

Sample Translation (Pages 9-39)

ROUGH SEAS IN BRITTANY

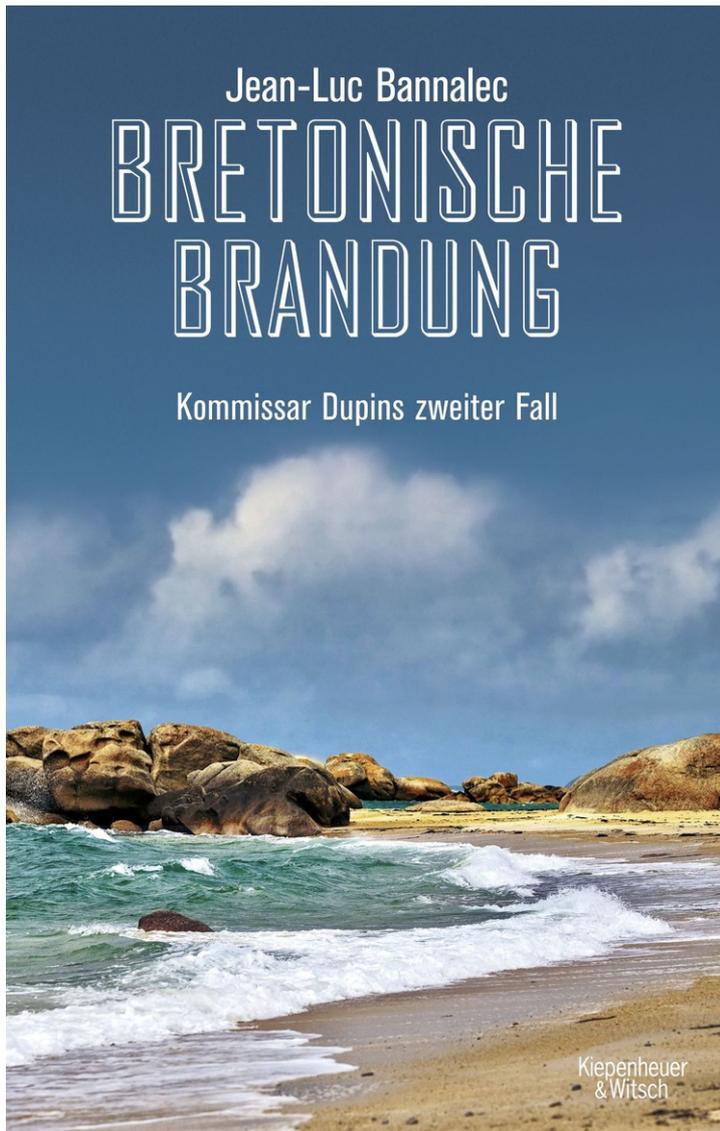
by Jean-Luc Bannalec

novel

Translated by John Reddick

Jean-Luc Bannalec: Bretonische Brandung

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Contact:

Iris Brandt/ Rights & Contracts Director: ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Aleksandra Erakovic/ Foreign Rights Manager: aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de

DAY ONE

Long and low, the islands hung above the deep opal sea as though by magic, shimmering and a touch indistinct. The famous cluster of islands lay there ahead of them like a mirage.

The outlines of the larger islands were already visible to the naked eye, with little in the way of landmarks: the mysterious fortress on Cicogne, the venerable, storm-battered lighthouse on Penfret, the abandoned farm on Drénec, the scattered, weather-beaten houses on Saint-Nicolas — the main island in the almost circular group. The legendary Iles de Glénan.

They were ten sea miles from the mainland, from Concarneau, the magnificent ‘blue city’ of the Cornouaille region, whose citizens had hailed the islands as their ‘protector’ since time immemorial. Day in, day out, the islands formed their trusty horizon. Sometimes clear and sharply defined, sometimes hazy and indistinct, sometimes spectral, sometimes unmistakably real, their appearance signalled the following day’s weather, and sometimes the weather for the entire year to come. For hundreds of years the Bretons had argued doggedly about how many islands there were. Seven, nine, twelve and twenty were the numbers most commonly alleged. All were agreed that there were seven ‘big’ islands — ‘big’ in this context meaning a length of a few hundred metres at most. Once, in times long gone, they had been but a single island, but gradually the raging sea and pounding waves had torn it into separate pieces. Some years ago a commission set up by the Département had formally determined that there were ‘twenty two islands and islets’ according to the relevant official criterion of ‘land that is continuously above sea level and has permanent vegetation’. In addition, there was a seemingly infinite plethora of rocky outcrops jutting out of the water, both singly and in groups. The overall number of islands also varied enormously with the rise and fall of the tide, which in turn was profoundly affected by the relative positions of sun, moon and earth. High tides could be three or four metres higher on some days than on others, while extremely low tides could greatly increase the size of an island and possibly even reveal its connection to an off-lying sandbank that normally lay hidden beneath the water. There was no such thing as a ‘normal’ state of affairs. As a result, the appearance of the islands changed constantly, so no one could ever say ‘There you are, *that’s* the Iles de Glénan, *that’s* what they look like.’ The islands weren’t unambiguous pieces of land; they were neither land nor sea, but something in between, something vague and indeterminate.

In violent winter storms gigantic waves sometimes washed right over the islands, the huge clouds of foam turning everything into a single surging mass of water. In the poetic but telling phrase of the locals: ‘All but lost in the void, in a vast expanse of nothingness.’

It was a quite exceptional day in early May, differing in no respect from a real summer’s day, what with its altogether unbelievable warmth, its vivid light, its vibrant colours. The very air had turned summery, too: it felt lighter, less salt-laden, less infused with iodine, seaweed and algae, yet at the same time full of that special Atlantic tang that was so difficult to describe. Although it was still only 10 in the morning, the sun had already turned the horizon into a glittering, glinting band of turbulent light, and below it on the water a swathe of silvery luminescence fanned out ever more widely from wherever the beholder happened to be.

