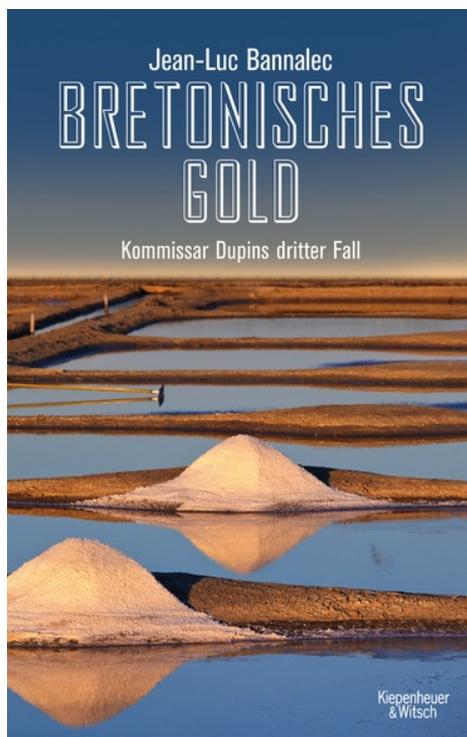


**Sample Translation (Pages 9-32)**

**BRETON GOLD**  
**by Jean-Luc Bannalec**  
novel

**Translated by John Reddick**

Jean-Luc Bannalec: Bretonisches Gold  
© 2014, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG



Publication: May 2014 (Flexcover)  
339 pages

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## DAY ONE

The curious aroma of violets that fleur de sel always gives off for a few days after it has been harvested was mixed in with the smell of clay, not to mention the scent and the taste of salt and iodine in the air that were so much stronger here in the ‘White Country’ than anywhere else along the coast — the ‘Gwenn Rann’, the spacious salt flats of the Guérande. At this time of year, the end of summer, the distinctive odour filled the entire expanse of the flats. According to the old paludiers, the local denizens who collected the salt, the smell could bring on hallucinations and delusions, it could drive a man mad.

It is a landscape at once bizarre and breathtaking. A landscape made up of the four elements that produced the alchemy of salt: sea, sun, earth and wind. Located on a peninsula formed by the raging Atlantic between the Loire and Vilaine rivers, it was originally a large, open bay, before turning first into a lagoon, then mudflats, then alluvial flatland, skilfully put to use by human hand. The proud little mediaeval town of Guérande — from which the whole area gained its name — marks the northern extremity of the salt flats. To the south they melt away into what remains of the lagoon, bounded on its further side by Le Croisic with its charming little harbour. From there you can behold the breathtaking spectacle in all its glory: the rhythmical tides of the mighty Atlantic carry its waters into the lagoon and on into the intricate capillaries of the salt flats — especially during the days of la grande marée, the spring tides that follow the full moon.

The ‘White Country’ is entirely flat, undisturbed by even the slightest eminence. For more than twelve hundred years it has been divided up into countless large, middle-sized and small salt pans, all of them mathematically precise rectangles, yet bordered by apparently quite random swirls of earth and water — a cunningly contrived, infinitely ramified network of water channels and salt pans: holding pans; pans for preliminary warming of the water; evaporation pans; pans ready for harvesting. A system with a single purpose: to trap seawater by means of sluice gates and send it on the slowest possible journey so that it evaporates in the wind and sun to the point where crystals begin to form. Salt is the very essence of the sea, ‘the child of the sun and the wind’, as folk called it, and they gave the pans poetic names: ‘vasières’, ‘cobiers’, ‘fares’, ‘adernes’, ‘oeillets’. One of the oeillets, the harvesting pans, has been in continuous use since the time of Charlemagne. For the paludiers the harvesting pans are the holiest of holies, and everything depends on their particular ‘character’, on the clays specific to each one and the minerals of which they are composed. The paludiers describe the pans in human terms: they are

‘lazy’, ‘generous’, ‘contented’, ‘feverish’, ‘sensitive’, ‘hard’, ‘awkward’. Here, in these pans open to all the elements, salt is nurtured and harvested: the white gold of Brittany.

Hair-raisingly narrow, unmade paths wind their way amongst the pans, bafflingly labyrinthine and accessible for the most part only on foot. Despite the unrelieved flatness of the landscape, it is never possible to see very far because of the earthen walls, varying in height and covered with undergrowth, that border the pans and the paths connecting them. Dotted here and there are scrubby bushes, tall, sun-bleached grasses bent over by the wind, gnarled trees, and a wild motley of cabanes, the sheds of wood, stone or corrugated iron used by the paludiers.

