

Sample Translation (Pages 9-37)

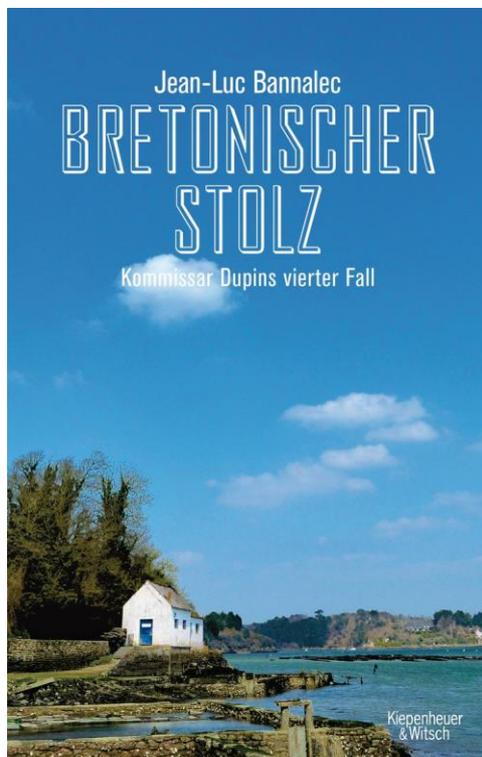
BRETON SECRETS. COMMISSAIRE DUPIN'S SEVENTH CASE

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Jean-Luc Bannalec: Bretonische Geheimnisse

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DAY 1

'It's the *Val sans retour!* We're there, boss. – The Valley of No Return!'

Inspector Riwal's eyes gleamed. He was beaming all over his face.

Commissaire Georges Dupin and his small team from Police Headquarters in Concarneau had done well in the traffic and taken only just over an hour to get there. Dupin had done the driving, blithely ignoring all the speed limits, as was his habit. His Citroën, all sharp angles and undeniably elderly, was nonetheless still extremely lively, and a warning light had twice flashed an amiable admonition. Riwal and Kadeg, his two Inspectors, sat on the bench seat in the back, while Nolwenn, his indispensable PA, sat next to him in the front passenger seat.

Faced with having to make a trip to the *Forêt de Brocéliande* on police business that he couldn't get out of, Dupin had initially been unenthusiastic about Nolwenn's 'marvellous' idea of turning it into an outing for the whole team. But Nolwenn had insisted. Even Kadeg, who usually found fault with anything and everything, declared it to be an 'excellent' plan. Their last outing, Nolwenn had observed with some asperity, had taken place 'more than two years ago'. They had gone to the extreme north-west coast that time, and Dupin had to admit in all honesty that it had been very agreeable. His dissatisfaction related more to the police business involved in this trip, business that he had wished upon himself in the early summer by striking a deal with Jean Odinot, an old police pal from his Paris days. Odinot had provided Dupin with some important information regarding a 'grey area' of police activity, and in exchange Dupin had promised to check out something relating to a case that the Paris police had not so far managed to clear up. Dupin had no intention of wriggling out of the agreement. Fulfilling his part of the deal was a matter of honour for him, and for Jean Odinot he'd have taken on quite a lot anyway, deal or no deal. The problem wasn't Odinot – it was the Paris police. After his 'resignation' back then, straight on the heels of his 'suspension' – based as it was on gravely defamatory and unfortunately highly public remarks by the mayor - Dupin had sworn that he would never again have anything to do with the Paris police. His lack of enthusiasm for his present mission had not been improved by Odinot's remark in a phone call the previous day that what he was supposed to be following up was something 'completely crazy'.

'*Brocéliande!*' Nolwenn had pulled a small book from the bag she had brought containing enough food to keep them all amply supplied in the wild for several days at a stretch. '*Brocéliande!* What fabulous echoes resonate in this single word! In mediaeval Europe it was only ever uttered with the deepest reverence. The last remaining fairy realm! Some of the most wondrous imaginings ever to stir the human heart are set right here.'

It was Dupin's first visit to the *Forêt de Brocéliande* – otherwise known rather more prosaically as the *Forêt de Paimpont*. The biggest forest in Brittany, it was also the most famous – not only within Brittany, but also of course in the whole of France and the whole of Europe. It was indisputably the very heart of the Brittany of poetic imagination. The most mythic of all mythic places. The legend of legends – quite something, given the vast quantity of legends in Brittany. Dupin had readied himself for the likelihood that Riwal and Nolwenn would adopt the role of travel guide even more zealously

than usual and offer running commentaries on anything and everything – and he had steeled himself to stay absolutely calm.