Commissaire Georges Dupin of the Concarneau police scarcely noticed any of this. He was in a thoroughly bad mood on this particular Monday morning. He had been sitting in the *Amiral* with his third cup of coffee already on its way and his newspapers spread out in front of him — *Le Monde*, *Ouest France*, *Télégramme* — when the shrill tones of his mobile had made him jump. Three corpses had been found on the Glénan islands. No other information had come in as yet — just that single fact: three corpses.

He had set off straightaway. The *Amiral*, his regular haunt where he always began his day, stood right next to the harbour, so he found himself aboard a fast police launch within minutes. Commissaire Dupin had only been out to the islands once before: the previous year he had visited Penfret, right at the eastern edge of the group.

The journey had lasted twenty minutes so far, and they were only half way across. Dupin wished they were further on: boat trips on open water were not his thing, despite his fondness for the sea — the kind of fondness typical of a dyed in the wool Parisian from the 16th *arrondissement* such as he had been until his compulsory transfer to Brittany almost four years earlier. A fondness for the beach, for watching the world go by, for taking an occasional gentle swim; a fondness for the atmosphere, the smells, the teeming crowds of people. He wasn’t keen on boat trips of any sort, but he particularly disliked travelling on the two fast launches that the maritime police had finally acquired two years earlier after a bitter struggle with the powers-that-be, and which were their pride and joy — no wonder, as the vessels were the very latest models, mind-blowing miracles of technology with probes and sensors of every imaginable kind. They positively shot across the water. One boat was named

Bir — Breton for ‘arrow’ — while the other was *Luc'hed*, ‘lightning’. In Dupin’s view, boats deserved better-sounding names — but the meanings of the words were all that had counted.

Commissaire Dupin was also short on caffeine, a state of affairs that always made him grumpy. Two coffees first thing in the morning were nowhere near enough. He was pretty heavily built — not fat, but very decidedly not thin — and had suffered since childhood from astonishingly low blood pressure.

He had boarded the boat with great reluctance, and then only because he didn’t want to lose face, and because Riwal, one of his two young inspectors, had gone on board as well, and Riwal held him in awe — something Dupin deeply disapproved of.

Dupin would have been quite prepared to do the half-hour drive to the little aerodrome at Quimper and fly across to the islands in the police’s own rather ropy and rickety two-man helicopter, even though it would have taken considerably longer overall, and even though he wasn’t very keen on flying either. But his boss, the *Préfet*, had commandeered the helicopter for a get-together with the Channel Islands authorities in a sleepy little backwater on Guernsey by the name of Bordeaux. The British and the French alike were determined to further improve co-operation between their respective police forces: ‘Crime will be stamped on no matter where the criminals come from.’ Commissaire Dupin cordially detested Lug Locmariaquer, the *Préfet*, and even now, after almost four years, still couldn’t pronounce his name properly (Georges Dupin had always had difficulties in his relationships with authority figures — and rightly so, in his opinion). For weeks he had suffered an irritating then utterly maddening barrage of phone calls from the *Préfet* seeking ‘bright ideas’ suitable for discussion at such an illustrious high-level meeting. Madame Nolwenn, Dupin’s infinitely patient PA, had been instructed by Locmariaquer to dig out any unsolved cases over the last few decades that ‘might conceivably’ have had any kind of connection to the Channel Islands, and that ‘might conceivably’ have been solved had there been closer co-operation at the time between the two police forces. It was utterly ridiculous. Nolwenn had jibbed at the whole idea. She couldn’t begin to understand why it was necessary for ‘us southerners’ to get involved with folk from the far north where icebergs were commonplace and where it rained from one end of the year to the other. Mountains of files were brought out and ploughed through, but not a single case of any significance was discovered — to the intense displeasure of the *Préfet*.

Dupin's mood on the boat had not been improved by the slight mishap that had befallen him soon after they set out. He had done what only absolute landlubbers do: with the boat already travelling fast and a stiff breeze blowing in from the port side where the sea was also particularly choppy, he had crossed over to that side of the boat to take a look at the islands, whereas Riwal and the *Bir*'s two deck crew had stayed doggedly to starboard. It wasn't long before he was hit by a massive wave. Commissaire Dupin was soaked. The jeans, polo shirt and jacket (unbuttoned as always) that constituted his quasi-uniform from March to October now clung tightly to his skin; the only things still dry were the socks ensconced inside his shoes.

What was making the commissaire particularly bad-tempered, however, was the complete absence of any information beyond the one bare fact that three corpses had been discovered. Dupin was not blessed with patience. Quite the opposite. Kadeg, the second of his two inspectors, and a man he was almost always at loggerheads with, had been able to tell him nothing on the phone beyond the little he had gleaned from a distraught call made to the police station a little earlier by 'a man with a strong English accent'. The corpses were apparently lying on the north-eastern beach of Le Loc'h, the largest island in the group — 'large' here meaning a total length of four hundred metres. Le Loc'h was uninhabited, and boasted a ruined monastery, an ancient graveyard, a derelict soda factory, and a lagoon-like lake — the island's chief attraction. Kadeg had had to repeat a dozen times that he had no other information whatsoever: he had been bombarded with endless questions by Dupin, who was notorious for his positively fanatical interest in seemingly insignificant details and circumstances.

Three dead bodies, yet not a single bit of information about them: the Prefecture had understandably been extremely rattled by this state of affairs. After all, three corpses were a pretty big deal here in Finistère, the picturesque 'end of the earth', as the Romans called it. For the Gauls and the Celts — and the folk in these parts still regarded themselves as such — it was of course exactly the opposite: not the 'end' but quite explicitly the 'beginning', the 'chief place in the world': not 'Finis Terrae' but 'Penn ar Bed'.

The launch had meanwhile slowed to a much lower speed, as some tricky navigation was now called for. Even at the best of times the ubiquitous sandbanks and numerous rocks both above and below the surface of the sea meant that pilotage in these waters required the highest possible level of skill — but with the tide now falling the challenge was even greater than usual. The entry route between Bananec and the large sandbank off Penfret offered the least dangerous approach to the islands,

opening as it did into the pool known as ‘La Chambre’, which was protected from storms and violent swells by the islands that lay all around it. The *Bir* made its way into the *Chambre* in magisterial fashion, manoeuvring amongst the rocks with effortless ease and then heading towards Le Loc’h.