And now, in September, the huge mounds of salt collected over the course of the summer were everywhere to be seen, harsh and dazzling in their whiteness: artfully heaped up, cone-shaped like volcanoes, some of them as much as two or even three metres in height.

Commissaire Georges Dupin of the Concarneau police couldn’t help smiling. It was such an unlikely landscape, a vista of the imagination rather than reality. The sense of unreality was intensified by the plethora of colours in both sky and water — an extravagant display of drastically varied shades of violet, pink, orange and red provoked by the setting sun. After yet another boiling-hot late summer’s day the gathering dusk was accompanied by the welcome onset of a stiff breeze

Commissaire Dupin locked the car, a police vehicle with its livery of red, white and blue. The impressively old and challengingly tiny Peugeot 106 was the fall-back car at the police station when nothing else was available. Dupin’s own much-loved and equally ancient Citroën had been in for repair for ten days now. Suspension problems — again.

Dupin had parked by the roadside, with two wheels on the grass verge. He’d go the rest of the way on foot.

It was a narrow but none the less asphalted track that meandered chaotically through the salt flats. It hadn’t been easy to find — a side road off the route du Marais, one of only three thoroughfares that wind their way through the salt flats between Le Croisic and the town of Guérande.

Dupin had a good look around. There wasn’t a soul to be seen. He hadn’t encountered a single car on the route du Marais. The working day seemed to have finished in the salt flats.

He had nothing but a hand-written sketch to guide him to the place he was heading for. It showed a shed near one of the salt pans, more or less in the direction of the lagoon, some three hundred metres away. He’d find the salt pan in question and the shed that belonged to it, and see

if he could spot anything ‘suspicious’ — he had to admit that it was all very vague.

He would scout around once and once only, then make straight for Le Croisic. Dupin had the whole picture clearly in his mind: after a brief and no doubt fruitless inspection of the area he would be sitting a quarter of an hour later in Le Grand Large eating a Breton sole, cooked in salted butter to a golden brown colour. With a glass of well chilled Quincy in his hand he would gaze out over the waters of the turquoise lagoon with its light-coloured sand and watch the last light of day slowly fade away to the west. He’d been in Le Croisic once before, a year earlier, with his friend Henri, and had the best possible memories of the tiny town (and its golden-brown sole).

Even though the grounds for his trip to the salt pans were extremely vague and dubious, not to say positively ridiculous, Commissaire Dupin was in a decidedly good mood on this particular evening, as he had been desperate to get out into the open air for a change. He had spent almost every day of the last five weeks stuck in his hot, stuffy office. Five weeks! Pen-pushing had been his sole occupation, formal stuff, the manifold irritations routinely inflicted on him by the bureaucratic process; the sort of work that regularly fills the lives of real-life commissaires, as opposed to those in books and films. There’d been the new cars for his two inspectors, which had also involved new ‘Regulations governing the utilisation of vehicles provided for the execution of official police duties’ — twenty-eight pages, 9-point font, almost no spacing between the lines, all of it ‘extremely important’, according to the Prefecture, and including ‘a considerable number of major new elements’. There’d been a salary increase for his thoroughly excellent secretary, Nolwenn, which was certainly something to shout about, given that he’d been battling for it for no less than two years and nine months. Then there’d been the time-consuming business of filing away a couple of old and trifling unresolved cases. That had been a record for him for the entire period since he had been shunted from Paris to the ends of the earth: five solid weeks of office work throughout these magical Indian summer days, full of a light even more enchanting than that of all the other months. A stable and spectacular Azores high had prevailed for week after week, like something out of a picture book, with not a single drop of rain. ‘La Bretagne fait la cure au soleil’, it said in the papers: Want a health cure? — come to sunny Brittany! For five weeks Dupin’s bad temper had worsened more or less day by day. It had been unbearable — for everybody.

Although the salt flats were very definitely not on Dupin’s patch, Lilou Breval’s suggestion that he go and check them out had offered him an extremely welcome pretext for a proper outing.

When it came down to it, any excuse would have been enough for Dupin. More to the point, though: he'd owed Lilou Breval a favour since forever. A journalist at Ouest France, she steered clear of the police as a rule, not least because the mostly unorthodox methods she used in her investigations often brought her into conflict with normal police practice and the requirements of the law — but one way or another she had come to trust Dupin. He respected her, and he also liked her.

Lilou Breval had provided him with 'certain information' on a variety of occasions. In the case of the murdered Pont Aven hotelier two years earlier — which had ultimately gripped the entire nation — she had ended up giving Dupin some useful help. She was not much involved in routine, everyday fare, she was more of an investigative journalist specialising in major stories and enquiries — mostly very Breton ones. Two years earlier she had played a considerable role in uncovering a massive cigarette-smuggling scam: 1.3 million cigarettes had been concealed in a concrete pillar allegedly intended for a drilling platform off the coast.

