to leave. Duty called! Michelle returned to the kitchen. Léon-Jules, now with Evelyn, and Diego walked out. Deniz, however, ran to the kitchen door and disappeared. Outside the door, Diego said goodbye to Léon-Jules and Evelyn, thanked them for everything, and waited for Deniz. Léon-Jules and Evelyn walked to the ferry, engaged in a heated talk. Diego waited a long time. Then, a red-faced Deniz hurried out.

‘What have you been doing?’ Diego asked.

‘Once in a while, a girl has to explain things to another girl,’ Deniz replied mysteriously.

‘Michelle won't be mad at you.’

They passed the lake on the ferry, and returned to Trioteignes.

3.2. Hamza's story. From Saturday, 18 to Monday, 20 July

Commissaire Joseph Bikri had installed close surveillance on the mosque buildings. He had positioned two police cars at the two corners of the mosque complex. So far, nothing special had been signalled. All remained quiet. Almost no people entered the complex. The Koran School sessions of Saturday had been cancelled. This had caused some emotion in the Muslim community, but the annulation had been attributed to an illness that had struck Madyan Bin Mahfouz. Robois remained tranquil. Usual life continued.

The surveillance of the mosque would rapidly become a problem for Joseph Bikri. He had not nearly enough inspectors and officers to keep the watch around the clock in place for more than a couple of days. Guarding the mosque complex during the weekend would create a big hole in the commissaire's budget for the month. Worse, Bikri could guard the accesses to the N11 road, but not also the back side of the buildings. Men could easily escape in the night out of the back windows of the mosque complex, and walk on foot in the dark to farther on the N11, to find a car there waiting for them. Joseph Bikri therefore nurtured not many illusions on the efficiency of his guarding the mosque. If Al-Faris really wanted to escape, he could already have done so at ease the previous night! Nevertheless, what Al-Faris did would be limited to escape. He could receive no visitors without the police knowing about it and having photographed the visitors, and Al-Faris could not leave in his cars without being seen and followed. Joseph Bikri had also succeeded in obtaining the necessary permissions to place the mosque telephones, fixed and mobile, under taps. That would also be the case for all electronic mail of the most official addresses. Everything was being put on memory discs by the telephone companies. Two officers of the Federal Police who spoke Arabic were listening to the conversations. Nothing special had been revealed up to this hour. Calls had been infrequent and short.

The recordings of the speeches of Al-Faris had delivered useful results. Four tapes had so far been brought in by the good services of Karim Khedis, the gardener, and the helpful men of the Muslim community. Joseph Bikri esteemed he had sufficient evidence by now of the radical language of the imam, and of his tendency to preach intolerance. Al-Faris had publicly called the Muslims to resist against the appeals of the more moderate Muslims. He was enticing the young men to hostility towards infidels, who were simply all the non-Muslim families of Robois. The commissaire had enough evidence to apply Belgium's newest counter-terrorist laws. Joseph Bikri was thinking of calling off the operation of recording the speeches, for Al-Faris would now be much more prudent, and very suspicious of his audience. He possessed sufficient information to incriminate the imam. Bikri also did not want the men who were helping him to run additional risks.

Since two days, Khadijah and Hamza had been running around in Joseph Bikri's house with very long faces and glances of gloom, obviously nervous, no smile possible. Bikri hated seeing people unhappy and worried, especially in his family. Hamza, who never failed the Friday prayers in the new mosque, had not even tried to get out from Bikri's sofa during most of the day, and he had sulked in a dark mood, close to Khadijah, in front of the television set.

The commissaire knew no proper imam would have preached in the new mosque. He surmised the Muslim community would start to grumble after a few days, and to fear, in search for reasons and for solutions. Imam Bin Mahfouz had been hidden in the safe house of the *Sûreté Nationale*, and Imam Al-Faris would not venture out of his apartments to walk to the prayer hall. After a while, one or other of the assistants of Al-Faris allowed the Muslim men into the mosque, and he initiated a few prayers. This man did not preach, obviously incapable of doing so.

On Saturday morning, Joseph Bikri called Khadijah to him, and when Hamza also entered, he confronted both young people together. He wanted their dark mood to stop and to tell him what was going on. Bikri needed an entire hour to hear out the two and have them confess why they looked so gloomily.

Afterwards, he remained sitting in his sofa in silence, excited, and extremely worried. His immediate reaction was to phone Diego de Trioteignes at the lodge, for urgent support. When Diego answered on the phone, Joseph Bikri asked for an urgent meeting with the three agents. Bikri could not really ask of the three to come to his house. Diego, Atsel and Deniz would want to keep their identity a secret, and Bikri was not sure his own house was not under surveillance by people of Al-Faris. The commissaire's office at the Abbey was also out of the question, for the same reason. Diego proposed the commissaire to drive to the lodge of Trioteignes, where he stayed with Atsel and Deniz. Joseph Bikri accepted, and told he would come with somebody who had new, startling information to offer on the Al-Faris affair.

The car of Joseph Bikri rode into the garden of Diego's house half an hour later. Diego heard the car on the gravel path. He stood ready at his opened door to receive Joseph Bikri and Hamza Al-Harrak. Diego brought them to the living-room, where he introduced them to Christian Trevanion and to Denise Legrand. A pot of green tea and a bottle of red wine stood on the table. Joseph Bikri and Hamza preferred tea. So did Atsel and Diego, but Deniz sipped from her wine.

Joseph Bikri could not wait.

He started, 'we may have a new issue! The *Sûreté de l'État* must be aware of what young Hamza, here, told me just half an hour ago. I will not repeat what he said to me. I would prefer to have him tell his story in his own words.'

Joseph Bikri pointed to the young man, introducing him.

Bikri said first, 'this is Hamza Al-Harrak. Hamza is the friend of Khadijah, my wife's younger sister. Hamza has been much worried these last days. He found out some dreadful things on what might be going on in the mosque buildings. You must know he has been developing in the mosque workshop a project Imam Al-Faris and his assistants defined for him. Three young Muslims, fine students at the Technical School of Robois, have been working on this project, one of them being Hamza. Young Hamza is something of a genius in my eyes, a genius in electronics, computers and software programming. I would not even have been able to imagine what he has developed. He claims he has not at first grasped the real meaning of what Al-Faris and his men asked from him, and I believe Hamza. I think he is a good boy. He has been terribly deceived by the imam. A few days ago, he has arrived at a frightening conclusion, and he has been fretting over this the last days! By his own free accord, he has come to me with his story.'

Joseph Bikri then addressed Hamza directly, 'all right, Hamza. You can trust these three persons as you trust me. Suffice to know for you they are helping the police. Tell us what you told me an hour ago! Be brief, please.'

Hamza was impressed. He stammered at the beginning, almost whispering. Gradually, he gained more self-confidence.

'As Commissaire Bikri mentioned,' he began, 'I have been developing a new toy model in the workshop of the new mosque. With my friends, I designed a drone based on entirely futuristic concepts for the Blouges Toy factories. We came up with what is still an experimental, but powerful drone. The craft we developed was not really as revolutionary as Commissaire Bikri thinks. The Blouges factories have quite some experience with engines, drones and with helicopter models. The Blouges engineers provided us with data on miniature combustion engines and electrical batteries, on notions of lift and drag, and the like. We tinkered more than we calculated, and we tested in the workshop. So, we developed a drone that was very simple and cheap to construct, essentially a round platform of aluminium and plastic, merely a thirty centimetres thick and a metre in diameter, in which we could place four horizontal rotors powered by as many combustion mini-motors. The design of the drone, and having this model fly, was not really something very special. Quadcopters and the like exist elsewhere. The engines exist, the transmitter/receiver equipment exists, and so on.'

Diego and Deniz looked surprised at each other. They had seen such a drone being produced in the Blouges factories in hundreds of exemplars!

'It is probably no longer a prototype,' Diego added. 'We saw them being manufactured in large numbers already today, in the Blouges factories.'

Hamza looked up.

'I didn't know that,' he said nervously. 'I thought only a few had been built, merely experimental proof-of-design units!'

'Continue with your story, boy,' Joseph Bikri urged Hamza on, losing patience.

'What is so special about this drone?' Deniz asked, smiling.

'I'm coming to that,' Hamza said, a little louder. 'The craft is different in four ways from the other model toys the Blouges Company produces.'

Hamza hesitated at that moment. He drank from his tea, looked at Joseph Bikri, who nodded.

'The drone we developed is different from the classical toy models in range, in speed, in payload and in control,' Hamza enumerated on his fingers, 'especially in control! As for range, it can fly up to eighty kilometres far, on its gasoline-powered engines for the rotors. It can fly at a speed of up to seventy kilometres for an hour or more without payload. It can carry a payload of instruments of up to five to seven kilograms at fifty kilometres an hour!'

Diego, Atsel and Deniz again looked at each other.

'No, no, one cannot apply a manual remote control at such distances,' Diego understood instantly. 'Remote control devices cannot control so far, and how would one be able to steer the craft without visual contact that far?'

'I'm coming to that, also,' Hamza declared. 'The most important difference is in control, as I said. The drone we developed is steered by an on-board computer chip, connected to various instruments, among which a GPS unit, a Global Positioning System unit, which is a Global

Navigation Satellite System or GNSS receiver. The GPS module sends continuously signals over its wiring to the on-board computer, to notify the position of the craft. We don't need any maps in our on-board computer memory, for we don't have to drive along streets and the kind. The flight plan consist of a series of coordinates, and the drone has to fly in straight lines from one point to the other. Straight lines are easy to calculate, and no need to have a compass on board! The GPS unit keeps us in the right place.

We also put a special control software in our computer. This steering program directs the device from one point to another in stable flight, applying corrections constantly. Then, we have another software to enter a trajectory in the computer's memory, simply by giving a series of coordinates. Even on a memory chip no bigger than your fingernail, we have several gigabytes at our disposal. We can load into the computer a trajectory of earth coordinates. The computer, with the information from the position of the craft given by the GPS module, can direct the rotors and their flaps to steer it along the trajectory. The steering program then takes over, and corrects for deviations in the trajectory, while flying in the air. In other words, the drone will entirely on its own follow a pre-loaded route, autonomously, without the need of a manual remote control, without connection to a transmitter base station, and at the desired height. Yes, we also have a height sensor on board, a small laser-type height sensor, and so the drone will automatically follow a flight plan in height and distance. No need anymore to have a person steer it around with a manual remote control device! Our drone will zigzag a little along the straight line from one point to the other, but it will get there, to within centimetres of its target!

'You came up with a fucking model cruise missile!' Atsel suddenly exclaimed, 'a cruise missile that can fly low, fly not thousands of kilometres but tens of kilometres, and not at speeds of hundreds of kilometres per hour but at a few tens of kilometres per hour, and with payloads not of hundreds of kilograms of explosives but of a few kilograms. Or you came up, not with a military drone that can fire target-seeking missile, but with a model military drone that is not recognised as such but can nevertheless deliver explosives to where you wish!'

Hamza Al-Harrak blemished, and he began to stutter again.

Yet, not with some pride he continued, 'yes. Yes! We didn't think about a payload of explosives at first, not until very recently! We only thought about a video camera as payload, as most model drones do. Or maybe the payload could be small packages, as at least one transport company has already announced it might be using drones for in the future! Such autonomously controlled drones did not exist when we started with our project, but we esteemed it feasible to build one, so we did, and assembled one, and then we tried out several prototypes until we had one that actually worked. Most essential was the software!'