‘The best thing would be to park by the *Église du Graal* – it’s an ideal starting point.’ Nolwenn pointed to her left.

Everything here suggested the spectacular. They had seen signs along the road to The Church of the Holy Grail, Sir Lancelot’s Lake, Merlin’s Stair, Tomb of the Giants...

‘7,700 hectares of forest!’ Riwal had unbuckled his belt and was leaning right forward in his seat. ‘Forest and heathland, pools and lakes aplenty. The proud remnant of the mighty forest that in the days of the Gauls covered the whole of Brittany. It’s in the shape of a sleeping dragon – you can see it plainly from the air! The banal interpretation of the name has it that “Broce” translates as “forest” and “liande” as “heathland” – but for the true meaning you have to go back to its Celtic origins: “Fortress of the Other World”.’

Riwal paused for a moment, before launching forth again even more emphatically. ‘Countless Celtic and Breton legends are located here, fantastical tales that have arisen over several millennia. But the forest is most famous for King Arthur and his Round Table. And as of course you know’ – a rhetorical trick, this, for concentrating everyone’s attention – ‘King Arthur is immensely important to us Bretons! He is the very embodiment of one thing above all else: the spirit of resistance, which is one of our proudest virtues! Indeed...’ - Riwal’s impassioned tone grew even more intense – ‘... it is the very essence of our being. That spirit of resistance that we display in fighting for the noblest ideals, the principles at the very heart of King Arthur’s dominion – equality, fraternity, goodness. It is we Bretons who have always believed unwaveringly in King Arthur’s return, and who have remained ever steadfast in our loyalty!’

‘Hmm’, murmured Kadeg, who was gazing out of the window with a look of indifference on his face, ‘it isn’t even known whether Arthur ever actually existed.’

Riwal was not going to be let himself be put off, and retorted in a typically Riwal-ish manner: ‘But the legend as such and the enormous impact it’s had are unquestionably real! It has such a powerful, mighty aura! What’s more, scholars have turned up more and more evidence pointing to there being an actual historical figure behind the fantastical stories.’

‘And let’s remember’, said Nolwenn, joining in the conversation, ‘that a whole bunch of Arthurian tales are reckoned to have taken place right here in this forest.’

Tréhorenteuc was the name of the tiny hamlet in the so-called *Val sans retour*, on the western edge of the forest. On the left-hand side of the short main street stood a few houses, to the right lay a freshly mown field. Dupin could already see the church, and the graveyard that lay at an angle behind it. There was no doubt about it: this was an enchanting little place with loads of character. The final quarter of an hour of their journey, once they had left the main road, had taken them through the kind of countryside that Dupin really liked: gently rolling hills, greenness in every conceivable shade, harmonious fields edged with ancient stone walls, meadows, unspoilt patches of woodland, winding lanes, pretty villages – the very particular blend of culture and nature that made

up 'L'Argoat', the inland part of Brittany.

Riwal poked his head between the front seats again. 'In the first French translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's epoch-making *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the mid-twelfth century, the forest that played host to the Arthurians' adventures was placed unambiguously in Brittany. The originator of the Arthurian romances was Chrétien de Troyes, who lived from 1135 to 1188 and came from Champagne...'

'How very appropriate! A perfect breeding ground for top-flight fantasies!' remarked Kadeg waggishly – but Riwal pressed on with even greater determination. 'Chrétien made use of the accounts given in the *Historia*' – Riwal emphasised the word 'accounts' – 'but also of ancient Celtic stories: the tales of King Arthur and his Round Table, initially handed down solely through the oral tradition. There are five romances by Chrétien. And all of them, boss' – Dupin unfortunately knew exactly what was coming – 'have been waiting for you on your desk for the last two weeks.'

Dupin stared straight ahead, albeit with considerable difficulty. He had noticed the hefty tomes, but had never once picked any of them up.