Lilou Breval had rung Dupin the previous evening and asked him to do her a favour — something she had never done before. She wanted him to take a look at a particular salt pan and the shed alongside it. He was to watch out for 'suspicious barrels', she had told him, 'blue plastic barrels'. She couldn't yet tell him what it was about, she said, but she was 'pretty sure' that it was 'something very nasty'; as soon as he'd checked everything out she'd call by at police headquarters and fill him in on what she knew. Dupin hadn't understood a word of what she was on about, and his follow-up questions had brought no further enlightenment, but at some point he'd mumbled that Yes, okay, he'd look into it, and earlier that morning she had faxed him a sketch map showing him how to get there. Needless to say he was perfectly aware that he was driving a coach and horses through the rule book, and he had even felt a bit uncomfortable about this on the drive out, which wasn't like him at all. Even just coming out here in the first place was against regulations; instead, he should have asked the local force to look into the matter — not least because Loire-Atlantique, the département to which the salt pans belonged, was administratively speaking no longer part of Brittany — let alone part of his official 'patch' — having been stolen from the Bretons in the 1960s in an act of legalised vandalism under the guise of a much-detested programme of 'administrative reform'. In terms of everyday life and culture, as also in the eyes of French people generally and indeed of the entire world, Loire-Atlantique remained of course just as thoroughly Breton as it had always been.

Dupin's moments of doubt were thus very brief. The fact was that he owed Lilou Breval, and he took such obligations extremely seriously. A good policeman needs people who are happy to do him a favour from time to time.

Commissaire Dupin stood next to his car, looming well above it with his broad shoulders and altogether sturdy physique. Just to be sure, he took another look at the sketch map, then crossed the road and set off along a grass-covered path. He had barely walked any distance before salt pans began appearing to left and right, and the path suddenly sloped steeply down into them to run along their edge. A drop of a metre, a metre and a half, thought Dupin. The salt pans exhibited a whole variety of different colours — some light beige, light-greyish, greyish blue, others reddish or earthy brown — and all of them were criss-crossed with dams and clay walkways. Birds were strutting about around their edges hunting silently for food, or so it seemed to Dupin; he didn't know what kind they were — ornithology was not one of his strong points.

It really was a weird landscape. The White Country seemed to belong to human beings only during the daytime, and to be reclaimed in its entirety by nature come evening and night-time. All was quiet, not a sound could be heard except for a strange chirruping noise somewhere in the background — whether caused by birds or cicadas, Dupin couldn't tell. It was almost a touch ghostly. Very occasionally there was the shriek of a bad-tempered seagull, a witness to the proximity of the sea.

Perhaps it had been a stupid idea coming out here, all things considered. Even if he were to spot anything noteworthy — which wasn't going to happen — he would still have to inform the local force at once. Dupin stopped in his tracks. Perhaps he should just drive straight to Le Croisic and forget the whole peculiar business? But — he'd made Lilou Breval a promise.

Dupin's tortured ruminations were interrupted by the shrill sound of his mobile, which seemed even louder than normal in the meditative silence that surrounded him. He fished the phone out of his pocket with considerable reluctance — but his expression brightened as soon as he saw that it was Nolwenn who was calling him.

'What's up?'

'Hel... .... ssaire. Is ... you?' There was a short pause, then: '... called ... And have ... road ... kanga... ...?'

The signal was appalling.

'I can't hear you, Nolwenn. I'm already in the salt pans, I ...'

'You ... between the two ... I really ... know whether ... kanga...'

Dupin could have sworn that he'd heard the word 'kangaroo' twice over. Perhaps he was mistaken. He spoke much more loudly this time: 'I — really — can't — hear — a — word. I'll — call — you — later.'

'... just ... with ... back.' The signal appeared to have gone completely.

'Hello?'

No response.

Dupin hadn't the faintest idea why Nolwenn might be going on about Australian marsupials. It seemed grotesque. But he didn't go on bothering his head about it. Here in Brittany, at the very end of the earth, Nolwenn was without any doubt the most important person in his world. Even though he had the feeling that he himself had become just a little bit 'bretonised' in the course of time, he was none the less completely lost without Nolwenn. 'Bretonisation' was her avowed aim with Dupin, and its motto was very simple: 'Brittany: either love it, or leave it!'

He valued Nolwenn's talents in the the practical and social spheres, not to mention her simply boundless local knowledge. He also enjoyed her passion for oddities and 'quirky stories'. The kangaroo no doubt belonged in that category.