'Why is that?' Diego asked.

'The most difficult, as any pilot will tell, is not so much to keep one's speed and height and direction in full flight, high in the air! The most difficult is taking off and landing. You need to define flight curves, depending on the weight of the craft, and so on. You have to regulate quite sharply the engine power, the rotor positions, the various flaps for thrust and direction, and change those almost constantly with the speed of the wind. You must do that at take-off or you will crash. You must do that at landing to follow a predetermined descent inclination, to not just have the drone fall unpredictably out of the sky. If necessary, we can have our drone enter an open door, given the right coordinates of the opening! The flight curve is

intricate, but not too difficult, but then you must also do that at landing time, which is quite more challenging. We had to place typical take-off and landing plans in the computer memory. We succeeded in this! We began to have after-thoughts, however, at the last requirements Al-Faris and his assistants defined and gave us.'

'What were those?' Deniz prompted.

'We have an electrical battery, a clock, and a speedometer, as well as an accelerometer on board,' Hamza explained. 'Al-Faris' assistants asked us to push an electrical signal of a determined voltage and current change on two electrical wires, depending on two conditions. The signal was to be generated either on abrupt changes in acceleration, from a certain value to zero in the shortest of time, and after a number of seconds subsequently to a speed of zero.' 'Meaning,' Atsel explained, 'you can send a signal to an electrical detonator right before the crash of the drone, or at a certain time after the drone has landed. Congratulations!' 'Right,' Hamza nodded, 'only, we didn't think about detonators and explosives! We didn't know what such requirements were for. We only began to understand much later what our drone could be used for.'

'You do have developed a fucking cruise missile, boy,' Atsel said. 'You have built a drone that can be moved about in a box not larger than a metre by thirty centimetres, put a flight plan in the on-board computer, run as fast as you can to some other place so that no one can find where you are, have the drone fly to where you want it to fly autonomously, have it crash on the nose of *Manneken Pis* and blow the fountain to smithereens, with everybody who stands not too far from it! Bravo! You did it! Congratulations again!'

'Something like that,' Hamza grinned. 'Only, we never thought of transporting explosives, and we never had any explosives. I don't even know what explosives look like!'

'Al-Faris and his accomplices can have explosives,' Atsel remarked. 'Tell me, boy, how many kilograms of explosives can the drone transport?'

'A lot,' Hamza said, more seriously. 'We have a payload of more than five kilograms, but from that amount you must deduct the on-board computer, the GPS unit, the receiver antennas and the electronics, the accelerometer and the speedometer, the height sensors, the clock, and so on, the weight of which together are way under one kilogram all together. I think one could easily snap three to four kilograms of explosives beneath, on the main bar of the drone. One would have to spread the explosives about, to not unbalance the platform, but it could be done easily.'

'With three kilograms of Semtex or C4, or even more powerful explosives, I can blow up a gasoline tank, a house, an airplane waiting on an aerodrome, a train, a ship like a methane gas tanker, cause serious damage to a nuclear reactor, blow up a chemical plant, you name it,' Atsel said, whistling.

'There is more,' Joseph Bikri warned.

'The drone alone, with all its gear,' Hamza explained, 'without the explosives, of course, costs between one thousand and two thousand Euros. I don't know how much explosives cost.'

'Explosives cost very little if you steal them, boy,' Atsel again remarked. 'So you built a mini cruise missile for a thousand Euros. So, what?'

‘So, they gave us another challenge! We had to devise a way to very rapidly change the flight plan and other characteristics, such as the electric signal to send out on the two wires, not into one drone, but into any number of drones at the same time.

In the end, we devised two schemes for that function.

In the first process, to lower costs, we developed a “follow-me” function. We pushed the characteristics of the flight plan in one drone, and had that drone be provided with a transmission device. This device sends out signals, which the other drones can capture, and follow. We tested that function with model airplanes, and it worked fine. One drone flew about, and all the other drones simply followed the first one.

Next, we simply pushed a flight plan in an instant into any number of drones at the same time. For that, we had to provide each drone with a different number, an identification number, if you want. When activated, all the drones start to listen with their antennas and their receiver equipment, and then we send out a digital signal with the coded flight plan. We transmit from a personal computer first a list of identification numbers of the drones that have to follow the same flight plan. The drones listen to this protocol and to these numbers, and know that the information that follows the numbers is a flight plan for them. Each drone that hears its number takes on the flight plan that follows, and starts to fly. This way, transmitting a flight plan to a hundred drones ready to take off takes only a few minutes. The time depends on the transmitting equipment you use. We do not need anymore to charge a flight plan manually in each drone. Preparation is minimal! We use digital signals anyhow to control the drone!’

‘So, in minutes you can send a hundred drones in the air and deliver hundreds of kilograms of high-yield explosives to a target, based on the target’s GPS location?’ Diego asked.

Hamza nodded miserably, ‘or we can send fifty or so drones, any number really, to one target and the other fifty to another target, and so on.’

‘You can send a hundred drones at a time, fully automatically, against an advancing army, at any target,’ Atsel mused, ‘at something like two hundred thousand Euros of cost, a fraction of the cost of but one real cruise missile?’

‘Yes, but at a range of something over fifty kilometres maximum,’ Hamza told.

‘Tel Aviv lies somewhat over fifty kilometres from the borders of Gaza City,’ Atsel mused, ‘and twenty kilometres or less from Palestinian villages in Cisjordan! You created the poor man’s cruise missile, boy! Call it the PMCM, and you may get the Nobel Prize of international terrorism!’

‘If I could do this,’ Hamza tried, ‘then anybody can do this. It was only a matter of time before somebody came up with the idea, and found it perfectly feasible with the units we have at our disposal today.’

‘Indeed,’ Atsel agreed. ‘Still, it hasn’t been done so far, to my knowledge.’

The living-room remained silent for a long time. Atsel stood and went to fetch a bottle of cognac. He never drank brandy at this time of the day, but he felt an overwhelming need for a stiff drink.

‘We saw hundreds of boxes with those drones ready to ship in the warehouse of the Blouges factories,’ Deniz whispered.

‘And all wearing stickers with “Made in China” on them, so that they cannot be trailed back to the Blouges factories, no mention of the Blouges factories on the boxes and also not on the drones,’ Diego added.

‘The production of drones is not forbidden by law in Belgium,’ Joseph Bikri then said. ‘They do not come under the law on military equipment. They are models, toys. I cannot stop the Blouges factories from making them. Out-of-sight flight is forbidden by the law, however, but I guess it is not in many other countries of the world. Anyway, as long as there are no explosives on the drones, they can be sold as models, as toys. You cannot use them in autonomous flight over Belgium, but terrorists don’t care about the law.’

‘Right. How many of such drones have the Blouges factories already shipped, and to which countries?’ Diego reflected. ‘The drones are no weapons in itself, so they don’t need permission to be exported by end-user-certificates for arms. They can easily be loaded with explosives on-site. You just strap the explosives to the bars and connect them to a detonator. Nevertheless, I believe that you can stop the addition of the function of autonomous flight to them, as that is forbidden in Belgium. You could try, Joseph, to stop the adding of an on-board computer to the drones for use in Belgium, and then it would be a crime to sell them here. Nothing would stop the Blouges factory from producing the autonomously guided ones in other countries!’

‘How do you blast these things out of the sky?’ Deniz wondered.

‘You can’t,’ Hamza explained. ‘They are too small to be detected by radar. The heat print of its engine is so small that surface-to-air missiles, SAM missiles, have a very big chance to miss them! You are not going to use a SAM system like the American Patriot to blow a thousand Euro drone out of the air! One Patriot missile costs hundreds of times more! The drones also can fly low, making SAM missiles a hazard. Give me a map of the heights of Belgium, and I can have the drones follow the contours of the land at merely ten metres or so in the sky. I can have them follow the contours of the land, through valleys and over hills, even under power lines, and not even have to use height sensors! We have not yet developed such a version. Height maps do exist, though!’

You can shoot with a rifle at a drone, but it would be very difficult to shoot at such a small, moving target, fifty metres above the ground. You would have to aim in front of it, for the platform moves! The platform can be open, like a grid. Bullets may shoot through it. Much can be hit, but chances are the quadcopters will fly on. It would also be very dangerous to shoot at it, for it might drop and explode its explosives anywhere on the ground. And so on. Laser guns are in development, but that is Star Wars stuff, and months away from real trials. One hundred drones directed against one target can swamp any defence system! You might try anti-aircraft guns, but at the low height the drones can fly, that might be dangerous in hilly terrain. Again, large numbers of drones can swamp any manually operated anti-aircraft defence system.’

Atsel understood the threat for Israeli air defence. The drones formed the ultimate terrorist weapons! Deniz shuddered, afraid also of what terrorist gangs could do with the drones against the forces of her country, against the public and governmental buildings of her nation. ‘Gentlemen and lady,’ Atsel exclaimed, ‘welcome in a new era! We had terrorism, suicide bombers, cyberterrorism. Now we enter the era of drone terrorism.’

‘So, now we know,’ Diego said coldly. ‘What do we do about it?’

He asked the question rhetorically more to himself than to the people present in the living-room.

'I almost forgot,' Joseph Bikri sighed. 'I have more bad news! While driving to here, my men phoned me to tell a big Mercedes car with a CD plate, a *Corps Diplomatique* car with the Saudi-Arabian flag on, came to fetch Al-Faris at the mosque. My men could not stop such a car. So, we lost Al-Faris. The CD car rode to Brussels, but only the Lord knows where Al-Faris is now. Saudi Arabia has always been fair with our country. We believe individual, very wealthy men are supporting Al-Faris, not the government of Saudi Arabia itself. So, we are not sure the car has driven into the embassy.

Moreover, my men noticed not one of Al-Faris' assistants coming out of the apartment buildings today. My officers fear also the assistants have fled, either in the night, or last evening after the evening prayers. They could easily have disguised themselves, and mixed with the men who came out of the mosque and went to their cars yesterday evening. They may have driven to who knows where. We are not sure yet, but we may have lost all the men around Al-Faris too! If they are potential terrorists with drones, they can hide or wait anywhere.'

'We must assume they are terrorists,' Diego said. 'Why else would they have asked Hamza and his friends to design the detonator signals? An open question is whether they were planning terrorist attacks in Belgium soon.'

'Belgium is attractive as a target,' Deniz remarked. 'Brussels is the seat of the European Union! Heads of State regularly meet in Brussels.'

Diego had been thinking on.

'Could we track where the platforms drones are?' he asked.

'Not until they are activated,' Hamza replied. 'When they get activated, which still has to be done manually by pushing a button under the drone, then I can enter the transmitting computer – if it too is activated -, a mere personal computer, which sends the flight plan. I can access that computer probably only for a few minutes, unless they leave it in active mode. I will be able to see the flight plan, then.'

'Can you change it?'

'Yes I can! I can do that from my own personal computer, but I have to get to a transmitter/receiver station. There is one in the mosque workshop. From there, I can warn you when my computer lights up. I hope to tell you from where the drones are taking off, and where they are heading to. The flight plan will contain those coordinates! The drones do not have transmitters yet. They can only receive messages. However, after a computer tries to build up a connection with them, I can connect to the program linked to the transmitter. You see, I wrote those programs, and I built in backdoors through which I can enter. I can find out from a second computer, my computer, what happens on the first. I can send commands to it, and so on. One can notice on the first computer a second one has connected with it, but I doubt they will understand the signal. The mark is tiny on screen, and I didn't explain the indication to somebody. So, yes, I can download the flight plans, see how many drones are being controlled, where they are heading to, and so on. Because I can see the flight plans, I may be able to give you the coordinates of the site from where the drones flew off. I will also be able to give you the target coordinates.'