‘We won’t be getting any closer.’

The skipper of the police launch, a tall, thin young man in a uniform made of some kind of special high-tech fabric, had called out from his raised steering position without turning his head to look at anyone: his attention was focused solely on piloting the boat.

Dupin felt uneasy at this news: there were still a good hundred metres between the boat and the island.

‘Spring tide. Huge range.’

These words, too, were addressed by the gaunt-looking skipper to no one in particular. Commissaire Dupin looked enquiringly at his inspector; following the mishap with the massive wave, he had moved across to join the others and stayed firmly put. Riwal leaned his head close to Dupin’s ear, as the boat’s engines were still making a deafening noise even though it was by now almost stationary.

‘There’s a massive tidal range at the moment, Monsieur le Commissaire. At spring tides low water is even lower than normal. I don’t know whether you...’

‘I know what spring tides are.’

Dupin had been going to add that he’d been living in Brittany for almost four years now and had lived through a good few spring and neap tides in that time — but he knew it would have been pointless. He also had to admit that he’d had that stuff about tidal ranges explained to him countless times but he’d never really managed to get his head around it. In the eyes of Riwal, as of all other Bretons, he would still be an ‘incomer’ even when he had been there for decades — though this was not necessarily meant critically. He was, however, an incomer of the very worst sort so far as Bretons were concerned, namely a Parisian — and that was liable to be meant *extremely* critically. He had suffered the same spiel being trotted out time after time: when moon, sun and earth are all aligned, the cumulative gravitational pull... — etc., etc., etc.

The noise of the motor suddenly died, and the two maritime police officers serving as deck crew immediately began busying themselves in the bow. Only now did Dupin notice that the two men were comically similar to their skipper — same wiry build, same lean face, same seafarer uniform.

‘We can’t get any closer to the island. The water’s too shallow.’

‘So what does that mean?’

‘We have to get off right here.’

It took Dupin a few seconds to react to this.

‘We have to *get off* right here?’

So far as Dupin was concerned they were still on the high seas.

‘The water here isn’t deep — say, fifty centimetres.’

Inspector Riwal had already knelt down and begun taking his shoes off.

‘But there’s a tender on board, for heaven’s sake.’

Dupin had in fact only just caught sight of it — to his great relief.

‘Not worth it, Monsieur le Commissaire. We wouldn’t get much closer to the shore even with that.’

Dupin looked over the boat’s railing with arched eyebrows. The water looked a lot deeper than fifty centimetres. It was unbelievably clear. Every shell, every pebble on the bottom was plainly visible. A shoal of tiny bright green fish went flitting by. Ahead of the boat lay the northern side of Le Loc’h. Nothing but dazzling white sand, smooth turquoise water, the sea within the *Chambre* completely still. Throw in a couple of coconut trees — about the only variety of palm, it seemed to Dupin, that didn’t grow in Brittany — and you’d think you were in the Caribbean. It would never occur to anyone to connect this landscape with Brittany. The view could be marvelled at on a thousand postcards, and they really didn’t exaggerate in the least.

By now Riwal had taken his socks off as well. The crew had put the anchor down and without any hesitation hopped nimbly over the side and into the sea. They were now engaged in pulling the boat around so that the stern with its wooden step jutting out just above the waterline faced the shore. Riwal in his light-coloured trousers jumped down into the water as though it were the most natural thing in the world, closely followed by the gangly skipper.

Dupin hesitated. It was like a scene from some absurd comedy, he thought. The young water-police crew, the skipper and Riwal were all standing there expectantly, like an honour guard, their eyes focused on him, and him alone.

Dupin jumped. He hadn't removed his shoes. There he was, in a flash, standing up to his lower thighs in the Atlantic Ocean, which at this time of year — the beginning of May — was 14 degrees Celsius at most. He inspected the bottom with an unyielding stare. The shoal of tiny bright green fish, now much larger and full of curiosity, came towards him and circled his legs, quite devoid of fear. He turned right round to follow their course through the water — and that's when he caught sight of the crab. It was a massive creature, some twenty or thirty centimetres across, gazing straight at him and poised ready to attack — a genuine *tourteau*, much enjoyed in the restaurants along this coast, not least by Dupin himself. Two responses rose to his lips, both of which he managed to suppress: a yelp of fear, and a squeal of gastronomic delight. He turned his head and suddenly realised that the others were all still standing there motionless, watching his every move. Straightening his body with studied deliberation, Dupin started wading towards the shore, taking great pains to avoid the eye of Riwal and the three men from the maritime police. They quickly overtook him to left and right.

Dupin was the last to reach dry land.

The corpse lay on its stomach, canted slightly to one side, one shoulder unnaturally jammed beneath the body so that it looked as if there were no right arm. The left arm, doubtless broken, was bent at an impossible angle. The head was resting almost wholly on its forehead, as if someone had deliberately arranged it so. The face was not visible. The pullover and blue jacket on the body were more or less in shreds, and the appalling array of huge deep wounds on back, neck, head and left arm were plain to see. In contrast, the lower half of the body seemed largely unharmed, with patches of seaweed stuck to it here and there. The robust sailing shoes still firmly laced to the corpse's feet looked new. With the man lying in this position it was difficult to judge his age — perhaps a touch older than he himself was, thought Dupin: late forties,

early fifties. He wasn't very tall. Dupin had knelt down beside him to take a closer look. The sea had carried him a long way up the beach, to a point a few metres short of the line where the gently sloping white sand ended and the extravagantly green vegetation began.

'The other two are back there, fairly close together. They're in the same sort of state.'

Riwal pointed along the beach. Dupin saw the young officers from the maritime police standing next to a heap of some sort, a good hundred yards away. Dupin hadn't even noticed that anyone was still with him. Riwal's voice was a touch faltering.

'The bodies look terrible.'

He was right.

'Who's the pathologist?'

'Dr Savoir should be here any minute. He's on the other launch. With Inspector Kadeg.'

'Ah yes, I should have guessed. How perfectly ideal!'

Everyone knew that the Commissaire and Dr Savoir had little time for one another.

'Dr Lafond had something on in Rennes this morning.'