Dupin had just begun to re-focus his attention on the job in hand when his phone rang again. He answered automatically.

'Can you hear me this time, Nolwenn?'

For a while he heard nothing but more loud crackling, then all of a sudden a few more or less comprehensible words:

'I'm looking forward ... tomorrow, Georges, ... really am.'

Claire. It was Claire. The connection immediately started breaking up again:

'... restau ... efinally ... evening.'

Yes, yes, I'll be there tomorrow evening, of course I will!

There was silence for a moment or two, then quite suddenly an ear-splitting roaring noise. It was Claire's birthday tomorrow. He had booked a table at La Palette in the sixième, her favourite restaurant. The very thought of it: a large helping of boeuf bourguignon with baby mushrooms and plenty of bacon, slow-cooked for hours in fine red wine, the meat so tender that you could eat it with a spoon. It was supposed to be a surprise, though he reckoned that Claire had long since guessed: he'd dropped far too many hints, as usual. He was going to catch the 1.15 train, that way he'd be in Paris by six.

‘... impression ... thing ... come up? Does tha... won’t make ..., ... the other times?’

‘No, no, not at all! Of course I’ll make it! I’ll be there at six. I’ve already got my ticket.’

‘... can’t ... very well.’

‘I can’t hear you either. I just wanted to say, I’m really excited. About tomorrow evening, I mean.’

‘... just ... eat...’

‘Everything’s arranged. No need to worry.’

‘... fish ... later.’

That made no sense at all.

‘Claire — I — will — call — you — later.’

‘... perhaps ... later ... after work ... better ...’

‘Okay.’

He hung up.

After their tryst in Paris in late August the previous year, which had gone particularly well, they had started phoning each other every day and meeting up on a regular basis. It had mostly been impromptu — one or other had simply hopped on a TGV. So: yes, they were back together again, even if they had never explicitly said so and it wasn’t in any way official — though Dupin had made the disastrous mistake in an unguarded moment of mentioning it in a vague sort of way to his mother, whose transports of delight at the thought of getting a daughter-in-law at long last were not the least bit vague.

Claire had just been in the States doing a further-training course in heart surgery at the famous Mayo Clinic, so they hadn’t seen each other for the last seven weeks, though they had often talked on the phone. That was doubtless another reason why Dupin had been in such a bad mood recently. Claire had only arrived back a couple of days earlier, and this in turn was largely responsible for Dupin now being in such a decidedly good mood. All the same, he was feeling a bit nervous, right across the board. He didn’t want to mess things up with Claire all over again, like last time. He had even bought his train ticket a full three weeks in advance, just to make quite sure that nothing could get in the way.

He would call Claire back once he was in Le Croisic and they could have a nice peaceful chat about their plans for tomorrow. He’d ring as soon as he’d had his sole.

In the meantime he would hurry things up a bit.

Commissaire Dupin was suddenly pretty certain that he had caught sight of someone near to a wooden shed. Only for the briefest of moments, a fraction of a second. More a shadow than anything else, it had immediately disappeared again.

Dupin slowed his pace. He took in his surroundings. The shed was some twenty metres away. The path skirted past it and then appeared to plunge down into a salt pan.

He stopped, and ran his hands through his hair with great vehemence. He had a gut feeling that something was wrong. He didn't like the situation one bit.

Once again, he scanned the area attentively. Logically speaking there was nothing the least bit suspicious. What if it had just been a cat? Or some other kind of animal? Perhaps he had simply imagined it? That would certainly fit with the general atmosphere of the place. Perhaps the intoxicating scent, even more intense down here in the heart of the salt pans, was beginning to work its hallucinogenic magic.

Suddenly, completely out of the blue, there was a peculiar hissing sound, metallic and high-pitched, followed by a dull thud somewhere very close. A flock of birds scattered noisily.

Dupin recognised the sound at once. With a speed and precision that one would not have expected in such a heavily built man he threw himself leftwards onto the ground, where the narrow band of grass fell steeply away towards a water-storage basin. Rolling deftly down the slope he turned his body in such a way that he entered the basin legs first and was thus able to get a firm footing. The water was about fifty centimetres deep. Dupin had already drawn his gun — a Sig Sauer 9mm — and was instinctively pointing it in the direction of the shed. His refuge didn't offer ideal protection by any means, but it was better than nothing. The bullet had hit to his right, quite close; whether it had come from the shed or from one of the nearby smaller huts he couldn't tell. He hadn't seen the muzzle-flash. He hadn't seen anything. Dupin's mind was racing. In situations like this there was no such thing as logical thought, but instead a maelstrom of countless different things: flashes of acute observation of events round about, automatic reflexes, instinctive reactions, scraps of considered thought — all came together in a hectic swirl to produce the phenomenon haphazardly termed 'intuition'.