'Can you reprogram the flight plans?'

'Yes, I could try to do that,' Hamza nodded, 'but I would probably be too late. I would have to load the flight plans drone per drone. If they send out one hundred drones, I will never

have changed all the drone flight plans during the flight duration. The program to reprogram the drones in mass is not yet ready on my personal computer. I must reprogram drone after drone. Some, many, of the drones, will reach target. The imam's assistants are at least five, and they can prepare the drones hours in advance. The "follow-me" function will not be implemented yet.'

'How many drones can you change in one hour?'

'Ten to twenty, but take care! If I change the flight plan, I have to direct the drones to some place where they can do no harm. That place should be increasingly close to where the drones are at that moment, for their fuel will dry out. If they fall out of the sky on their way back, they may also fall on houses, schools, and so on. I really don't know what to do for the best. If, for instance, the drones fly to Brussels, I can modify their flight plans to drop them in the Genval Lake, between here and Brussels. The ones who have passed that point, and which have not enough fuel on board, will fall out of the sky on their way back. At least, they won't reach their target.'

'We have some time then,' Joseph Bikri hoped, 'to inform the police what the targets are. We can clear the area, and reprogram. We cannot do more. Warrant or not, we have to break in into the mosque workshop and wait near the transmitter/receiver station.'

'Nothing else to do,' Atsel agreed, 'if Al-Faris and his companions have disappeared, we must fear for the worse to happen!'

'When the drones explode, we can arrest de Blouges for conspiracy,' Joseph Bikri added. 'He will probably get away with that accusation. I will propose to the Prosecutor also to charge him with illegally exporting weapons. His lawyers may argue the drones are no weapons, and de Blouges may win that trial, but putting him in jail we can do. If the Prosecutor follows me in my reasoning. I think he will do that, in view of the counter-terrorism acts and the atmosphere in our country after the recent attack against the Jewish museum of Brussels and against the high-speed TGV train between Brussels and Paris.'

'Well then,' Joseph Bikri concluded. 'We go immediately with young Hamza and his computer to the mosque. Hamza will have to remain there all the time, eat and sleep in the workshop, next to the transmitter/receiver device, and with his eye on his computer. I shall alert the Prosecutor of the King and his assistants of what is happening in Robois. With some luck and much persuasion, I may get the papers ready for the arrest of all the people involved, mainly Léon-Jules de Blouges and his General Manager. I will have documents allowing me once more to search the premises of the new mosque, and of the Blouges factories. I will seize all papers at the factories, all the accounting data and shipment data of the drones. The Special Services will have to do that! If the Prosecutors and their assistants find one mention of explosives with the drones, then de Blouges will hang. I will get all the data of the Blouges castle too, and of the private companies of the de Blouges family. In the meantime, my officers can continue guarding the mosque, and the Blouges factory halls. I'll have to ask for reinforcements to do all that, which will not be easy, for we are in a weekend. It will be a nightmare getting all that under way!

Then, I hope you can stay at the workshop with young Hamza. When the first transmitter goes active, we rush to the place from where the drones will have taken off. We phone the targets to the Federal Police, and they will have to evacuate. We arrest whoever we find at the

take-off site. Hamza changes the flight plans to drop the drones in the Genval Lake. The fish are not going to like that, for more probably than not, the explosives will go off when they reach the water. Any remarks?’

‘Wait, wait! This all means we believe a terrorist attack initiated by the terrorist Majdi Al-Faris is going to take place in the next hours,’ Diego remarked. ‘We cannot be certain of that. What if no attack at all is planned for the next days? Why would Al-Faris send out drones with explosives now? He has nothing to gain, and much to lose! If he orders no attack, the de Blouges factories may continue to export their drones. If he orders no attack, he and his men will be able to leave the country quietly. He has more to win by not executing the attack than by sending the drones under way!’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Joseph Bikri replied. ‘Al-Faris has been found out for what he is, a terrorist schemer and an assassin. We thwarted his grander scheme for power. He will want revenge. His ego will demand revenge! No, he will apply his terror, believe me. He will want to show to the world what he can do, what a menace fundamentalist Islamists can be. He will want to be feared. This is a matter of pride, of the consideration that comes with power, much more than of religion. Now that he knows this kind of drone can be produced, he can ask for that anywhere in the world!’

The commissaire thought on.

‘We have a very long weekend before us,’ he mused. ‘It is Saturday today. We have not only Sunday, but also Monday and Tuesday, for Tuesday is the twenty-first of July, the Belgian National Day. Tuesday is a holiday. Most offices will also be closed on Monday, to allow people a long holiday. As of Wednesday, as late as that, we can start looking for the terrorist gangs in earnest. The *Sûreté de l’État* can help in that. The embassy of Saudi Arabia will have been contacted. I do not doubt they will lend us their assistance. The Saudi government like terrorism as little as we. If they have indeed recuperated Al-Faris and his men, they will want them fast on an airplane to their country. They will contain the scandal, which is a good thing for all of us. At least, also, we will be rid of Al-Faris, and we can lower the alert.’

Atsel and Deniz looked at each other. Their job was over in Belgium, for the plot had been uncovered. They were not over with Al-Faris, however. They did not like the idea of Al-Faris once more disappearing, to start his mischief somewhere else in the Middle-East of Asia.

Diego was more optimistic, except for a few things he would have to explain to Michelle. He began to have a bitter taste in his mouth. Why had he accepted this task? Was it because he had understood it was his duty, as the person in the *Sûreté* who knew Robois best, or was it because he had wanted to take revenge on Léon-Jules de Blouges and Evelyn Bazaine? He was not sure of his own motives anymore. And how would Michelle react when she heard Léon-Jules had been put in jail partly by the actions of her lover? Diego began to shake, feel cold, thinking of a possible lurking personal disaster.

Nevertheless, he said, ‘we have to get on our way immediately! We have no time to spare!’

Commissaire Joseph Bikri rode back to the Abbey, to warn everybody in the Federal Police and to warn the Prosecutors of Namur.

Diego, Atsel, Deniz and Hamza rode to the new mosque of Robois in full equipment, guns included. They invested the new mosque building. They found out rapidly that indeed, all the men had left.

Hamza took possession of the workshop. Hamza's two friends arrived in the afternoon. Diego, who had become the non-appointed leader of the team in the mosque complex, let them come in. Hamza explained. The boys were appalled. They declared they would stay with Hamza, and help him with the guarding of the personal computers. Diego, and later also Joseph Bikri, agreed. The three students remained in the workshop. A task team was installed. When one young man slept, the other two stared at the screen. Late in the afternoon, Khadijah and Samia also came to visit them. They organised the men had tea as often as they wanted, and they brought food and moral support. The waiting began.

The following two days passed in relative calm. During the night, the three youth stayed in the workshop, riveted to their personal computers, on guard, their software active and listening. The first night, only Diego remained with them, alert and prepared, his P90 at arm's reach. The second night, Atsel stayed. A team of four policemen and – women kept a discreet guard at the mosque complex near the cafeteria and the workshop. A terrorist assault on the workshop was, however, not expected to happen.

Commissaire Joseph Bikri passed by only once every while, and only during the day. The families of the three youth came to visit their sons. The young men and their guards got buried under heaps of the best food their mothers could provide. They received especially many sweets. The police guards had never eaten so many succulent Muslim preparations.

Commissaire Joseph Bikri tried to get his warrants and papers for the arrest of Léon-Jules de Blouges in order. He told the Prosecutor of the King he had invested the mosque buildings. He received official permission to do so without insisting.

Seeking contact with the necessary persons for further action was not easy during the weekend. Bikri had hoped to reach more persons more quickly and to get more help from them, but in the end he abandoned all hope of receiving the needed permissions and assistance to act before Wednesday noon. He was told to involve so many different police services, he decided to organise everything on his own, and only accept the other services of Namur, Brussels and of the federal police when they announced themselves. He stopped contacting them by his own initiative. Joseph Bikri did receive additional officers from the head of the police zone, who kept confidence in him, and supported him with advice and officers.

Diego Trioteignes stayed alert. He found himself in a quandary. He knew Léon-Jules would be arrested on Wednesday. He could not tell this to Michelle, for she might warn her sister. How would she react? Diego might well have been the person who had brought ruin to the Blouges factory and family, hence to Evelyn Bazaine. What would remain of the factories after their reputation had been ruined? Their substantial new product, maybe one of the few products that brought in fine profits from the Gulf States, would most probably be refused export licenses. There was no doubt in Diego's mind the funds that had been injected into the Blouges enterprise from the Gulf countries had been served to finance the long-range model drone. Diego had no illusion on the outcome. Léon-Jules would take the plans and the software for his newest invention, and manufacture the drones elsewhere, with money from

wealthy individuals of the Gulf States. He also did not think Léon-Jules would stay in prison for long, maybe as little as a few days. What an atmosphere would henceforth dominate relations in Michelle's family? Diego certainly would be regarded as one of Léon-Jules's arch-enemies, Diego's deeds would be stigmatised, as inspired by dark revenge and jealousy. How admit to Michelle he was not sure of his motives himself, and yet proclaim his never-ending love for her?

More and more, Joseph Bikri and Diego Trioteignes expected something spectacular to happen on the Belgian National day of the 21th of July, on Tuesday. If nothing happened on Tuesday, nothing would happen the following days! Such an iconic date as the 21th of July would be an excellent means to call the attention of international journalism to a terrorist organisation such as Al-Faris' team. To that end, Al-Faris might be planning a world-shocking event of blood and horror.

Joseph Bikri had talked further on with Madyan Bin Mahfouz, only to become more convinced of the evil nature of Imam Majdi Al-Faris. The man sought power and evil-doing, using the Islam only as an easy excuse for his cruel misdeeds. The murder Al-Faris had committed and the terrorist attack on the festival had as sole aim to make the "infidel" community fear him. Al-Faris' aim was to be recognised as a hero in the eyes of all Muslims who felt humiliated because they did not really succeed in becoming as rich, smart and organised as the West-European people. Al-Faris should now be all the more frustrated, because he could not but realise most of the Muslims of Robois had declared against him. The Muslims of Robois were maybe not all very well integrated in the Robois local community. They had nevertheless proven extraordinarily in solidarity with their neighbours. Al-Faris must be bitterly regretting now, Joseph Bikri smiled, how much and how quickly the Muslim immigrants had declared being Europeans after all!

On Monday afternoon, Commissaire Joseph Bikri heard of the result of the discreet negotiations between the Foreign Ministry and the Saudi Arabian embassy. The Saudis knew of Imam Majdi Al-Faris being protected by a diplomatic passport. They also knew the men of which Joseph Bikri had given the names, assistants of the imam, had Saudi diplomatic passports. They did not draw in doubt the evidence against Al-Faris offered by the Belgian authorities, and led it be known to the Foreign Minister they regretted. They told they did not know where the man and his assistants were. With slight embarrassment, they acknowledged they had no idea of the whereabouts of Al-Faris at that moment. No ambassadorial car had been sent to Robois to bring Al-Faris to the embassy. The Saudi government confirmed that as soon as Al-Faris would give sign of life, he would be called to the embassy in Belgium and be repatriated to Saudi-Arabia.