'Anyway,' continued Riwal, 'following Chrétien, numerous other works of the highest literary merit began to appear, some quite new, others reworking Chrétien's material, together with countless popular versions of the stories. You have to think of the whole of Arthurian literature as being like a wildly exuberant flower bed in the spring, with everything bursting into life in all possible directions. What we have here' – and at this point Riwal went off into sheer raptures – 'What we have here is an eternally ongoing story, the subject matter is inexhaustible, it is re-invented over and over again, it will never come to an end.'

'Just stop somewhere along here on the right-hand side of the road', interjected Nolwenn. 'This is ideal.'

'What I also put on your desk was an edition of the famous *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, one of the main versions of the Arthurian stories. A particularly large number of episodes are located in this forest: stories about Arthur's youth, Merlin – the greatest magician of all time, Viviane the Fairy, Arthur's half-sister Morgan, Lancelot, and Iwein, the Knight of the Lion. You have to...'

'That's it – we're there.'

Dupin had brought the Citroën to a halt just behind another car. They were fewer than twenty metres from the church. Stopping the engine, he opened the door and climbed out. The others followed suit.

He stood still and drew a deep breath.

Here too, right in the middle of Brittany, the weather was fabulous. The forest lay almost exactly half-way between the north and south coasts – between the English Channel and the Bay of Biscay, between Vannes and Saint-Malo. It was quite often cloudy here, but it was different today: the weather was simply phenomenal. It was the middle of August, and hence a curious time of year: full summer, yet with melancholic undertones. The weather could take you by surprise: it might

suddenly change, with monstrous banks of dark clouds racing across the sky, torrential rain and howling winds, leaves blown from the trees, in sharp contrast to the weather prevailing only a couple of weeks earlier. All at once the entire mood would be different. The light would be milder, softer, a velvety gold colour, even at midday. You could always tell exactly when this drastic change would occur. It didn't mean the end of summer days – there were of course more of them, right up until the end of October; they were warm, sometimes even hot – but the heat, too, was different from what it had been before. Today, however, there was not yet the slightest hint of autumn. When they had set out from Concarneau just after one o'clock the thermometer had already reached a pretty impressive 27 degrees. The sun was still burning hot, the sky – a rich and magnificent blue – was crystal clear.

'Let's just have another run through our plan for the day.' Nolwenn was bursting with energy. They had all gathered at the back of the car, next to the boot containing their various bags and rucksacks. 'The two Inspectors and I will start off by sitting down for a while in Marie Line's *Maison des Sources*.' Even out here, of course, Nolwenn knew exactly what was what. She glanced at her watch. 'You've got your meeting pretty well straightaway, Monsieur le Commissaire, and after that you're joining up with us again.' She frowned, then added, 'Preferably no later later than 4.'

Dupin had arranged to meet Fabien Cadiou – the man he was talking to on Odinot's behalf – at 2.30, and he was hoping it wouldn't take anywhere near as long as one and a half hours.

'At Marie Line's we can get whatever we need in the way of maps, books, etc. And have a little bite to eat as well – there are such gorgeous delicacies here, sweet as well as savoury.' In recent days Nolwenn had talked a lot about the *Maison des Sources*, a small café with an adjoining bookshop and art gallery. 'I imagine you'll want a coffee after your appointment. Then we can set off on our excursion. First stop: the Holy Grail.' She nodded her head in the direction of the church. 'After that, the Valley of No Return, also known as the the "Dangerous Valley" or the "Valley of the False Lovers".'

'What really matters in the Valley', said Riwal, changing his expression and lowering his voice for better effect, 'is not what you see' – he paused – 'but what you feel.'

'Unbelievable! Nicking our beach, just like that!' grumped Kadeg, throwing the newspaper he had been reading during the journey into the boot of the car. His indignant outburst completely ruined Riwal's attempt at melodrama. 'I think we should make an official complaint.'

No one reacted. For the last week the papers throughout Brittany had been full of it: the Corsicans – normally much liked in Brittany – had produced a glossy brochure designed to show off the unique beauty of Corsica's Mediterranean coastline, and had had the nerve to use photos of a beach in Brittany. The Bretons had cursed and sworn, of course – but at heart the episode filled them with pride. The Mediterranean wooing visitors with photos of Brittany! Why? – Because Breton beaches were more Mediterranean than those in the Mediterranean itself!

Imperturbable as ever, Nolwenn ignored Kadeg's interjection. 'We'll be setting off for the hotel at around seven, seven-thirty. Our table's reserved for half past eight.'