Dupin needed to find out where his attacker was located — and hope that he was on his own. There were three huts within view, all close to one another. The nearest was ten metres away. Whoever had fired the shot couldn't be all that close, or he wouldn't have missed.

Another high-pitched whistle, followed by another dull thud, a short distance in front of him. Then another. Once again, startled birds flew up into the air squawking and screaming. Dupin

slid further down into the basin until he found himself on his knees with water up to his stomach. A fourth shot rang out.

This time the bullet could only have missed him by a matter of centimetres. He had felt the draught of it by his left shoulder. He had the sense that all the shots were now coming from the same direction. Then suddenly, all was silence. Perhaps his attacker was making for a more advantageous position.

It was clear to Dupin that holing up in the salt pan was not going to solve his problem. He needed to take positive action. He reviewed his options with feverish haste. With luck, he could hope to use the element of surprise — but once, and once only.

Moving with lightning speed he leapt out of the basin and, aiming in the general direction of where he believed his attacker to be, he fired a volley of shots just as fast as his weapon allowed. At the same time he rushed towards the nearest hut. By the time he reached it he had emptied the entire magazine: fifteen bullets.

Dupin paused to take a few deep breaths. There was nothing but deathly silence. He was strangely calm, as he always was when he found himself in a tight corner. Even so, his forehead was bathed in cold sweat. He didn't have another magazine on him; in the glove compartment of his car, yes — but not here. He did have his mobile, but that was no use to him for the time being, even though of course he needed to try and call in as quickly as possible.

The hut that he was now crouching behind was made of pretty solid-looking corrugated iron — just how solid, he couldn't tell. What's more, he had no idea where the door was, or whether it was open. But it was probably his only chance. His current location was against one of the long sides of the building. The likeliest thing was that the door faced the path, in which case it would be off to his left. He knew he couldn't waste time wondering about it. And he knew that with this manoeuvre, too, he would have one try, and one try only.

Keeping as close to the corrugated iron wall as possible he moved quickly but carefully to the corner, then paused for a moment. A second later he rushed round the corner in a sudden burst, saw that there was indeed a door, tore it open, threw himself inside, and slammed it shut behind him.

The whole thing had taken just two or three seconds. Either Dupin's attacker had not seen him, or he had been taken by surprise. Whatever the reason, he hadn't taken a shot at him — that was the main thing.

It was pitch dark in the hut. Only through gaps around the door were there faint glimmers of the fading light outside.

Dupin kept a firm grip on the door handle. As he had expected, the door couldn't be locked or bolted from the inside. He took out his mobile: calling for back-up was the number one priority now. Nolwenn's number was the second on the redial list. The tiny screen display illuminated an astonishingly large area of the hut's interior. Dupin took a quick look around: the nearer half of the space was empty, towards the back there were half a dozen large sacks and various poles of some sort. Then he looked at the screen again: no reception.

He couldn't believe his eyes: not a single bar. 'No reception': the message on the screen was unambiguous. He was familiar with this: here at the 'End of the World' you often really were cut off from the ordinary world; at times you could rely on getting reception only if you were in one of the bigger towns. His radio was in his car, together with his second magazine of bullets. Contrary to numerous regulations, he almost never carried it with him. He just might have been able to raise a local colleague on some frequency or another, and on the emergency frequency for sure. But that was neither here nor there, as he didn't have the radio with him anyway. And the chances of anyone happening to come by at this out of the way place and at this time of day were remote in the extreme.

'Bloody mess!'

He had blurted the words out much too loudly: barely a moment later there was a deafening metallic crash. Dupin almost dropped his phone. A shot. Then another. Then yet another. Each time the same hellish noise. Dupin held his breath. He had no idea whether the corrugated iron would keep the bullets out — especially if whoever was firing them was astute enough to keep firing at the same spot. He couldn't see any holes yet. Another bullet smashed into the cladding, making even more noise than the others: his attacker seemed to be approaching the hut. Two more bullets in rapid succession. Kneeling down, Dupin placed his elbow on his knee and braced his clenched fist under the lever handle of the door. Even so, it would be difficult to stop anyone opening the door, as he had far less leverage. He just had to hope that his attacker wouldn't even try it for fear of getting involved in an exchange of fire. All of a sudden there was a dull but almighty thud on the door. It wasn't a bullet; it was as if something very heavy had smashed against the door, and this was followed by a kind of loud scraping sound. The door handle rattled for a moment. There was someone right there on the other side of the door, just centimetres away from him. Dupin thought he heard a voice, a few muffled words, but he wasn't sure. Then there

was silence.