3.3. The National Day. Tuesday, 21 July

National Day, the day of the 'Fête Nationale Belge,' started like no other previous day of the summer: it rained. Unusual in general, this was not. Belgians had a sense of tradition of wet National Days. They smiled instead of cursing, for on the 21st of July it had rained for as long as people could remember, eight times out of ten. More so, this year the rain was welcomed, as it ended a period of torrid heat. The rain drizzled at first, but it was expected to gain intensity as the day progressed, to pelting rain and a storm of gales in the afternoon.

In the workshop of the new mosque of Robois, the guard on drone alert was held by three young men. They were Muslims of Algerian, Turkish and Moroccan descent. No one had really expected an attack during the night, so the youth had slept, close to their computers. Diego, Atsel and Deniz had also remained in the workshop. They had not slept. At the least new sign on the computers, they would have awakened one of the boys. Four armed policemen protected the doors to the cafeteria building of the mosque complex, two officers patrolled outside, at the back, covering the rear windows. Two more officers walked along the prayer hall, the imam's house, and the apartment buildings.

The Muslim women left behind in the apartments did not come out of the rooms they lived in. Joseph Bikri had not cared much for them, but he had been prepared to assist the women in getting the food and drink they might need. A group of women of the Muslim community of Robois would help the women of Al-Faris and of his assistants, and get for them what they needed. So far, the only item that had been asked for had been pampers for the little children. Joseph Bikri was the only one to worry about what would become of these women.

By common consent, the man to whom the Muslims of Robois referred to was not the mayor, but Karim Khedis, the gardener. He too arrived very early in the morning at the mosque. He was not alone. The Muslim community seemed to have gathered at the new mosque! Many more Muslim men than usual arrived for prayers in the prayer hall for their morning prayers. Afterwards, they sauntered with umbrellas in their hand near the hall. One might have thought they had come to hold back Al-Faris and his men from entering the workshop. The mothers of the three young men brought breakfast. These women did not wear abayas. They came to the compound as normal female citizens of Robois, even though some wore small shawls over their head. The veils of these women hung far behind their head, showing a fair patch of luxurious brown or black hair in front, and the veils were multi-coloured, just flimsy pieces of silk decorated with large, very bright flowers. Not only the mothers had come. Accompanying them came the aunts and the cousins. They had all wished to encourage their young men and their families.

The officers of Robois opened the cafeteria, so that the women could shelter from the rain. One male officer took pity on the women, and started to make tea and coffee. He waved away the objections of his colleagues. He knew the tea and coffee were not his. The man was clumsy. He didn't really know how the coffee machines worked in the cafeteria. He did succeed in obtaining very hot water, but then the Muslim women shoved him aside, shouting he was to guard, not to make tea. The women took over, and made tea and coffee. They broke open a few biscuit tins from the cupboards of the cafeteria, and served themselves. The police

officers did not object, on the contrary. They too liked a strong coffee in the morning, and when the women offered a sandwich, they smiled gratefully.

It continued to rain outside, in what in Belgium was affectionately known as the '*Drache Nationale*', the national drizzle, a word of Brussels slang. A strange spectacle ensued. Muslim women, the elder ones, not the most attractive grandmothers of Robois, went out with recuperated Dewar thermoses and cups and biscuits. They brought cups of tea and coffee to the policemen on guard, inside and outside the buildings. If only on this one day, the solidarity between the Muslims and the policemen of Robois and of Namur had been organised spontaneously.

Karim Khedis, the gardener, sat at a table in the cafeteria. The women flocked to him for news. He phoned regularly with Joseph Bikri, the commissaire of Robois. He had spoken little with the young men in the workshop. He told the youngsters had slept a little, had held guard at their computers, and were fine. Nothing out of the usual had happened so far. Only their mothers and two sweethearts had been allowed to them, to bring them breakfast. Karim told not too many people should distract and tire the three youth.

The women who had arrived early therefore did not stay for long. They returned to their work. Another phenomenon then developed. The amount of men and women in the cafeteria did not slacken! At all times of the day, at least twenty persons permanently remained sitting, walking and talking in the cafeteria. Also women who wore no veils entered, women of the Christian community and of the lay community of Robois. These accompanied neighbours. They had heard about the constant guard in the workshop of the mosque complex, and they had come hesitantly, to show their sympathy. Soon, their number augmented.

The town of Robois and its villages was known for its rich associative life. All kinds of associations for solidarity had been founded in Robois, solidarity with African villages, solidarity with newcomers to the town, solidarity in sports, solidarity with twin cities in France, England, Spain and Greece, and so on. Many of them had members who actually were Muslim. A Muslim man had even been chosen in the City Council, also with other votes than Muslim ones. The men and women of the associations of Robois dared now to join their Muslim neighbours at the cafeteria. Was Robois not threatened by a common danger? The noise of voices gradually filled the hall, which soon looked and sounded as filled as a beehive. The cafeteria received many cakes and pastries and quiches. A real industry began to move, as more and more people entered, saying hello with loud voices when they came in. No, with so many people, they didn't believe Robois could be in danger! Who would dare to attack Robois and its mosque complex when so many had assembled here? The gathering continued the entire day, and the people came despite the rain. The cafeteria served no beer, and that rule was respected. Of course, non-alcoholic beer was brought in by the non-Muslim men.

When Joseph Bikri and Dominique Bussy entered the cafeteria to drink a cup of coffee, they were startled. What the boys were doing upstairs was no communal feast! What if somebody phoned to Majdi Al-Faris to warn him about what was going on here? Bikri wanted to clear the mosque complex, but Dominique Bussy placed a soft hand on his shoulder to withhold him. She saw the commissaire plant his fists on his hips, but she shook her head of no, don't spoil this! Joseph Bikri sighed, drew a nasty grin, but then went around to shake hands in the

cafeteria, for he knew many people. He said hello, drank a coffee, and went upstairs with Dominique, to the workshop.

‘Al-Faris has managed to bring a miracle to Robois,’ Dominique Bussy remarked joyfully. ‘I noticed as many non-Muslims in the cafeteria as others. Al-Faris’ wickedness has backfired! We will have a much tighter forged together community in Robois after this, Sir!’

‘Oh, they’ll be at each other’s throat sooner than you think,’ Joseph Bikri replied disillusioned. ‘They’ll be complaining over a tree in their neighbour’s garden throwing a shadow over their vegetables. They will complain about the noise of a party in the suburb, about a dog’s poop left near a hedge, about a boy insisting too much looking at a nice girl, and so on. Nothing of that, of course, is connected to ethnic or religious differences! People are the same everywhere, whatever their faith. Our work will never end.’

Joseph Bikri had spoken so bitterly, that Dominique turned in surprise. She stopped in the middle of the stairs, so that Joseph Bikri almost bumped into her. Dominique wanted to say something, but then she understood her boss was not in his usual good mood. For the first time in five days, Joseph’s nerves were on edge. He had not slept much, she knew. Even this night, Bikri and his wife had been up till very late. Samia had been looking up the articles in the law that might allow the commissaire to have Imam Al-Faris and entrepreneur Léon-Jules de Blouges spent their time in jail. Samia Bennani, Joseph’s wife, was a lawyer. She had studied law at Belgian universities. Samia found no article under international law, however, allowing a foreign diplomat to be arrested. Léon-Jules de Blouges could be held a day or two, but his lawyers would get him out soon. Already, the prosecutors of Namur had objected to his pending arrest! These men, of course, knew Léon-Jules well. They met him in the service clubs of Namur and at conferences organised for the business men and notables of the province. It would be up to the prosecutors and the investigating judges to find arguments to prosecute on Léon-Jules. Joseph Bikri suspected they would not show much zeal at that! He, Bikri, would have to provide all the proof.

Then too, the three people from the *Sûreté de l’État* worried the commissaire. He knew, of course, that Diego Trioteignes was born in Robois, and hence a Belgian. The other two spoke French with accents that were not Belgian at all, however, and Bikri suspected their Belgian passports were false. He had to admit they had already prevented a massacre. They gave all the signs of wanting to thwart Al-Faris’ pernicious plans. Still, Joseph Bikri felt uneasy about their presence in Robois. If, as he thought, these persons had false passports, he should denounce them! They did not heighten his joy, this morning.

‘Commissaire,’ Dominique Bussy dared, ‘you worry too much and you sleep too little. Why don’t you go back home, and get some more sleep? I had a full night’s angelic rest. I and our officers can handle this!’

‘No,’ Bikri sighed, regretting having let his sarcasm surface. ‘Cases such as this always end in a dramatic dénouement, Dominique. These cases unravel in a series of violent or spectacular actions. The two of us are needed here. My feeling is, today something rather sensational will happen. No, I won’t go home. My place is here in Robois, and awake. My people are here. Tomorrow will be peaceful.’

He grinned, ‘if I fall down, catch me, and wake me up again. High caffeine coffee! I cannot miss the circus!’

Joseph Bikri could not have told better, for on that very moment, all the lights on the young men's personal computers lit up like the main shopping street of Robois on the afternoon before Christmas!

The two youth who were sitting with Hamza Al-Harrak at the large, roughly planed wooden table in the workshop, were Nur, a boy of Anatolian origins, and Yazid, the son of a family that had emigrated from a small village near Algiers. Nur and Yazid cried out first, and simultaneously. Then, the three of them bent over their personal computers, and seemed lost in another world. They began frantically to type in commands and data.

'They are transmitting. Take-off imminent. Take-off initiated!' Hamza shouted. 'They must have activated the drones a short while ago. They are launching them very rapidly. We are counting them and reading their identification numbers.'

The three young men looked intently to their screens, on which numeric data appeared. Diego, Atsel and Deniz stood around them, also looking at the screens, but the data meant nothing to them. They only saw a white background, with on each computer screen a series of overlapping black blocks, on which data and commands appeared and rolled down in the on-screen windows. Hamza was switching from block to block so fast, Diego wondered what the boy was actually reading. Hamza worked frantically at his keyboard, then. Joseph Bikri and Dominique Bussy entered the room. They ran to the boys. They recognised what the excitement was about. The terrorist attack had been launched!

'Two different flight plans,' Hamza cried. 'Nur, you take plan number two. I'll follow plan 1.'

'Understood,' Nur cried. 'Flight plan 2 is being downloaded to my computer. Two different computers are in use. Plan 2 is being transmitted from computer 2, now to my workstation. I have it! I'm in! Control over computer 2 complete. How are you doing with computer 1?'

'I'm inside computer 1 too,' Yazid cried. 'I have flight plan 1 downloaded on my workstation. Have you got it, Hamza? I suggest I abandon computer 1. They might remark we slow down their personal computers too much!'

'I have flight plan 1,' Hamza said. 'I can read the starting coordinates! I agree with you leaving computer 1, Yazid.'

Hamza cited two series of eight numbers, a dot between each set of two numbers. The boys had explained before to Diego these were the figures for the latitude north and the longitude east, in degrees, minutes and seconds, eventually followed by the hundredths of seconds.

Nur shouted, 'same for me! Coordinates are in! Exactly the same starting coordinates! The units are all in the air together from the same starting site. I have three coordinates following in the flight plan, two sets of eight numbers in between starting point and target.'