As a rule Nolwenn quietly fixed things so that the excellent if grumpy old Dr Lafond was called whenever Dupin was on a case.

The skipper of the *Bir* came striding towards them.

'The three of them are all males, probably in their early fifties.' The young man spoke in a calm, grave tone. 'Identity unknown as yet. The bodies were very likely washed up by the last high tide: they're fairly far up on the beach. There are powerful currents all around the islands, and at springs they're even stronger than normal. We'll log and photograph everything.'

'Is the tide at its lowest point now?'

‘More or less.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Dead low tide was one and a half hours ago. The tide’s been coming in again since then.’

Dupin started thinking figures.

‘It’s 10.45 now. When was low tide exactly?’

‘This morning’s low tide was at 09.15. The one before that was yesterday at 20.50. Twelve hours and twenty five minutes earlier. High tide was at 03.03 last night.’

It had taken the officer less than three seconds to say all this. He looked at Dupin without a hint of triumph in his face.

‘Any missing people reports? Either at our end or the coastguard’s?’

‘None as yet that we’re aware of, Monsieur le Commissaire. But that might change.’

‘Le Loc’h is uninhabited, am I right?’

‘Yes. Saint-Nicolas is the only one of the islands still inhabited. And there aren’t many people there either. Ten at most; fifteen during the summer.’

‘In other words, there’s no one on the island overnight?’

‘Camping on the islands is strictly prohibited. A few daredevils do it all the same in the summer. We’ll check the entire island. And a few boats may have overnighted in the *Chambre*, close to Le Loc’h. It’s a favourite anchorage. We’ll check it out.’

‘What’s your name?’ Dupin liked the calm, careful young officer.

‘My name is Kireg Goulch, Monsieur le Commissaire.’

‘Kireg Goulch?!’ Dupin’s response had slipped out all on its own.

‘Exactly that.’

‘That’s a... That’s a very... I mean, it’s a very Breton sort of name.’

This response didn't seem to faze the young officer any more than the previous one. Dupin hurriedly cleared his throat and tried to concentrate all his attention once again on the matter in hand.

'Inspector Riwal said that the Englishman who found the bodies was on a canoe trip.'

'Lots of people visit the islands in sea-going kayaks, it's really popular. There aren't all that many at this time of year, but there *is* a steady trickle of them.'

'Even early in the morning? They're already over here at this stage of the day?'

'It's the most popular time. By this time of year the sun's already burning hot out on the sea around midday.'

'But the man didn't come ashore?'

'Not so far as we know. And there aren't any footprints in the sand.'

Dupin hadn't given any thought to this. The sand, made pristine again by every high tide, unfailingly showed up any new marks, and any efforts to get rid of them.

'Where's this man now?'

'On Saint-Nicolas. He's waiting on the quay there. Our other boat is taking one of our officers across to the island. He'll talk to him. Inspector Kadeg gave the order.'

'Inspector Kadeg gave you the *order*?'

'Yes, he...'

'Leave it — that's fine.' This wasn't the right moment to get worked up.

Dupin dug around in his still wet jacket and with considerable difficulty extracted one of the red Clairefontaine notebooks that he invariably used. It had been quite well protected in his pocket and so had remained reasonably dry when the wave had hit him on the way over. He hunted with the same dogged pernicketyness for one of the cheap biros that he always bought in bulk as he invariably mislaid them with incomprehensible rapidity.

‘Have any boats gone down anywhere around here?’

He knew immediately that it was a superfluous question: they would have heard of any such event long ago. The young policeman responded to his query with amiable forbearance.

‘That’s something else we have no information about at present, Monsieur le Commissaire. But if a boat *had* gone down last night it could easily take some time before it was missed. It would depend on how big it was, what sort of technical equipment it possessed, where it went down, where it was heading, who was aware of its ETA...’

Dupin made a few desultory notes.

‘So was there bad weather last night? Was it stormy out here?’

‘Don’t be fooled by today’s fine weather. A storm swept down the coast yesterday evening. Headquarters can tell us its precise strength and how and where it travelled. There wasn’t much sign of it in Concarneau, but that doesn’t mean a thing. We hold all the relevant reports. The sea’s still pretty rough, even though it’s calm here in the *Chambre*. You’ll have noticed that yourself on the way over.’

The remark was entirely neutral, without any ironic undertones. Dupin was getting to like Goulch more and more.

‘It wasn’t a once-in-a-century storm,’ the skipper added, ‘but it was a nasty one, that’s for sure.’

Dupin was all too familiar with this. He had long since become Breton enough not to be deceived by cloudless blue skies and the pervasive illusion of immutable fine weather. As Nolwenn never tired of telling him, the Breton peninsula with its jagged extremity — Finistere — juts right out into the very middle of the North Atlantic. ‘Armorica stretches its craggy head out like a prehistoric monster, like a rampant dragon.’ He liked this image — and you only had to look at a map to make out the dragon’s outline. Brittany was thus exposed not only to the might of an ocean generally acknowledged to be the wildest in the world, but also to the chaotic, endlessly fluctuating weather fronts that developed in the fastness encompassed by the East Coast of the USA, Canada, Greenland, the Arctic and the western flanks of Ireland, Britain, Norway and France. The weather could change in a trice from one

extreme to the other. ‘All four seasons in a single day’ was an expression the Bretons trotted out with pride and relish.

‘Maybe it wasn’t a shipwreck at all.’ Riwal’s voice was a touch firmer now. ‘They might have been caught out by the tide or the storm while fishing or mussel-hunting. Especially if they were tourists. A lot of people go searching for mussels when there’s an unusually low tide.’

This was very true. Dupin jotted it down in his notebook.

‘Why aren’t they wearing lifejackets? Doesn’t that suggest that they weren’t on a boat at all?’

‘Not necessarily’, said Goulch firmly. ‘Many of the locals don’t bother with lifejackets. Especially when alcohol’s involved as well... I wouldn’t attach much significance to that.’

Dupin made a gesture of resignation. That was it, then. They knew nothing — less than nothing so long as they were stuck out here.

‘Alcohol plays a big role on the sea’, added Goulch. ‘And especially here on the islands.’

‘People say that bottles are smaller on the islands than on the mainland — that’s why they’re emptied so quickly.’