Nothing happened over the course of the next few minutes. Dupin was on edge. He had no idea what his attacker was going to do next, and absolutely no chance of finding out. There was nothing he could do — except hope that his attacker wouldn't try to burst into the hut. One thing he was sure to work out was that Dupin had no reception on his mobile, and therefore couldn't summon help.

In all likelihood his opponent would have a good look around and find his car. Or perhaps he had an accomplice keeping watch somewhere along the road who had immediately reported the car's arrival. The number of people involved would depend on the scale of whatever was going on here.

Dupin suddenly heard the sound of a car engine — not right next to the hut, but not all that far away either. He hadn't seen a car anywhere on his way out here. The engine carried on running for a while without anything else happening. The car then started moving. The sound was muffled, but Dupin could hear it clearly enough. What was going on? Was his attacker clearing off? He had finished doing something or other. After just a few metres the car braked abruptly. Dupin waited for the sound of the doors being opened, but there was nothing.

All of a sudden his mobile rang. He raised it to his ear in a flash.

'Hello?' he exclaimed in a muted voice.

He could hear nothing but crackle and roaring noises.

'This is an emergency. I'm in the Guérande salt pans. In a corrugated iron hut. I'm being shot at. My car's in a side road off the route du Marais. I walked west from there along the gravel path. — Hello?'

Dupin hoped that whoever was at the other end would catch at least some of his words and give the alarm. But it was highly unlikely.

'Hello? This is an emergency!' he was more or less shouting now, much against his better judgement. 'I'm being shot, I'm...'

'... just ringing to ... table ... 8 o'clock ...'

The caller's voice was too distorted for Dupin to make out who it was — but the words 'table' and '8 o'clock' had been remarkably distinct. He couldn't believe his ears. It had to be the restaurant ringing about his reservation the following evening. Stéphane, perhaps, the maître d': he knew that it was always wise to remind Dupin of the precise time of his reservation.

‘This is a police emergency! Please inform police headquarters in Concarneau. — Hello, Stéphane?’

The caller had plainly not caught a single word. But Dupin needed to make use of what little reception he had before it broke up again. And sure enough, one bar was now showing on his screen. He instantly speed-dialed Nolwenn’s mobile. Her number rang, Dupin heard it as clear as a bell — but only once. Then the connection went dead. He tried again. No luck. He stared aghast at the display: the one little bar had disappeared.

A moment later Dupin heard the car start to move. Its engine had been running the whole time, and now it suddenly drove off at speed.

Dupin put his mobile back on the floor. He needed to keep an eye on the display — but there was no change to be seen.

The car was now out of earshot. It was gone from the salt pans. Had there been just one attacker, or two, or even more? And if there had been more than one, had one of them stayed behind, waiting for Dupin to come out of the hut? Had they set him a trap?

It was too risky to try to leave the hut straightaway. He would have to wait a while longer. He’d have to stick it out in this stuffy hut without being able to do anything at all. His ordeal was by no means over.

It was now shortly after 10pm. Absolutely nothing had happened during the last interminable half hour. Sweating ever more profusely Dupin had remained in his more or less impossible crouching position, switching every three minutes between his left and right arm to block the door handle. Before very long everything had started hurting, then he had gradually lost all feeling in his hands, his arm, his legs, and in the end he had lost sensation in his entire body, except for occasional stabbing pains in his left shoulder. He estimated the temperature within the hut at more than 30 degrees, and the oxygen seemed to have been completely used up.

He had to get out of the hut. His mobile had continued to show zero reception. It was risky, but he had no alternative. And he had a plan.

Very warily, he tried to open the door.

In vain. The handle wouldn’t budge. His attacker had jammed it on the other side. That explained the curious noises he had heard earlier on: something had been wedged under the door lever. Dupin rattled the handle as hard as he could. It didn’t yield in the slightest.

He was stuck inside the hut. And his attacker was probably miles away by now.

Dupin slumped down in a heap. He shuffled his body to the right a little and stretched out on the floor of the hut. He was in a miserable situation, but — as he now began to realise — it was a relief that there was no longer any immediate threat.

He had been lying there for perhaps a minute, flexing his arms and legs to try to get some feeling back into them and thinking about what he should do next, when he heard a sudden noise, as clear as anything. It wasn't an animal, he was sure of that.

There was someone outside. As quick as a flash Dupin heaved himself back into his original position to safeguard the door. He could hear a low-level murmur of voices. He pressed his ear against the corrugated iron, straining every nerve to try to hear what was going on outside.