'So have I,' Hamza said. 'Yazid, can you check on the maps where these coordinates point to? Nearest village, nearest street, indications? I send you the coordinates. Nur, will you do the same? Coordinates sent to Yazid. Yazid finds out to what the coordinates point to.'

'Right, understood,' Yazid and Nur confirmed.

Diego, Atsel, Deniz, Joseph and Dominique were smiling. They thought for a while the boys imagined they were at some or other control centre in Houston, Texas, and the drones taking

off from Cape Kennedy. But the boys were very intent at what they were doing, and very serious.

'The target of flight plan 2 is somewhere in Brussels,' Nur said. 'I seem to know these coordinates.'

'Latitude 50 degrees, 51 minutes and longitude 04 degrees and 21 minutes is somewhere in the centre of Brussels!' Yazid also shouted

'For me also, target in Brussels! All units are sent to Brussels! I repeat, all units sent to Brussels! None sent to Robois. I count about fifteen identification numbers so far. I also have coordinates in between. Why do they use in-between coordinates?' Hamza called.

'They are sending them over less populated areas, avoiding the cities,' Nur cried. 'The air is not so good over cities, rain and winds are unpredictable. Too many winds over the cities, I guess. I am sending flight plan 2 to Yazid.'

'And I also sent flight plan 1 to Yazid, to verify whether the targets are the same or different.'

'I have a list of twenty id numbers so far,' Nur exclaimed. 'Oh God, they are sending tens of drones at once!'

'Target 2 of flight plan 2 identified,' Yazid screamed. 'The end of the *Rue de la Loi* in Brussels. They are sending the first batch against the Belraymont building of the European Commission! They are sending the drones against the main building of the European Community!'

'Thirty drones underway to the EU building then,' Hamza cried. 'I have the id numbers. God, we are never going to be able to change all those flight plans in time! The drones are going to reach Brussels in less than one hour.'

'The rain and contrary winds may be slowing them down,' Yazid proposed without too much conviction. 'Second target identified! It is the Royal Palace. No, wait, no, no, it is in front of the palace, in the middle of the *Place du Palais*, between the Royal Palace and the Brussels Park,' cited Yazid.

Joseph Bikri blemished.

'That is where the National Military Parade is being held today,' he exclaimed. 'It is where the podium stands of the king and the queen, inspecting the army parade! The terrorists are throwing bombs in the crowd that has gathered there, and on the marching army, probably also on the parade tent where the king and the queen, the government and the foreign ambassadors sit!'

'I confirm,' Nur cried, 'thirty units en route against the EU building of Brussels, coordinates 50 degrees 50 minutes 37 seconds North and 04 degrees 22 minutes 58 seconds East, and hundredths of seconds mentioned. That is the building with the offices of the President of the European Commission!'

'That building has a screen of metal in front of it, with flaps that move to protect the building from the excessive sunrays,' Diego remarked. 'The drones shall explode against that screen, in front of the façade, throwing pieces of metal and glass inside. Structural damage will be limited inside, but terrible outside. We are not going to have a collapse like happened to the World Trade Centre towers of New York, but maybe substantial damage to the people inside. The building must be evacuated. Not too many people will be working in there, because of the National Day holiday, but the damage will be extensive though more superficial than they

might think. The evacuated people should not stray around the building. They should gather far away from it!

'How fast can you reprogram?' Atsel asked.

'I just started reprogramming,' Hamza replied, 'but we began late. I am using the starting coordinates of the flight plans and the coordinates for the Lake of Genval of 50 degrees 43 minutes 44 seconds north and 04 degrees 31 minutes 10 seconds east.'

'How long to change the flight plan in one drone?' Atsel asked.

'Complete process, including the turns of the drones, about three to four minutes,' Nur replied. 'The Baud transmission rate of our transmitter in the workshop is also very low. The program in the on-board computers is slow. We must expect half of the drones to reach the EU building.'

'Twenty drones to target the *Place du Palais*,' Hamza cried. 'Reprogramming started. Five to ten drones will most probably crash into the parade, on or near the podium of the king and queen.'

'The entire royal family will be standing there, the Prime Minister, the entire Belgian government, foreign diplomats,' Joseph Bikri said in awe. 'We must evacuate that entire area and stop the parade. And that must be done within half an hour! Nobody will believe me, and how to evacuate that crowd without causing a panic? The nearby streets too will be full of people!'

'Send them into the park,' Atsel shouted, indicating he knew the site. 'In front of the Royal Palace and the broad avenue lies the vast park of the centre of Brussels! Order to evacuate into the park! One or other drone may crash there, but many people will be saved. At the first explosion, there is going to be a tremendous panic in the crowd.'

'I must also send my officers to the coordinates of the take-off point,' Joseph Bikri said, grasping his mobile phone. 'Where is that place?'

'A site in Besnes,' Yazid cried back, 'not far from the castle of Blouges, but in the woods! No road there! It is a place in the wood, maybe leading to there might be paths too small to be mentioned on the maps I have.'

'Coordinates can be entered on the GPS devices of my officers,' Joseph Bikri said. 'Give me the coordinates!'

He grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil.

'No, no, wait!' Diego shouted higher than everyone else. 'Hamza, when I was watching the model airplanes, the remote control devices had a "panic" button. That function brought a model back to the ground smoothly. Have you some function like that in your on-board program?'

Diego saw Hamza looking at him, incredulously, not anymore at his screen. Hamza was thinking. A flood of short, guttural Arabic phrases came from Nur and Yazid. The three boys were shouting, arguing, and gesturing at each other.

'Hey, hey,' Diego shouted, 'what is going on? Quick, boys!'

Finally, Hamza said, 'we have no such "panic" function, but we can simulate one! We believe that if we erase the flight plans in the drones by a single command, and leave the on-board programs that way, the program will count a number of seconds and then use a counter of the computers' memories in which the starting coordinates are held to turn back and land. We believe the drones will return automatically to the point of take-off, using that counter!'

'What do you mean "believe"? Aren't you sure of the result?'

'Yes and no. We think we know how the program will react. We think we know what routines will be followed in the on-board computers, but we have never tested those routines in real flight. Also, when the flight plans are erased, destroyed, the drones will simply fall out of the sky over the starting point! The smooth landing routine will not be activated!'

'Right,' Diego continued, 'and that will either be over a completely isolated place in the woods of Besnes, or right on top of the terrorists. There is nothing I would love more! Do it! I trust you boys. Your on-board programs are OK! Do it!'

'If we fail, then units may fall out of the sky where they are, or do other strange things we cannot predict, we have no idea which strange things might happen!'

'Your programs are fine. Do it! Quick!' Diego screamed.

Hamza looked at Joseph Bikri for confirmation. The commissaire threw his hands into the air. He was anyway too late to stop a massacre in Brussels.

'How long does it take for the drones to react to these commands?' Bikri asked.

'Half a minute or less. Much less transmission, no recognition by the program necessary, quick execution,' Hamza replied. 'If all goes well, half a minute or so.'

Hamza added with some hesitation, 'we never tested this reaction. It takes much less time to send a single command than to end and initiate a complete flight plan. The terrorists have probably installed the flight plans manually in the on-board computers, before activating and launching the drones. They did that probably in order for all the drones to reach almost simultaneously the targets. It is a choice. Either you want all the drones to explode within a few minutes, or one drone arrives minutes after the other, and that for a period longer than an hour. They are after maximum effect in the shortest of time. I am not sure I would have chosen the first option. The second may create more chaos, inspire more terror and more panic.'

'I'm glad I haven't got you against me, Hamza,' Joseph Bikri grinned. 'All right, do it! Even if we lose a few, do as Diego proposed!'

'This is a computer program,' Hamza declared. 'Or all the drones react and return the same way, or they don't react at all as we think they will. They'll all react the same way!'

'You should not send your officers to Besnes, then,' Diego warned Joseph Bikri. 'The drones may not all fall close to the starting point. They may spread a little, even though they have the same coordinates. They certainly will spread in time. You can position your cars on the N11, near the impact site. After the explosions, which may last five minutes or so, the cars can drive to where the explosions have been heard.'

'Make that at least fifteen to twenty minutes,' Yazid intervened. 'The drones do not fly all at the same speed. Some of them will have flown faster, but then have to turn farther off and fly longer distances, even though at higher speed. No, don't tell to wait a short time! Tell them to be patient and not to rush to the site. Tell them to be patient, very patient, only to drive in fifteen minutes after the last explosion they heard!'

'Anyhow,' Nur added, 'there will not much be left of the terrorists. That is, if they stayed!'

'Why would they not have stayed?' Diego asked.

'I would have run as fast as I could to elsewhere,' Nur explained. 'I would have taken no chances of being detected, even by simple visual contact. You always have to take into

account somebody having recuperated the coordinates, or simply a man walking in the wood having seen the drones take off to the air, and having phoned the police!

‘That is maybe because you know what you know now, boy,’ Atsel said. ‘I rather think they will take some time to clean up before disappearing, leave nothing behind that might incriminate them. Like boxes and paper. They must think they have the ultimate weapon in hand. Anyway, commissaire, I propose you send your men no farther than the N11 and control all suspect vehicles there. The terrorists will use cars and trucks. Maybe they will put the trucks on fire. There isn't just the N11. There are roads leading from the Besnes woods to the direction of Brussels. They may be trying to escape to the west, take the highway on the other side, to outside Robois. The police will never block the highways! Still, potentially, they may escape via North, South, East or West. My guess is they will seek a large airport, but not Brussels National. They may try for Charles de Gaulle airport near Paris, or Schiphol in the Netherlands, maybe even Frankfurt am Main.’

‘Yes,’ Joseph Bikri concluded. ‘Hamza, Nur, Yazid, you do your part! Have those drones turn back as quickly as possible. I'm going to give instructions to my teams to drive to the N11. I'll not alert Brussels yet. Let me know first whether you succeed in bringing the drones back.’

Commissaire Bikri ran down the stairs, calculating how many officers he could send to the N11 in front of Besnes, how many he wanted to keep in the mosque complex. He began to frantically use his mobile phone. Hamza, Nur and Yazid typed commandos on their computers with the aim of erasing all flight plans in the drones.

The people who were looking at the sky over the university town of Louvain-la-Neuve could have seen a strange spectacle. Tens of weird birds without wings, flying in a long line one after the other, some grouped and others isolated, suddenly made a wide turn, and flew back to the East. A few children remarked the rare spectacle. They pointed upwards, but few adults seemed interested in birds and in what the children looked at. The birds turned, flew back, and disappeared from sight rapidly. A few of the birds not only turned, but also began to fly lower, so that the children could see they had an unusual, rounded form, and no wings. The birds shone, did not cry, glimmered in the rain, but they soon flew out of sight.

Imam Al-Faris, with five of his assistants, waited with two cars and two long, large trucks at the end of a path in a clearing of the wood of Besnes. The place had been carefully chosen since long, for it had two exits a little farther, toward the N11 road. One path lead to the N11 proper, the other one back to Blouges-le-Château, where they had come from. The plan was to drive the trucks back to the hangars of the Blouges manufactories, and store them there. The men would drive in cars to Brussels.

They were now still looking at their computers, hoping to catch something of the Armageddon that would befall on the capital. They knew nothing could be seen on their computers from the drones directly, but they yet hoped otherwise. They could not have known the drones were turning back.