Nolwenn and Riwal had had lengthy discussions about the choice of hotel, and had plumped in the end for the *Grée des Landes* in La Gacilly, largely of course because they wanted to try out its highly praised restaurant. The choice of a restaurant being a matter of paramount importance for all good Frenchmen – and in this respect at least Bretons naturally regard themselves as thoroughly French – it constitutes the essential starting point in the planning of any kind of outing.

‘Fabien Cadiou’s house isn’t far from the *Maison des Sources*, boss. Just three minutes from here, no more. We can all go part of the way together, then you’ll be turning off. *Allons-y!*’

Riwal was already on the move – appropriately kitted out in rugged clothing and footwear that would have been suitable for climbing Mont Blanc; even his blue rucksack was fully in keeping. Kadeg was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a thin jacket in military green with a large S on the shoulder for ‘Salomon’, his favourite brand. Nolwenn looked dazzling, as always.

Riwal turned round towards Dupin. ‘As I’ve mentioned, boss: Fabien Cadiou is a real star! He’s one of the world’s leading Arthurian scholars.’

Dupin didn’t respond. He had carefully suppressed the fact that Cadiou was involved in Arthurianism.

‘Did you remember to order vegan food for me, Nolwenn?’ Kadeg suddenly asked.

The Inspector and his wife – a martial arts teacher from Lorient – had recently converted to veganism. Dupin had nothing against veganism as such; what irritated and frequently enraged both him and everyone else was Kadeg’s excessive zeal in trumpeting his new-found faith. For Kadeg, everything became a mission.

‘My choice for this evening is a great big fricassee of snails topped with parsley butter’ – Riwal was still some way ahead of them, and there was nothing in Kadeg’s tone to suggest that he was being ironic or provocative – ‘followed by a *carré d’agneau* in a crust of herbs and wild nuts.’ Needless to say, the day’s menu had been studied in great detail. There almost seemed to be an audible smacking of lips.

Complete silence followed for a while, until finally it was broken by Nolwenn. ‘And as for tomorrow, the plan is to visit the *Fontaine de Barenton*, the famous spring with its magic waters, then Paimpont, more or less at the centre of the forest, and after that...’

Riwal had suddenly stopped. ‘You need to go down here, boss’, he said, pointing along a wide gravelled path that branched off on the right hand side of the road. ‘The old manor house is about three hundred metres away, right on the edge of the forest.’ He turned and nodded towards a group of houses. ‘The *Maison des Sources* is almost directly ahead of us – just there on the right, you can’t miss it.’

Dupin could see a low wall, behind which were banks of hollyhocks and an ancient house built of reddish stone.

‘Pink granite!’ he exclaimed. Ever since his holiday on the *Côte de Granit Rose* he had been

particularly interested in rocks of every sort.

Riwal's response was instantaneous: 'Slate, boss, if you don't mind me saying so. Red slate. Not granite. The rock throughout the entire forest is slate – some red, some grey. In the Val sans Retour, too, where masses of people have ended up getting lost, there are outcrops of red slate. Its exceptionally high iron content has a serious effect on compasses – and on the human senses' (a partly science-based assertion, yes – but only partly). 'And do you know why the slate is red?'

Dupin shook his head with a sigh.

Riwal launched forth without a moment's hesitation. 'Seven fairies lived in secret beneath the lake together with their treasures. They had all sworn an oath never to reveal themselves to human beings. The youngest of them broke her oath and let herself be seen by a young man riding past the lake. Her sisters decided to kill him to stop their secret getting out. This made the youngest fairy so enraged that she slit the throats of her sisters as they slept and made a magic potion out of their blood to bring the young man back to life. The story goes that the blood of the murdered sisters was absorbed by the slate over a period of seven days, and in the process turned it red.'

In no mood to respond, Dupin turned off the roadway. 'Right – see you later.'

'As I said, Monsieur le Commissaire: no later than 4!' called Nolwenn.

'4 at the very, very latest', Dupin muttered, starting to walk a bit faster, the gravel crunching beneath his feet.