For a minute or two silence reigned. Then all of a sudden the sound of a megaphone blasted through the night air, making Dupin almost jump out of his skin.

'This is the police. The area is surrounded. We order you to surrender at once. We won't hesitate to use our weapons.'

Dupin leapt to his feet, almost falling over in the process. 'I'm here. In this hut.'

He screamed the words out, banging on the door at the same time.

'Commissaire Georges Dupin, Concarneau police. I'm in this hut. There's no one else in here. The danger's over.'

Dupin was about to shout out again, but changed his mind: what if it was a trap? Who could possibly have contacted the police? The megaphone proved nothing. Why had no one responded to his shouts? But then on the other hand if it really was the police, they would need to check out the situation first. They would have to be certain that there was no longer any danger. Suddenly the door handle jerked violently.

'We've unblocked the door. Come out with your hands above your head and your fingers outstretched: I want to see the palms of your hands. And do it nice and slow.'

The disembodied voice had come from quite some distance away even while the door was being dealt with, so there had to be at least two people outside.

Dupin thought quickly and then shouted out:

'Identify yourselves. I need to be sure that you're the police.'

Dupin got an instant response:

'No way. You just come out of there right now.'

He couldn't have had a much more convincing reply.

‘Okay, I’m coming out.’

‘Like I said: hands above your head. And make it really, really slow.’

‘I’m Commissaire Georges Dupin, Concarneau police.’

‘Right, let’s have you out here.’

The speaker’s tone was icy. Dupin opened the door. A harsh, sharply defined beam of light burst into the hut. One of those new high-power LED lamps, that was for sure. He stood still for a moment, just to be sure that he was completely steady on his feet, then without further ado he stepped out of the hut, shielding his eyes with his right hand and holding his mobile with his left.

‘I need a telephone that works. I have to make a call right here and now.’

He needed to speak to Lilou Breval. Immediately.

‘I said hands above your head. I...’ —

the voice broke off, and Dupin heard someone approaching from his right.

‘You’ve no right to be here! What the hell are you up to?’

It was a woman’s voice, and a pretty harsh one. Aggressive in tone, but at the same time completely controlled and not unduly loud.

‘What’s been going on here?’

Someone changed the setting on the torch from ‘spot’ to ‘flood’, and Dupin could uncover his eyes at last.

Standing right in front of him was a good-looking woman, about one metre seventy five in height, with dark, wavy, shoulder-length hair, wearing a light grey trouser suit, a dark-coloured blouse, and elegant black ankle boots with fairly high heels. In her right hand she was clutching a half-drawn Sig Sauer.

‘Commissaire Sylvaine Rose, Guérande police.’

There was a short pause, then the woman continued, carefully emphasising every syllable:

‘In the département of Loire-Atlantique.’

‘I need to make an urgent call. Do you have a satellite phone with you?’

‘Unlike the Concarneau police we have all the appropriate equipment with us when we’re out on a job. What the hell do you think you’re doing out here? This thoroughly unprofessional operation of yours — what’s it all about?’

Dupin was about to let rip, but pulled himself together at the very last moment.

‘I... Who told you...’, he broke off for a moment. ‘Who told you I was here?’

‘You owe your rescue to a waiter in Paris. He’d rung you about your reservation for tomorrow

night. He couldn't make out what you were saying, but thought he heard the words 'shot at', so he rang the police in the sixième just in case, and they contacted us — just in case. They knew exactly who you were: your exit from Paris must have been pretty dramatic. So we came out to take a look — just in case.' Her tone of voice changed abruptly at this point. 'What are you doing here in the salt pans? How did you end up in this hut? What's going on? I want the whole story, every single detail. You're not ringing anyone until I've got it. In fact you're not doing anything at all.'

Dupin would have felt distinctly impressed were it not for the fact that a towering rage had built up in him over the preceding hour, a rage that had blanked out all other feelings, including his sense of impotence, and even the physical pain in his arms, legs and shoulder. He was enraged at his tormentors, at the whole situation — but above all at himself. He knew that he had been a complete idiot. He wanted to know who had shot at him. He wanted to know what the hell was going on! He wanted answers to exactly the same questions as his fellow commissaire from Guérande did. But he couldn't provide any answers himself beyond giving an account of what had happened. He needed to find out as quickly as possible what Lilou Breval knew — and had failed to tell him the day before.

'Let me have your satellite phone!' he said between clenched teeth.

'You get absolutely nothing until you've given me the full story.'

The words were spoken with a quiet intensity that no one could have bettered.