One of the two men at the computers had a mobile Internet connection. He was now scanning the news messages. He read nothing yet of explosions in Brussels. He followed the television images of the military parade.

The drones had no transmitters in the version used by the terrorists. The drones could not let Al-Faris' men know where they were, and the terrorists had no idea how far the drones had flown, or whether the targets had been reached. The drones had taken off better than expected, no malfunctions had been noticed. The terrorists were already jubilant about the result. Their attack would make all the newspapers, and all television news, over the world. Their attack would rival the throwing of the two airplanes against the World Trade Centre of New York! The small kingdom of Belgium might sink into total chaos, and also the European Union would have been humiliated and crippled, their archives and work destroyed, many experts killed or severely injured. How great God was, and how right their actions, which would bring a curse of destruction over Robois and over Belgium, as well as eternal shame. Let the Belgians also live in fear for a while! The terrorists had been the instruments of God. They would be famous as jihadists for the cause of God in all the Gulf States and in all the states along the African and Asian Mediterranean coasts.

Then an order was shouted from a car that stood apart, a fine black Mercedes. The men began throwing into the trucks all remaining carton boxes, plastic wrappings and the like, all paper. They would erase all traces of their passage. They stopped their transmitters, and also their personal computers. Time to leave!

In the mosque workshop, the three young Muslims remarked the transmitter of the terrorists had stopped emitting. The programs in the terrorist computers that had determined the flight plans and sent the signal to take off, went silent. The young men had been downloading all files from the terrorist computers, but as the speed of their transmitter and receiver device was not high, they had not get caught of all files yet. The boys could do nothing more than wait, now. Their nerves had been at the breaking point the last hour or so. They let their computers active, but merely listening to nothing.

One of the young men opened a window in the direction of Besnes and Blouges. He wanted to hear the explosions in the far, though he was not sure he could hear anything whatsoever so far from Besnes. He had no idea how the explosion of a few tens of kilograms of explosives might sound. He did not hear anything for a long while, but he did saw tens of drones passing high in the sky, flying in the direction of Besnes, and he cheered!

Everybody who was still in the workshop then ran to the windows. Diego, Atsel and Deniz saw how a long string of metal platforms silently moved through the sky, direction the centre of Robois town. They all cheered at the windows, so that the people in the cafeteria rushed outside, and saw the boys weaving. They also looked at the sky, saw the drones return, and cheered. A few first drones flew nicely one after the other, some open airspace between them. Several groups of drones passed a little later, the drones were clustered together, and they too flow to Robois and Besnes. Hamza feared the drones might touch each other and fall, but they didn't. There was ample space between them. Further tens of drones, flying together like birds, followed, and a few platforms trailed behind.

The men who ran now in the wood of Besnes, waved to a man who sat at the driver's seat of the black Mercedes. Al-Faris signalled them to leave and to hurry. He did not get out of his car, for it rained harder. He turned his car into the direction of Brussels. Al-Faris would not

drive to the N11, even though that was the closest escape to the highway. He had a ticket for a flight from Schiphol in the Netherlands. His men had tickets for flights that took off at Charles de Gaulle airport. Al-Faris and three of his men would fly to Dubai, his two other assistants would first fly to Frankfurt and from there take a plane to Riyadh. All their passports were false, the tickets issued on the false names. Al-Faris smiled. He had obtained his revenge. God's curse was brought on the infidels. He had done his duty. Then, quite suddenly, all hell broke loose with deafening noise.

Metal platforms, rotors still spinning, fell out of the sky to all around the trucks and cars in the clearing. The platforms exploded when they hit the ground. They exploded on the earth, forming craters of a metre deep. Earth and stones were thrown high and far around, on the cars and trucks. The men screamed. The engines of the cars and trucks growled and the vehicles began to move, but two of the drones fell straight on the first truck, which was already engaging the path to freedom.

The drones exploded with an enormous blast of fire. Al-Faris saw also the petrol tank of the truck explode, sending fire metres high in the sky, and also spreading flames all around. The second truck was almost simultaneously hit by a drone right next to it. The sideways explosion rocked the truck. The fire caused the second petrol tank to explode.

Al-Faris saw a young driver jump out of the cabin of the truck, a living flame as his clothes were on fire. The man thrashed around, but he fell and did not get up. Yet another drone crashed near the man and exploded, so that he was thrown into the air, a burning ball of flames, then torn apart.

More drones came in, flew or fell against the trees in the environs. Smaller trees were cut down by the blasts. A large trunk blew up under two exploding drones, and fell on a car, crushing it and killing the passenger. Then another explosion sent the car and the man who had tried to escape from it high into the air.

Metal and plastic debris were sent howling over the terrain. Rotors were projected high in the sky. They formed as many deadly rests of cutting plastic and metal that were swung deep into tree-trunks and in the men, who were hit and went down. When the bodies of the men fell, two other drones exploded nearby and sent the bodies lifeless, broken, into the lower branches of trees. The wood and the ground was on fire. The second car exploded.

Al-Faris sat alone in his car. He pushed the car in gear and hit the accelerator. The heavy car surged forward. Al-Faris drove down the path, back to Blouges, thinking he could escape. He had no idea what had happened. He was white from fear, as he heard behind him yet more explosions. He knew then the drones could not have crashed into the National Parade and not into the EU building! The drones had returned! Something had gone awfully wrong. His revenge had failed. The drones had failed. They had not reached the targets, they had returned! He should not have trusted those boys! They had betrayed him! They were lousy programmers! Their software was all wrong. Their tests had proved nothing!

The drones were exploding behind Al-Faris. He thought he had escaped, when a lone platform fell close to his vehicle, exploded and threw his car aside, away from the path, against the trunks of a line of trees. His car crashed against the trees, and then another explosion slammed the car back on the path, but turned it over. Al-Faris had not secured his

door, and not put on his safety belt. His body fell out of the car while it was being hurled aside. His body slid out, and the car fell on him and crushed both his legs.

The car lay still. Al-Faris was stuck under the weight of his car, legs smashed by the scorched metal. He feared other explosions might tear him to pieces. He feared the gasoline tank of his Mercedes might catch fire. He still heard explosions in the clearing, pieces of metal and of wood were thrown to near him. He lay still, and couldn't move. He waited for a long time. The rain splashed on his face, and he lay in the mud. The pain in his legs gradually dumbbed.

After a very long time, Al-Faris heard cars drive to near him, but pass. Men jumped out of the cars. He heard men shout from where the drones had taken off. This was the place where now the two trucks stood, burning completely, and where the other car had been overturned, laying amidst broken trees. Myriad leaves still flew in the air, and slowly, slowly fluttered down.

Al-Faris lay on his back. He tried to move his legs, but couldn't. He waited more. Then, he heard footsteps near him.

He called out, 'help! Help me!'

The policeman who had seen Al-Faris lying in the grass under the car, shouted something, and soon four more people stood around him. He recognised the face of Commissaire Joseph Bikri. Two more men and a woman stood near the commissaire. He did not know these, but he noticed they all wore bulletproof vests with the word 'Police' written on chest and back. Al-Faris again called, 'help me! My legs are stuck under the car. You must help me. I am a Saudi diplomat!'

Joseph Bikri came to close to Al-Faris. He brought his face to very close Al-Faris' lips, for the man had only been able to whisper, not to shout. Al-Faris managed a grin, despite the pain that hit him again excruciatingly, now.

He said, 'you see, commissaire, I did bring a curse over Robois! More men like I will come now, and they will send explosions of fire all over your country. I lost, but in the end, you will not win. More men like I will ultimately prevail!'

'No,' Bikri said out loud so that the people around him could hear what he said. 'You are no diplomat! Your passports are false. You lost indeed, Al-Faris, but no such men as you will ever win here or elsewhere definitely! We will all see to that, Christians, Jews and Muslims together. And do you know why? Because God is a God of good, not of evil! You have no religion, Al-Faris. You were not really an imam! You do not teach people how to think freely and believe. You only want people to accept your will, not the will of God. How dare you to assume God's place and determine other people's lives? No, you only have your evil nature! You will be cursed by God, not we!'

Joseph Bikri righted again and looked at the wreck of the car that blocked the legs of Al-Faris.

'We will have to move that wreck,' he said to Diego Trioteignes.

Deniz Sürkoglou looked at Atsel and at Diego. Diego understood.

'Commissaire,' Diego told, 'have a look here!'

Diego took Joseph Bikri at the shoulders, and drew him to behind the wreckage.

When Joseph Bikri had turned his back to Al-Faris, Deniz tore off a large green leaf of a plant. Covering her hand with the leaf, she took a long, slim piece of wood that lay on the ground near Al-Faris. She brought the piece upward in her fist, the sharp and jagged side down, and then drove it with a powerful thrust into Al-Faris' throat. She severed the main artery. Blood sprouted out of Al-Faris' flesh. His eyes widened, he gurgled, he grasped for his throat, but Atsel's foot stood on the hand he wanted to move. Al-Faris convulsed, drew his heavy torso higher, but his white shirt reddened and reddened more around his neck. He wanted to shout, but no sound escaped. Joseph Bikri had heard a noise. He drew himself away from Diego's arms. He stepped from behind the Mercedes, Diego in his wake.

'See, commissaire,' Atsel remarked coolly, 'we forgot to notice the piece of wood that had pierced the man's throat. He moved, and the piece of wood penetrated deeper!'

Joseph Bikri looked around. He only saw Deniz throw a crumpled leaf in the wood. Joseph Bikri was angry. He knew instantly he had been tricked. He should have to report a murder! It had been a murder indeed, he knew. He had seen no piece of wood in or near Al-Faris' throat before. He had seen no blood so high on the white shirt! But then should he really report this?

Deniz came back. She came to stand in between Diego and Atsel. The three of them looked defiantly at the commissaire. Joseph Bikri looked from the one to the other.

He said, 'indeed. The piece of wood entered his throat. I don't remember when that happened. I suppose the explosion did this.'

He thought, 'good riddance!'

He turned, and went to his officers who were standing in the capharnaum of burning cars and trucks and of heaps of debris formed by the exploded platforms.

Atsel looked at Deniz, then at Diego.

He said, in a low voice, intended only for the three of them, 'mission accomplished!'

Deniz grinned, and Diego nodded.

3.4. Epilogue

3.4.1. Deniz, Atsel, Diego and Michelle

The next day, Diego woke up late. Atsel and Deniz were still asleep when he took a shower, dressed, ate a quick breakfast, and drove once more in his car to the Lady of the Lake. When he rang at the door of the restaurant, the young Indian girl let him in. She drew a sour face.

‘Oh, sir, it is you again! I’m not too sure you are expected, and even less you might be welcome, but please do come in. I’m also not too sure I still like you. Every time you come here, my lady is in tears. Nevertheless, I wish you a good morning. Lady Michelle is in the kitchen, as usual, especially when she is not too happy.’

Michelle stood indeed behind her white table, in front of her red and blue blocks, knives ready, and turning the pages of a thick cookbook. Her eyes were red and swollen, but she wasn’t crying anymore. Diego did not try to kiss her a good morning. She knew.

‘Léon-Jules has been arrested and will be detained at the Abbey. The police may bring him to Namur for interrogation. I and Evelyn suppose that has to do with the terrorist attacks of the last days. What I truly would like to know is what your involvement was in Léon-Jules being accused of crimes!’