It took Dupin a moment to get the joke — he assumed it *was* a joke; Riwal had delivered it with a completely straight face.

Ignoring it, Goulch carried on. ‘The bodies were no doubt tossed around in the waves for quite some time; that’s probably how they acquired such severe injuries. If there *was* some kind of disaster on a boat, they could have suffered the injuries at that stage.’

‘Could they have died far away from here? I mean, how far could they have been carried by the current?’

‘That all depends on how long they were in the sea. They might have still been alive to start with and tried to save themselves, and then drowned. They don’t look as if

they've been in the sea for any length of time: corpses look different when that's the case. Currents don't all run at the same speed, though. Some of them do five knots, and in that case the bodies could have travelled a long way in a single night. Then again, they could have gone around in circles, depending on where they went into the water. Currents change direction, all according to the state of the tide, the weather, the time of year.'

'I get it: we can't draw any conclusions whatsoever at this stage.'

'It's a peculiarity of the islands that certain combinations of sun, moon and earth cause numerous currents to flow towards Le Loc'h. Victims of shipwrecks have been washed up here since time immemorial. Sometimes dozens of corpses would be found on these beaches when big ships went down. That's why a graveyard was established on the island in the nineteenth century, right next to the chapel. That meant they didn't have to transfer the dead to Saint-Nicolas, up till then the only island with a burial ground. They were all buried here. They've even found early Celtic graves on this island.'

'So the bodies were always washed up here?'

A strange sensation came over Dupin, and he involuntarily turned to look behind him.

'For centuries this island — the focus of countless legends — has been regarded as the lair of Groac'h, the evil spirit of shipwrecks. She was said to be fabulously rich, richer than all the kings of the world put together. And her treasure chest was the lake, which had an underground tunnel linking it to the sea, and by this means a magic current brought her all the treasures carried by ships that had sunk. Her palace also stood at the bottom of the lake.'

Riwal gave a smile when Goulch had finished, but the smile looked distinctly forced.

'She likes devouring young men', added Goulch. 'She seduces them, turns them into fish, deep-fries them, and gobbles them up. Countless numbers of them have gone in search of her legendary treasure, but not one has ever returned. There are countless stories.'

That's the way things were in Brittany: beneath the ordinary quotidian surface, obscure forces were at work. And every locality had its own supernatural tales. Even

though the Bretons themselves laughed about these things — and Dupin knew of no other category of people given to laughing at themselves with such relish and abandon — these stories were such that laughter could melt away in a flash, and everything could suddenly become very real. It was all so deeply ingrained; for thousands of years the most natural perspective on the world had been the supernatural. And why should everything change just because they were now in the twenty-first century?

‘I want to see the other two bodies.’

Dupin walked along the beach with Riwal and Goulch trailing behind. At this particular moment the first and all-important question was whether or not the men had been victims of an accident of some sort. Had they drowned? Was there anything to suggest that their deaths might *not* have been an accident?

The two bodies were lying on their sides facing one another, the arms of each stretched out towards the other. It was a pretty macabre sight: as if the pair had still been alive and tried in their agony to use their final reserves of strength to shuffle closer to one another. The eeriness of the scene was intensified by a ring of large mother-of-pearl shells, glinting with all the colours of the rainbow, that lay around the corpses as though carefully placed there. Goulch’s colleagues were kneeling between the bodies, one of them taking photographs with a digital camera. Coming up to them, the trio stopped without a word and gazed down at the two dead men.

After a moment or two Dupin broke away and slowly circled the bodies several times, repeatedly bending down for a closer look. The same severe flesh wounds, over the entire body in one case, and largely confined to the lower half in the other; badly torn clothing (cotton trousers, polo shirt, fleece, sturdy shoes); bits of algae and seaweed in and around the wounds.

The officer with the camera slowly got to his feet. ‘Like that other one back there, these two bodies only seem to have the sort of wounds that could easily have been inflicted by jagged rocks as they were tossed around in the surf.’

‘At sea you don’t need to physically harm anyone in order to kill them. One little shove, and in they go. If there’s a storm and the sea’s rough, even a good swimmer doesn’t stand a chance. Try proving that someone pushed them in.’

Everything Goulch said was spot on. You had to think differently out here.

‘The other boat’s arriving.’

Dupin gave a start. Goulch pointed out to sea. The *Luc’hed* was approaching the *Bir* at high speed, slowing only just before it reached it. Stopping dead, it moored up alongside the other boat.

Dupin watched the same procedure unfold that he had been through himself earlier on. He could see Kadeg and Dr Savoir plus the skipper, and another police crew member who was already in the water seeing to the boat. Without further ado they all clambered off the launch and waded ashore with Kadeg leading the way: no surprise there.

‘We landed an officer on Saint-Nicolas to question the Englishman who found the bodies. We should get his report very soon. Three dead bodies — that’s quite some case.’

Kadeg had started holding forth before he was even out of the water, in that oh-so-diligent tone of voice that he was fond of adopting and which Dupin utterly detested.

‘At this point, my dear Inspector, we don’t yet know whether it’s a case at all.’

‘What do you mean, Monsieur le Commissaire.’

‘For the moment at least it looks as if there’s been an accident’

‘So are you saying we don’t need to record whatever we need to record to establish what did actually happen here?’

This struck Dupin as a staggeringly stupid question. He suddenly realised how irritated he was. It was the fault of this whole disastrous morning — and particularly the arrival of the second police launch. Not only Kadeg, but also that lefty pathologist Savoir who would soon be putting on a show like something out of a CSI episode, and who was so unbelievably laborious and never came to a plain, straightforward conclusion. Only now did Dupin notice that the police crewman on the second boat was toting a huge and clearly heavy case that no doubt contained Savoir’s high-tech equipment.

Dupin knew he needed to concentrate all his attention on the matter in hand and on nothing else. With luck the whole business would be done and dusted within a couple of hours and no longer any concern of his.

‘Ah! Monsieur le Commissaire!’

There was an absurd undertone of pride in Savoir’s voice, as though his recognition of Dupin was itself a major feat.