Dupin began to protest: 'I...' — but immediately broke off. He understood his colleague's standpoint: he would have acted in exactly the same way. But there was no time for this sort of stuff.

'So what are you going to do? Keep me prisoner here?'

'I can't, unfortunately. But I'm taking you straight to the hospital in Guérande, and I won't budge from your side until I know every detail of what's happened. I object to shoot-outs on my patch. We've found a large number of shell cases: it must have been quite a battle. The crime scene people will check it all out. I trust you're not going to take it into your head to hold up my investigations? Internal Affairs are going to really love you as it is.'

A dozen police officers could now be seen, all armed with heavy torches. Darkness had long since fallen. Two police vehicles, one close up behind the other, were approaching along the track and had almost reached the wooden shed. Their headlights cast a harsh light on the scene.

Dupin reviewed his options. Perhaps he should cooperate. This wasn't his territory. He couldn't issue any orders. He couldn't achieve anything on his own here, for the time being at least he was completely dependent on his fellow commissaire. Unpalatable though it was, he had no alternative.

'It was all about suspicious barrels, here in the salt pans. I was following a tip from a journalist. Lilou Breval of Ouest France. When I arrived, someone started firing. I didn't spot anyone, I don't know how many there were — one, or more than one. I managed to take refuge in this hut. The attacker or attackers probably left at around 21.35.'

'What kind of barrels?'

'I don't know. Blue plastic barrels. That's why I need to talk to the journalist, she's the only person who can...'

'You don't know?! You blundered into this situation in such a grossly irresponsible way simply because someone asked you to check out a couple of barrels? Without you having the faintest idea what might be involved? In another département where you have absolutely no right to be?!'

'I need to ring Breval.'

'You need to go to hospital.'

'Why are you going on about hospitals?' Dupin's rage was resurfacing.

Commissaire Rose looked at him for a moment, indecision written all over her face, then turned aside and called out to a colleague who was checking out the corrugated iron hut: 'Chadron, about the search: we're looking for one person, possibly more. Identity unknown. Nothing known about their vehicle either. The only thing we know is that a vehicle drove out of the salt pans at around 21.35, direction and destination unknown. — It's pointless really, but send out an alert all the same.'

The officer pulled out her radio. The commissaire turned back to Dupin. Her annoyance was plain to see.

'Let's get going. Unlike some people, I don't like breaking the rules. You've been winged, and I'm going to make sure you see a doctor. It's called "duty of care".'

'Winged?'

'Your left shoulder's bleeding.'

Dupin put his hand up to his shoulder and turned his head to look. His polo shirt was wet with sweat and seawater. It was difficult to see in the glare of the headlights, but closer inspection

showed that the colour was darker on the left than on the right. And occasionally — only very occasionally, given how pumped up he had been with adrenalin — he had noticed a sharp pain there, without giving it any further thought beyond ascribing it to his cramped position. He could see that his polo shirt was in tatters between the upper arm and shoulder. He reached up and touched the area with his fingers. He felt a sudden stab of pain.

‘How ludicrous!’ The words rose from the deepest recesses of his being.

Commissaire Rose smiled at him for a moment, though Dupin had no idea what her smile was meant to convey. She spoke very quietly and calmly, looking him straight in the eye.

‘You’re on my patch here, Commissaire Dupin. And here you’re either someone who makes my life easier, or someone who makes it more difficult. And I can assure you that you won’t want to be the sort of person who makes it more difficult.’

‘Let’s go’, she continued, reverting to her normal tone of voice.

Dupin was inclined to protest.

Commissaire Rose looked up at the sky, murmured ‘Should work ok’, then turned to the same colleague as before:

‘I need a satellite phone. You’re taking over while I’m away. I’m going to the hospital with Commissaire Dupin. Get in touch if anything comes up. Anything at all. I want to know everything. Absolutely everything.’

Dupin rubbed his right temple: Commissaire Rose had sounded disconcertingly like him in the way she issued her instructions.

She walked towards the further of the two vehicles.

‘We’re leaving.’

She had shoved her left hand into her jacket pocket, with nothing showing outside except her thumb.

Inspector Chadrin came over with a phone and handed it to Dupin. With its bulky, heavily encased aerial it resembled an ancient mobile.

‘You can talk to your journalist friend on the way,’ Rose instructed him, ‘then you can tell me everything all over again, in precise detail.’

Dupin climbed into the car beside her. The salt pans beneath the clear blue-black sky, the mounds of salt glistening in the police cars’ headlights, the dancing cones of light from the officers’ torches: the picture was surreal.

Much had happened since he arrived in this place. And he had missed out on that Breton sole.