‘I’m not sure what exactly he is being accused of,’ Diego began, ‘but the truth is he has been constructing long-range and high-speed drones for a Muslim who turned out to be a nasty terrorist. Luckily, the devices Léon-Jules delivered to the imam exploded near the place they had been sent in the air from, yesterday. A devastating terrorist attack had thus been averted. Léon-Jules may have been involved with the imam, without realising the evil intentions of the man, without suspecting the man was a dangerous radical and a terrorist. I don’t expect Léon-Jules to stay in custody for long. He will have good lawyers. He may be home this evening.’

‘He was already arrested late yesterday,’ Michelle said. ‘He has slept in jail. You haven’t answered my question. What was your involvement?’

‘My orders were to investigate on why large sums of money were secretly being funnelled from out of certain Gulf States to Belgium, to the Blouges factories.’

‘And so you are directly involved in Léon-Jules having been imprisoned.’

‘Léon-Jules has been brought to the Abbey for interrogation,’ Diego replied patiently, ‘and if he is detained, it is not at all because of me, but because of things he did to himself!’

Michelle didn’t answer on these words. She kept turning her pages.

‘You needed me to invite you to the Bazaine reception and supper, didn’t you? You wanted Léon-Jules to invite you to visit the factory, to snoop around. Evelyn told me you did that with your lover, that oriental slut. I feared you could not be sincere when you told me so fast you loved me. Not you! You reason, you do not feel.’

‘Denise Legrand is not my lover. Within a couple of days at the latest, she will return to her home land. As I and she already told you and confirm. And I did not use you. I didn’t know there was a reception at Bazaine until you told me so and invited me. I came because I was dazzled by you.’

Michelle grinned, 'everything fell nicely into place then, didn't it? I was your key to unlock Blouges, and you could work your revenge on Evelyn and on Léon-Jules by ruining him.'

'I had precise orders for a mission. I executed them to the best of my capabilities,' Diego said desperately. 'Nobody else was born in Robois in the service. Somebody had to take on the job. I was the best qualified. I didn't even know you were the cook and owner of the Lady!'

'And I am to believe all that crap? I am to believe you are not exceedingly proud and satisfied to have taken your revenge on Evelyn and Léon-Jules? What a hypocrite and a liar you are! You reproached me for wanting to take revenge on Evelyn, while you were doing exactly the same all the time, only a lot more effectively!'

'I confess am not sure anymore about my own feelings, and not about my motives, to tell you honestly, Michelle, but by then my mission was already in full swing. Nevertheless, I am very proud this dangerous terrorist didn't kill the hundreds of people he intended to make victims of! If I had to do everything all over again, even manipulating you – which I did not – , yet by doing so being able to avoid the massacres, I wouldn't hesitate doing exactly the same things. I do not regret anything I have done. I only regretted you were Evelyn's sister, but what could I have done at that? Fate was at work!'

'No, you never regret anything, don't you, Diego? Do you even know what feelings are? How am I going to live, estranged from my sister, from my family, cast-out, knowing Léon-Jules landed in prison because of you. Do you imagine how dreadful my entire life would be with you at my side?'

'I don't have to ask forgiveness for anything from either Evelyn or Léon-Jules,' Diego pleaded. 'I assume Léon-Jules was lacking funds. So, he agreed to build a special sort of deadly drones and shipped large quantities of the models to the Near East, where they may well be used as terrorist weapons. He never informed the police. He could not but have known what the drones he was producing would be used for. I guess he was delaying his own demise. I didn't ruin him, Michelle! He was ruined before he started producing the drones. Crime never pays, Michelle. We all know that!'

'Blouges will be ruined,' Michelle continued, 'hundreds of people will be thrown on the streets. Evelyn made that clear to me. You came to me with false pretences. You tricked me. You lied to me. You did not tell me the truth. I cannot have a marriage on that basis, Diego!'

'I did not trick you. I could not tell you the entire truth, because that would have brought my mission in jeopardy and maybe have torn yourself in a quandary you couldn't escape from. It would have forced you into a choice that might have sent you too in prison. Had I told you what my mission was in the last detail, would you not have warned your sister? That would have made you the assessor to a crime. I was definitely not allowed to divulge any information about my mission. Had I done so, I might have landed in prison!'

'I want you to go away, Diego, to leave me be.'

'What about our intentions, Michelle? My feelings for you haven't changed!'

'I have to think. I don't want you around, now!'

'All right! I'll go, then. What if I came back? When can I come back? In a day, a week, a month, a year?'

Michelle started crying, 'I don't know! I have to bring order in my feelings and in my thoughts. How can I ever be sure of you again?'

'Fine,' Diego concluded. 'I won't harass you. I'll leave you on your own. I guess I'll be needing three to six months to get out of the military, maybe more. I'll come back then, if you haven't called me before. You can reach me via Castle Trioteignes. My father will know where I am. I may not be reachable by phone all the time. I'm leaving, now.'

Michelle bent over the table and wept.

'Go,' she said, 'go!'

Diego turned and left the house. He had to open the front door by himself.

Diego drove to the castle of Trioteignes. He told his father Charles and mother Monique what had happened in Robois. He also told about Michelle. He told she might call, but then also she might not. He asked his father for a job in one of his companies. Charles de Trioteignes merely nodded. Diego then rode back to the lodge, to find Atsel and Deniz packing.

'We cannot stay any longer,' Atsel said. 'We must get out of the country. One never knows somebody can identify us in Belgium, and we don't want to be interrogated. We phoned our services, and they agree. We must leave as soon as possible. We are driving to Paris. Airplane tickets have been reserved for us. I return to Tel Aviv with a direct flight, Deniz will fly to Istanbul via Frankfurt. We placed the weapons and other gear on our beds. Our bosses were surprised with the results. They seem more pleased than they want to acknowledge. Maybe we can find a correct place again in the services. If not, I may go private.'

Diego nodded.

Atsel and Deniz would drive together in Atsel's Renault, not an hour later.

'What about your Peugeot cabriolet?' Diego asked to Deniz.

'It's a gift,' Deniz smiled. 'No! The services will send somebody to come for it, today. I placed the keys under the wipers. It will be gone this afternoon. You don't need to be present.'

She kissed him goodbye.

'Too bad that cook Michelle has put her claws in you,' she confessed. 'I might have liked to spend the rest of my years with you! What a team we two would have made! You could have learned a few tricks from an older and more experienced woman.'

She kissed him again, a kiss he would not forget yet so soon. Diego smiled, somewhat surprised. Atsel honked from the car. Deniz ran.

Two weeks later, Diego received a postcard from Tel Aviv at Castle Trioteignes. He had taken leave from duty, and stayed with his parents for a few weeks. The postcard featured the wonderful, sunny beaches of Tel Aviv.

The card read, 'arrived well. All for the best. Back in business. Wish you luck. A.'

One month later, Diego heard in the BBC's international news a high-positioned notable of the Turkish government had been shot in plain view, in a street of Ankara. The bullet that had splashed his brains on the wall behind him, proved out to be made of an alloy of silver. All kinds of rumours spread ten, rumours of orgies of vampires in the capital of Turkey, totally fantastic stories that no normal-minded person would have given one minute of thought.

Terrorist groups, at least five of them, were accused and thought of for having committed the crime.

Somewhat later, Diego received another postcard, this one posted in Istanbul, showing a view of the Topkapi Palace museum.

The inscription read, 'all well. I am free. Hope you are free to. D.'

The address of a hotel followed. That set Diego thinking. What should he do now, stay in Robois and drool over Michelle, or get a plane to Istanbul?

3.4.2. Joseph Bikri, Hamza Al-Harrak and Imam Bin Mahfouz

Joseph Bikri had a very busy life in July and August, until the end of the summer. Most of the judicial case of the terrorists of Robois was kept out of his hands, as the prosecutors and inspectors of Namur handled the case extensively. The terrorist cells of Brussels, which had attacked the music festival, and the cell of former Imam Majdi Al-Faris had been eliminated, so there would be no public trial. Still, many people were interrogated in the aftermath. Joseph Bikri had to testify frequently. He was regularly interrogated on his part in the handling of the terrorist attacks. He had to justify his actions. Nobody drew into doubt how well he had handled the terrorist attacks. The involvement of secret service agents remained a mystery and was not discussed at length. Joseph Bikri merely mentioned the names he knew were false. Diego de Trioteignes' name did not surface beyond the confidentiality of the judges, covered by the secrecy of state security.

The arrest of Léon-Jules de Blouges hit Robois very hard. De Blouges was considered a hard and arrogant man, but his factories provided work to hundreds of citizens of Robois. With him, the Blouges factories lost their leader. He was released rapidly, after a mere two days in prison, but he lost authority in the enterprise. His involvement in the Blouges factories diminished sharply after his arrest. He stayed a member of the board, but left the presidency to Marc-Julien de Bazaine, his brother-in-law. Léon-Jules more or less retired to his castle of Blouges. The production of the long-range drones was stopped. Marc-Julien scarcely succeeded in saving the enterprise, and over a hundred workers had to be laid off. Nobody knew how long the toy factories would last. New products were being developed and went into production.

Nobody incriminated Hamza Al-Harrak. Hamza was nevertheless also interrogated several times for his involvement with the terrorist Majdi Al-Faris. Joseph Bikri told the prosecutors the boy had been able to avoid a catastrophe. Hamza would have been declared a true hero by the press, had the journalists also not learned that Hamza had actually designed the long-range drone, and written its software. The prosecutors accepted Hamza had worked in good faith, although somewhat naively, which was attributed to his young age. The judges were very lenient toward him. He was never put into prison, but interrogated for long hours. The same happened to his friends.

Hamza and Khadijah married six months later, in the spring of the next year. The wedding took place in Robois. The feast was grand, held in a large hall of the abbey of Robois, organised and paid for by Joseph Bikri and Samia Bennani. Khadijah never returned to Morocco! An American firm that produced drones and other models, a multinational firm, hired Hamza in as engineer. He soon left with Khadijah for a well-paid job in England, living near Reading. His two friends, who were equally regarded heroes by the people of Robois, accepted jobs in Montpellier, France.

Through her many contacts in Brussels, Samia Bennani arranged for Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz' book, his commentaries on the Koran, to be published in Paris and Brussels. The book was an immediate and great success. It was translated and sold in more than twenty languages, including Arabic, to over ten million copies. Imam Bin Mahfouz became instantly

very famous as a scholar and a prime interpreter of the Koran. He could have been lecturing at any Muslim University in the world, but he refused to leave Robois. He continued to write on Islam, and organised conferences on the subject in the new mosque of Robois. The mosque thus also became a centre of learning. The money from the sales of the books was placed in a trust, serving Bin Mahfouz' conferences and charitable institutions.

A large conference hall was built next to the mosque with funds from this trust, and with money from the town of Robois. The conference hall was used both by the Muslim community and by the other communities of Robois.

The president of the Imam Bin Mahfouz Trust was a woman, Samia Bennani, Joseph Bikri's wife. Imam Bin Mahfouz continued to speak, to preach in the prayer hall of the new mosque. Muslims from all over Belgium and also from other countries came to Robois to hear him discuss on the controversial verses in the Koran. His message was one of love for one's neighbours, in submission to the one God.