‘Any preliminary findings? Any facts thus far?’ While rattling out these questions he trotted on past Dupin without slowing his pace in the slightest. ‘I shall take a look at everything and then we shall no doubt know a lot more. Though of course everything’s provisional at this stage: I’ll need my lab before I can make any firm pronouncements. My equipment please: right here, between the two bodies.’

Savoir threw a brief but ostentatiously professional-looking glance at the bodies, and opened up his case.

‘Has everything been fully documented? Everything photographed?’

‘Yes, procedures have been completed for all three bodies’, said Goulch, breaking into the conversation. ‘Is it possible to say prior to a post mortem whether these men drowned?’

Savoir gave Goulch a withering glare.

‘Certainly not. I’m obviously not going to indulge in speculation in this case any more than in any other. These things take time.’

Dupin smiled quietly to himself. How wonderful! He wasn’t needed here! He stepped across to Riwal and Goulch.

‘I’m going to take a look at the island.’

He didn’t know himself what exactly he had in mind.

‘Even so, Monsieur le Commissaire, should we carry out a systematic search later on to see if we can find anything?’

‘Yes, Goulch, certainly. I’ll just wander around for a while. And in the meantime you can find out whether anybody on a boat has noticed anything unusual here on Le Loc’h. Anything at all. Or anywhere else, for that matter.’

‘Were you thinking of anything in particular?’ Kadeg had planted himself directly in front of Dupin — something he very much enjoyed doing as he knew Dupin detested it.

‘Routine, Kadeg. Routine pure and simple. I take it we’ll automatically be informed of any news that comes in about shipwrecks or missing persons?’ Dupin himself didn’t really know what he meant by ‘automatically’. He had turned towards Goulch to ask this question.

‘Of course, Monsieur le Commissaire. All police stations along the coast have been informed, as have those in the surrounding districts We’ve asked Air Sea Rescue HQ in Brest to send out their two helicopters. They’ve been on the job for an hour now and are checking out the whole area.’

‘Excellent, Goulch, excellent. — Riwal, you stay with Monsieur Goulch. I want to be put in the picture straightaway about any developments. Kadeg, as soon as Savoir gives the green light, search the bodies for documents, for anything at all that might help us to identify them.’

‘I..., I...’. Kadeg fell silent. Someone had to do it. And the Commissaire had the right to say who. Kadeg’s realisation of this simple fact was written across his face in distorted features such as might have been produced by some instrument of torture.

‘Be thorough, Kadeg. — Do mobiles actually work out here on the islands, Riwal?’

‘A new mast was put up on Penfret last year, though it’s not very big. Reception’s been mostly reliable since then.’ Riwal gazed into the distance beyond Le Loc’h, apparently trying to spot the mast on Penfret.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Reception depends on a variety of different factors.’

‘And what does *that* mean?’ To Dupin’s mind these things were far from unimportant.

‘The key factor is the weather. Bad weather usually means no reception, in good weather it’s mostly okay — but even then it sometimes doesn’t work for some reason or another. It depends a lot on whether you’re out on the water or on the islands — and then of course it depends on *which* island. On Bananec for instance there’s almost never any reception, even though it’s not very far from Saint-Nicolas.’

Dupin wondered how that could possibly be the case, technically speaking. He also wondered why Riwal knew so much about it. He didn’t pursue either question.

‘And here on Le Loc’h?’

‘It’s probably okay today.’

‘So I’m *probably* contactable?’

‘And don’t be surprised, Monsieur le Commissaire. You’ll see things on the islands that are there one minute and gone the next. Or you’ll hear strange sounds and noises. It’s always been that way over here, it’s completely normal.’

Dupin had absolutely no idea what to say to this. He turned round, ran his fingers through his hair, and set off along the beach in a westerly direction towards the broad southerly end of the island.

No matter where you looked, it was truly breathtaking. The finest white sand, beaches that sloped gently into water so limpid that it was impossible to tell exactly where it began. The water was a light but gleaming turquoise that morphed via an infinite succession of hues into opal and then into bright blue. Only in the far distance did it turn into a darker blue. One got a ravishing sense of the sea in Concarneau too — but out here on the islands the effect was greatly intensified. You were no longer simply *by* the sea: you had the sense of being truly *of* the sea. It was no longer mere delight at the taste and tang of the sea: it was a deep, all-pervading sensation.

Most bewitching of all, however, was the light — light that was powerful and mighty, yet also gentle and devoid of aggression. Light that came from everywhere, seeming to have no particular source, at any rate not merely one single one, not merely the sun. It emanated from the entire heavens — from their vast expanses, their numerous heights and levels, their different realms and dimensions. Above all, it came from the sea. The light seemed to become infinitely multiplied, to be reflected

back from the water as also from the atmosphere above, and to become in the process ever more intense. The few scraps of land were far too insubstantial to absorb any of it. Dupin had never seen as much light as there was in Brittany, and no other sky that arched so high and so free — but out here on the Glénan islands even these superlatives were exceeded. The folk along the coast said it made people drunk, made their heads spin. Dupin knew exactly what they meant.

He extracted his mobile from his hip pocket. It appeared to have survived everything so far. And it had reception.

‘Nolwenn?’

‘Monsieur le Commissaire?’

Dupin had completely forgotten that his secretary was away from the office that morning as she had made an appointment with Dr Garreg, the gruff and ancient doctor who served as her GP and also as Dupin’s. Only now did he remember.

‘Ah, of course. Presumably you don’t even know yet what’s happened?’

‘No. I was about to ring Inspector Kadeg. I’ve only just seen that he’s already tried me three times.’

‘Three bodies. On the Glénan islands. On Le Loc’h. Washed ashore. Not identified yet. Looks like a tragic accident so far.’

‘Yes, they’re always on Le Loc’h. Those islands have spelt shipwreck since forever.’ As always, Nolwenn remained completely unfazed. ‘As we say around here: “If you want to learn to pray, go to sea”.’

Nolwenn liked old proverbs, and imparting them to Monsieur le Commissaire was all part of the campaign of ‘Bretonisation’, as she called it, that she had been assiduously subjecting him to ever since his arrival from Paris.

Dupin wasn’t sure how to respond. ‘Yes, fair enough. But whatever lies behind it, this will certainly make big news. Savoir’s just got here. I’m just looking round the island.’

‘You’re already over there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you go across on the launch?’

‘Yes.’

His second ‘Yes’ had a more resigned ring to it than he had intended.

‘Anything I can do at the moment?’

‘No. We need the bodies identifying before anything else.’

Dupin really hadn’t had any particular job in mind for Nolwenn, he’d simply wanted to put her in the picture. Nolwenn had been his pillar of strength ever since his very first day in his new domain. She was thoroughly and unfailingly resourceful and practical, and nothing in the world — or beyond it, Dupin rather thought — was capable of ruffling her. In three weeks she was due to go away on holiday for the first time in two years: far, far away, to Portbou, at the Mediterranean end of the Pyrenees. Dupin had been fretting about it ever since he had first heard the news: she was proposing to be away for two whole weeks!

‘The *Préfet* intends to speak to you sometime today following the initial discussions at the meeting on Guernsey. We’d agreed a time for him to call this afternoon, but I rather fear that that’s completely out of the question now. I’ll tell his office to let him know.’

‘I — yes — that’s wonderful! Reception really is very bad out here. He’ll be able to work that out for himself: I’m more or less in the middle of the ocean.’

‘The *Préfet* will know all about the new phone mast on Penfret. The inauguration was a major event. Should have been a bigger one, though. But I’m sure you’ll be in the middle of your investigations. Three bodies: for Brittany that’s quite something — no matter what caused their death. The *Préfet* will certainly want it cleared up speedily.’

Dupin’s spirits rose for the first time that day.

‘Very good, yes. That’s just the ticket.’

Only now did it occur to Dupin to wonder why the inauguration of a telephone mast had been such a big deal that everyone knew about it.

‘So I’ll let them know that they shouldn’t count on getting a call from you for the time being.’

‘Excellent.’ Dupin hesitated for a moment. ‘How did it go at the doctor’s? Are you... um...’

‘Everything’s fine.’

‘Very glad to hear it.’ He felt a bit silly.

‘Thank you. One thing you absolutely must do is ring your mother. She’s already left three messages on the answering machine today.’

That was the last thing he needed. He kept forgetting. His mother. For the first time since his ‘banishment to the provinces’, as she persisted in calling it, she had decided to pay him a visit — starting this very Thursday. And for weeks she had been ringing him up — it was every single day now — to clear up some ‘important question’, which always turned out to relate to just one source of deep concern: given that Brittany was so very far from the metropolis, did it offer a sufficient range of civilised standards? Anna Dupin, scion of the upper bourgeoisie, was a typical snooty Parisian, tyrannical when necessary but otherwise charming, who only ever left Paris when she absolutely had to. Dupin had naturally booked her into Concarneau’s best hotel, and equally naturally reserved its most expensive room, the ‘Navy Suite’ — but apparently she still didn’t think she could take it for granted that it would have running water.

‘I’ll ring her.’

‘Good.’

‘Thank you, Nolwenn.’

Dupin hung up. He really did need to sort a few things out in readiness for his mother’s visit — especially his flat. Not that it was particularly untidy, but he didn’t want to offer even the tiniest target for her disapproval. The best thing would be if

they never even went near his flat: he would fix things so that the entire visit took place in other venues.

Dupin had walked around the tip of a small promontory, and here the beach with its gleaming white sand came to an abrupt end. A tangle of bushy, dark green vegetation — ferns, grasses, reeds — stretched right down to the rocky waterline. The stony mass of the island extended some thirty or forty metres below the surface of the sea at this point, and only at its foot was more sand to be found. Dupin set off along the narrow, stony footpath that led around the island, an ancient route forged by pirates and smugglers such as could be found everywhere along this coast. For hundreds of years the Glénan Islands had been the preserve of notorious pirates: ‘bad’ ones from England, and ‘good’ ones from Brittany who continued to be revered even today regardless of all moral considerations, since the only thing that mattered was that they were Breton and famous throughout the world. Nolwenn’s great heroine — after whom she had named her first daughter — was the ‘Tigress of Brittany’, Jeanne de Belleville, the first fully authenticated female pirate known to history. A breathtakingly beautiful woman from the aristocracy of Brittany — an independent country at the time! — Jeanne managed with daredevil skill and a ‘fleet’ of just three ships to sink countless numbers of heavily armed men-of-war belonging to Brittany’s mortal enemy, the king of France.

At the western end of the island Dupin could make out the ruins of the factory where industrial soda was once extracted from seaweed for use in the manufacture of glass, paints and detergents — a valuable commodity at the beginning of the twentieth century, incredible though that might seem today. All of a sudden the island’s extraordinary lake came into view. Lying there like an expanse of sheer smoothness it seemed a touch unreal, exhibiting the incredible colour for which it was so famous: a glowing, almost phosphorescent greenish-greyish blue, extraordinary in its sheer intensity. Whether he wanted to or not — and he tried very hard not to want to — Dupin couldn’t help thinking of the stories Goulch had recounted about the lake, about Groac’h, the evil witch. He could see at once how this lake could lend strange wings to a beholder’s imagination. A shiver ran down his spine. Images of Stygian underwater caverns and labyrinths loomed up unbidden before his mind’s eye.

Dupin had assumed it would be a good idea to walk around a bit and survey the territory. But when it came down to it there wasn’t really any point. What was he supposed to be looking out for? Whatever had happened had clearly not happened on Le Loc’h, so he wasn’t going to find anything useful on the island. In fact he didn’t have the faintest idea why he was still there. What they needed to do was discover the

identity of the three men, and find out what mishap had befallen them. Remaining on the island wouldn't help to achieve that objective.

It really hadn't been Dupin's day, this Monday. Although he hadn't been sleeping too badly recently — or at any rate not too badly for him — he hadn't slept at all well the previous night. He had no idea why, but he had tossed and turned the whole night through. He needed a coffee, that was for sure. And he needed it now.

He took his mobile out of his pocket.

'Riwal?'

'Monsieur le Commissaire?'

'Could you ask Goulch to get the *Bir* to take me over to Saint-Nicolas?'

'To Saint-Nicolas? Now?'