When the entire Al-Faris affair had blown over and had almost been forgotten by most people, Joseph Bikri remained astonished at how the entire affair had found a dénouement with such good success for the citizens of Robois. It was not always this way! More than ten men had been killed, but except for one poor steward of the music festival, all of those were evil men who had wanted to massacre hundreds of innocent citizens for their cause of dominance. Finally, much more good than evil had come from the episode for the people of Robois. Indeed, the Muslim community had found a better place in the town. A woman wearing a veil, the scarf tradition continued by the Muslims of Robois, was no longer considered an intruder and a foreigner. The communities of Robois had grouped together as never before. The Roboisians of all beliefs had understood how most of the Muslims had worked to protect Robois. All acknowledged that in every assembly of men and women, a certain percentage were wicked people. The ninety-nine percent of kind people should work hand in hand, they concluded, to ward off evil together. The Muslim people of Robois had done just that. Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz, Hamza Al-Harrak and his two friends were considered heroes of the town.

Commissaire Joseph Bikri could again walk at ease, satisfied and happy, in the streets of the Robois he loved. He was treated with increased respect by his citizens. Frequent visitors in his house were Imam Bin Mahfouz and Shaykh Karim Khedis the gardener. Often, they sat together with the mayor of Robois, and discussed over a cup of tea and sweet biscuits.

3.4.3. Epilogue

Joseph Bikri and Diego de Trioteignes walked in the woodland garden of Castle Trioteignes. 'I have come to pay homage to your father,' Joseph said. 'And to thank you. Without your help, a massacre would have happened at the music festival, and an even larger one on National Day. I suppose I will be the only one to thank you. At least one person should do that!'

'I did my duty. I did what I thought I had to do. Nobody will thank my two friends, though. The man Christian, Atsel, was an Israeli, a Jew, you know. The woman, Deniz, was Turkish and lay, but I guess she was a little bit a Muslim too. At heart, she was a very intriguing woman.'

Joseph nodded. 'Thanks to them and you, Imam Madyan Bin Mahfouz will be able to create another Islam, a European Islam, an Islam of real submission to the good in God, a truer Islam, one that goes back to the tolerance early Islam accomplished for centuries. Sometimes I wonder whether God does not need our help to have the good triumph. That was what the battle of Robois was about, as it is everywhere in the world, wasn't it? No, there is no God's curse on Robois, quite the contrary.'

Joseph Bikri hesitated, and then he continued, 'you know, nobody thanked me either. When I was being interrogated, I had the strange feeling I and you three and the police force of Robois were being accused of having been too successful. I was almost regarded as if I were the accused, the criminal, and not the victim. After all, we suffered no casualties, the terrorists did, and they suffered many deaths. It is an attitude I have read of, of course, but it remained a bad experience. Nobody thanked me, but I saw the envy, the jealousy, and also signs of awe, of fear even, in the eyes of my interrogators. That was my reward!' Joseph grinned at the memory.

'We have also entered a new era, commissaire. We have been opposed to a new threat. New technologies, or rather the application of them by humans, always brings dangers and threats. The threat of hundreds of cheap long-range, high-speed drones being hurled by terrorists or enemies against our large cities is now a reality. We only witnessed the first generation of small assault drones! The next generation will be yet smaller devices, faster ones with longer ranges, more sophisticated functions, and devices able to carry yet heavier payloads. We shall have to watch out for the skies in the future! Our sense of safety will still diminish some more. Will our politicians realise the threat? Also individual attacks with drones have to be reckoned with. Counter-measures should be developed and installed, but, also as always, the means of effectively stopping drone attacks will only come much later, when the threats are realised, too late!'

'We have been so busy fighting the terrorist groups,' Diego continued, 'we did not take the time to think about why the terrorism happened, and why the violence is perpetrated by the people we qualify as terrorists.'

Joseph Bikri looked at Diego, and saw he was supposed to answer.

He said, 'in the case of Al-Faris, the so-called third imam, who was not an imam at all, but merely a so self-appointed terrorist, the answers are easily given. Al-Faris was a radical

Islamist who took all verses of the Koran literally. He liked the most violent verses of the Koran. He was a religious ideologist. He thought he could impose his religious views on the world with violence. Those were his motives. He was entirely wrong, however, in thinking he could transform our society by violence. Terror, the creation of a state of fear in a population in order to achieve political or ideological aims, never succeeds. Our western societies absorb the violence and react. Our societies have at their disposal immense resources to counter terrorism: money, intelligent people, organisation of police forces, intelligence services, surveillance methods, repression by law, and others. Terrorism simply doesn't work! Have you heard of one terrorist activity the last hundred years that really reached its goals? I have knowledge of none. Violence is never effective, if only because most of the people hate it. By 'most' I mean ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent or more of our men and women. It means killing innocent people. It is addressed, in its form used in our populations, against innocent men and women, and it works indiscriminately. In terrorist attacks, also Muslim men and women are killed or hurt, and that is specifically forbidden by the Koran. Who can condone such means of indiscriminate violence in a peaceful country?'

'I agree,' Diego said, 'but that is not the answer to my question. Would the man using terrorism be so stupid as not to know this? Maybe they are. If they are not, why then are they committing or commanding these acts nevertheless?'

'Power, I believe,' Bikri answered quickly. 'Crimes are always committed for money, power or women. Women do not come into consideration with terror. In the West, money brings power and is therefore sought. In the East, and in Africa, power brings money and hence more power. The men who command terrorism are looking for power. They want to show their power to gain more power. They have too few military resources to hurt, to win a war, so they commit acts of terrorism to show they can hurt. That gives them more prestige, more media attention, they get feared, another form of power. That attracts other men, at least for some time. It makes their power grow. They gain influence. They hope to force other countries or communities to concessions in their war. Terrorism is a method of coercion. It never works, of course, because when countries give in to terrorism, they know quite well terrorism only augments power. Our countries never give in, and never will to terrorism. Our societies have all the means to counter it. As you said, we have the money, the intelligence, the organisations to counter it. And the patience to sit out the attacks. Our societies absorb the violence. We mourn our dead, and start organising. Terrorism is always a sign of impotence, of course. The groups or countries that are using terrorism are too weak to use other means, other military means. When terrorism proves not to work, people quit the groups commanding it, so it peters out. It quite naturally stops, even when that only happens after many years. It simply doesn't work, and terrorists in the end understand they have to use other means, less violent and more political.'

Joseph Bikri stopped, thought again, then continued, 'as to the question of why our young people are attracted to the terrorism commanded from far away, well, that question has already been answered by the scholarly Muslim who talked about it during our meeting in Karim Khedis' house. Men who have some money, men who live in comfort, do not become terrorists! Any society, at any time, has angry young men. Young men that do not have much money, because their fathers are still poor.'

Our Muslims boys are immigrants or boys born from immigration. They are not well schooled, they are not considered equals in some cases. They become juvenile delinquents, who take to using drugs, selling drugs and alcohol, some take to stealing, and so on. They radicalise. Some young men are strong of character, others are weak and give in to the first radical theory that allows them to make a name for themselves in the media. They find a reason to exist in the violence, and the violence suits their state of mind. Beware, such feelings are not only present in young Muslims. Native young people take increasingly to extreme right-wing ideas. Both sorts of young men seek the thrill, the end of boredom in a society in which they cannot shine. They finally find a way to be heroes. Sal Mineo also died in 'Rebels without a cause'. Our Muslim young men follow the first cause that promises them all attention in the media, their names eternalised, and yet being saved in Paradise, in a better world. Of course, I do not believe they will be saved, but that is what their puppet masters tell them, anyway.'

'That gives our societies much to work on,' Diego mused.

'It does,' Bikri concluded. 'Still, I refuse to be called responsible for their acts. Many young people can make a fine living in our society by talent and work, and Muslims have as many talents as other people, and they can work. Here lies a difference between our own societies and the societies of England and the United States, I believe. We nurture feelings of guilt for what happens with our young men, also with our young, angry Muslims. The English and the Americans do not harbour such feelings of guilt. They fight terrorism quite more easily. Well, I may be wrong with that view. It is just an idea of mine.'

They kept a silence, and walked on. Diego remained lost in thoughts.

'What will you do now?' Joseph Bikri asked.

'I wanted to ask my father for a job in his enterprises. I am going to leave the military. I saw my mother gets old. I proposed to help her with the farm. I know sheer to nothing about farming, but she will teach me. My highest reward was to see how happy she looked when I asked her! I shall not leave Robois. I shall wait for Michelle Bazaine to forgive me or to understand. If she doesn't want me after time has healed our minds, there is also a woman in Istanbul who may be waiting for me.'

Joseph Bikri laughed, 'a soldier always has several birds in the air!'

Diego laughed too.

'Yes,' Diego told, 'but my love is Michelle. I could get over Evelyn. Getting over Michelle will be much harder. Well, whatever, I think I can also be happy here, alone, and in my mother's farm, without anybody. I long for children, though!'

'Ah, children,' Joseph Bikri said, looking up at the once more blue sky.

They kept a silence for a few moments and walked on.

Suddenly, Joseph Bikri said, 'you know why we won, whereas other terrorist attacks have caused great harm elsewhere? All people of good faith and of good will worked together in Robois. We had the aid of the Muslim community, here in Robois. That was the miracle of Robois. Should it not be so everywhere? There is one lesson I learned from all what happened. I don't know by which forces, by the basic laws by which our universe has been

created, or by our own, human, logical mind of self-preservation or by both, in the end, sometimes only in the far end, evil never wins!'

Diego didn't answer. He and Commissaire Bikri walked together through the wood.

Author's Notes

This novel was written in its original, English version, before the 1st of November 2015, before the horrible events of Friday, the 13th of November that rocked the city of Paris, and long before the bombings of 22 March 2016 in Brussels. I always only publish the original, English version of my novels after the translation of the version in Dutch, my mother tongue. Both versions were ready by mid-January of 2016. More than 130 innocent persons were killed in the terrorist attacks on Paris, over 30 in Brussels. Since then, so much has been said in television debates in Europe and so much written in the press media, that the themes of this novel may now seem common subjects or common thoughts. Reality has surpassed the imagination at the basis of the novel.

In fact, I had this novel in mind since more than three years, but during that time I was finishing a five-book series on the fourteenth century history of the Flemish city of Ghent, so that I could start this novel only in 2015.

The attack in Paris on the Bataclan concert hall happened while a Heavy Metal rock group performed its music. The attack in this novel on an outdoor rock festival is situated in another environment altogether. An outdoor devils' festival, or hell's festival is not new. I know of at least one such real festival in Europe, organised each year, though not in Belgium.

This novel is much more optimistic than the results of the Paris attacks, which surprised the police forces of France and Belgium entirely. The optimism comes from the Muslim community in this novel joining the non-Muslim people in our lands to ward off a common threat. I cherish the hope the Muslims of Europe would indeed, in a similar way protect and help the people of the countries they live in. As the novel states, we should all fight wickedness and evil.

The accuracy of GPS-guided aerial devices can at best and normally be about 3 to 4 metres, and not centimetres as may be suggested in the novel. Even that accuracy is close enough for the purposes of the novel, though. The coordinates are presented in the novel in degrees, minutes and seconds and hundredths of seconds. GPS coordinates are usually expressed in degrees, decimal point and up to nine decimals. For an accuracy of 3 to 4 metres, tens and not hundredths of seconds would suffice. I proposed hundreds of seconds to conform to the mentioned nine decimals behind the degrees.

Finally, drones such as described in the novel do exist already, with the range and speed and payload described. They are not science-fiction anymore. I believe the threat of these devices for national security is not realised quite enough.