'Yes, right now.'

A longish pause ensued, and Riwal's unspoken question was almost audible in the silence: what on earth was Monsieur le Commissaire proposing to do on Saint-Nicolas? Riwal didn't say the question out loud: after several years of working with his maverick, sometimes stubborn boss, he well knew what he could and couldn't say.

'I'm assuming Saint-Nicolas is the nerve-centre for every bit of news about anything that happens on the islands — am I right? At the same time Goulch can take his officer off the island, and I might be able to have a few words with the Englishman.'

'I'll tell Goulch. You'll have to get back to the beach, though: there's nowhere else on the island where the boat could pick you up.'

'No problem. I'll be right there.'

'Good.'

'Riwal — the bar over there will be open by now, won't it?'

‘The bar?’

‘The café.’

‘No idea, boss.’

‘I’ll have to wait and see.’

Wooden lobster pots, their pale blue ropes bleached by the sea, lay strewn around in their dozens, some heaped into picturesque towers, others, just to the right of the main quay, piled up into veritable mountains. Dupin sat on one of the peeling, rickety wooden chairs spread out with their accompanying tables in front of the bar, and gazed at the pots with bemusement.

The *Quatre Vents* had clearly not been built as a restaurant, café or bar. Originally a boathouse constructed by the region’s very first marine rescue society based in Concarneau, it had been its chief station thanks to the incessant rescues it had been called upon to perform. It was over a hundred years old, and while the inside had been given a cheap and cheerful makeover, the outside was as shabby as ever. At its left-hand end stood a small, crooked, temporary-looking extension made of wood, painted white like the stone-built main structure, with space for a few extra tables, oversized windows, and a doorway connecting it to the premises’ main room.

Not much was on offer in the *Quatre Vents*: a small selection of drinks, mainly beer, wine and spirits; a *plat du jour* — either entrecôte steak or fish of the day; sandwiches filled with potted fish of various kinds; fish soup; assorted *fruits de mer* caught in the local waters: spider crabs, ordinary crabs, sundry shellfish — whelks, winkles, clams, abalone. Above all, of course: Glénan lobster. Above the main entrance was a length of wood with the word ‘Bar’ hand-written on it in white letters, and, below it, the name ‘Les Quatre Vents’, accompanied on both sides by stylised seagulls in full flight. In front of the ancient boathouse lay the rails that still ran far down into the sea and which once had carried the proud lifeboat down far enough into the water for it to float free and set off on its rescue mission.

Dupin’s mood had improved in a flash as soon as he was installed at the *Quatre Vents*. Everything here was simply marvellous. He realised immediately that he already loved this bar, which instantly added itself to the list of ‘Special Places’ that Dupin had been building up for as long as he could remember — places that made him feel truly happy. Everything was genuine at the *Quatre Vents*, nothing was

contrived or artfied to make it seem ‘idyllic’. And indeed it wasn’t in the least ‘idyllic’ — it was ravishingly beautiful. Equally importantly: the coffee was perfect. Dupin was already on his second cup. There was no table service: guests had to grab a wooden tray and collect their purchases from a long counter in the main bar, then go and sit wherever they fancied. Dupin had installed himself with his back to the wall of the extension and so could survey the entire panorama. To his left, some thirty metres away, stood the island’s largest building: the elongated former farmhouse that now served as the base of the legendary sailing school, *Les Glénans* (with an ‘s’ at the end, whereas the islands — contrary to all the rules of grammar — didn’t have an ‘s’). The school had been founded at the end of World War II by a few idealistic young members of the Resistance and over the ensuing decades had become the most highly respected sailing school in the world, soon spreading to five of the islands, and then developing branches in twelve different countries. The building was a dazzling white and so must have been painted very recently, for the combined effects of sun, salt, moisture and wind meant that even the most hard-wearing of special paints soon lost their initial gloss. In front of the sailing school was a small rectangular open space, and on the other side of this were two oyster beds, the stonebuilt parapets of which stuck out into the sea and formed a sort of harbour wall. Straddling part of the beds was a shed that served in summer as an oyster bar. It wasn’t smart or fashionable-looking — nothing here was; entirely free of show or affectation, it was quite simply delightful.

The front wall of the shed added a touch of incongruity to this otherwise entirely harmonious scene: it bore a vast, pseudo-naive mural in which typical Glénan landscape features, iconic symbols of the various islands, and bits of local legends had all been combined into a single surreal panorama. To the right was Groac’h’s throne, with Groac’h herself depicted as a pretty young mermaid queen; on a beach in the very middle of the picture stood an enormous penguin surveying the world with a jaunty gaze. Although penguins were Dupin’s favourite animal, he couldn’t see any earthly reason why the mural should include one — a jackass penguin, if he wasn’t much mistaken.

Alongside the larger of the two oyster beds stood a substantial concrete quay that extended a good fifty metres into the sea, and was much used during the summer months by the numerous boats that travelled to and fro between the islands and various places along the coast. The *Bir* had tied up there half an hour earlier. The young police officer had long since finished questioning the Englishman — an entirely fruitless task — and had already been waiting on the quay.

Not far from the oyster beds was one of the Glénan islands' typical Caribbean-looking beaches. The most striking feature of this beach was that at low tide — as now — it morphed into an immensely long sandbank, which had the effect of turning Bananec, normally Saint-Nicolas' smaller neighbour, into an appendage of the larger island. There it was right now, this most extraordinary of all the islands' beaches, which emerged brand new and pristine from the waves every twelve hours (and twenty five minutes!)

Only two other tables were occupied. A group of English people - yachtsmen to judge by their clothes - was sitting at the first, while the second group was French. Parisians by the look of it: Dupin had an eye for such things. Both groups were clearly somewhat animated — scarcely surprising, thought Dupin, as they were presumably discussing the washed-up corpses: it was the obvious topic of conversation.

The search of the bodies had turned up absolutely no clues to the individuals' identities: no documents, no mobile phones, nothing — just a few coins in the trouser pockets of two of them, and a sodden scrap of paper that had so far proved indecipherable. Kadeg had rung soon after Dupin's arrival on Saint-Nicolas and briskly rattled off his report.