The path led him around a tall laurel bush – and all of a sudden the view in front of him opened up. There it lay, the famous forest, on the crests of a succession of low, undulating hills. It looked imposing, dense, difficult, impenetrable – and defiant, too. A dark aura hung over it, not positively forbidding, but by no means inviting. It seemed to swallow up every speck of light. In sharp contrast, the sloping fields and meadows that led up to the forest lay in bright sunlight, the grass in them a stark, almost dazzling green. They belonged unambiguously to the ordinary world – they were real, unquestionably part of the here and now. The same could not be said with any certainty of the forest as it now presented itself to Dupin.

He shook his head. 'What rubbish!' he said out loud, deciding that he'd probably just heard too many stories about the great magic forest.

It was a forest, that's all. Just a forest.

Before long Dupin found himself standing in front of the old manor house.

Reddish slate, three floors, each element massive and elegant, thrusting mightily upwards, all topped off by a dark grey pitched roof. Compactly built, it almost had the air of a tower.

It was just as Riwal had said: the house stood right on the boundary, with one half towards the

meadow and the other extending right into the forest.

Dupin walked past the left-hand side of the house, only realising at the last moment that there was a large rectangular yard at the back, enclosed by a high, shoddily built stone wall. It gave off a heavy, dank smell, at once earthy and woody. The air suddenly seemed distinctly cooler.

The wall gave the impression of being a sort of defensive bulwark, as though to ensure that nothing could get in from the forest, from the wilderness that lay only a metre away. There would no doubt be all sorts of wild animals out there – boars, stone martens, badgers, screech owls, otters, beavers, all of them in this magical forest very possibly much bigger than normal. And surely there were poisonous plants there too – gigantic and rarely to be found elsewhere – that were waiting to entrap the unwary.

Dupin could see a wooden shed in the far corner, next to it a dark-coloured off-road Citroën with strikingly dirty side-panels. Trees overhung the walls and loomed over the yard in wild profusion. To reach into the yard at all the sun would need to be directly overhead – the only part of the day when there would be a reasonable level of light.

Dupin made his way to the broad stone steps leading to the manor's timber entrance-door. Beneath a bell-push was a plain brass plate saying 'Blanche Cadiou – Dr Fabien Cadiou', then beneath it another, larger one bearing the legend '*Brocéliande: Le Parc de l'Imagination illimitée*'.

The forest not only swallowed up the light – it seemed to swallow sounds as well: everywhere was as silent as the grave.

Dupin pressed the bell, taking a look around him as he did so. Down on the gravel area to the right of the entrance stood a blue table surrounded by five steel chairs, all in the same blue as the table. They looked new. A strange object stood on the table – a jug, perhaps, but of unusual shape.

Dupin rang the bell again, and waited. A glance at his watch told him it was 14.34. So he was on time: Wednesday half-past two at Fabien Cadiou's house – that was the arrangement.

He gave a third ring, a long one this time, then stepped a few paces back from the house.

'Hello?' He gazed up at the manor house. Three windows on each floor. One on the second floor and another on the third stood open. 'Monsieur Cadiou? Commissaire Dupin here!' He paused for a moment. 'Concarneau Police. We have an appointment.' With his words still ringing in the air he suddenly heard a peculiar noise and span round on his heels. It was a kind of scraping, scratching sound. He caught sight of something white ghosting along the top of the wall, largely hidden by foliage. Then it was gone, as though it had melted into thin air.

A cat?

'Damnation!' exclaimed Dupin. Where the hell was this man, Cadiou?

It struck the Commissaire just how tired he was. He needed a *petit café*. No, two *petits cafés*. He and Claire had been unpacking cardboard boxes until 2.30 a.m. the previous night – lots and lots of boxes. His life, her life – all in cardboard boxes. They had done it downstairs in the living room of the

house they had been renting together since earlier in the summer. A joint home, and in a fabulous position just a stone's throw from *Plage Mine*, the little beach by the city centre, looking out over the broad bay towards the sea. In the course of the evening they had downed two bottles of white wine, repeatedly having to search for their glasses amidst the scatter of boxes, and Claire had told him a story about every single item they extricated. Dupin smiled. At some point, when it was already dark, they had gone for a quick swim. The water had been an amazing 21 degrees. The entire warmth of the summer seemed to be stored up in the Atlantic. They would be able to go swimming for quite a few more weeks – including tomorrow. But there were still dozens of boxes to unpack first. Dupin was planning to be back home by the following afternoon.

He shook himself and carried on walking round the house.

'Monsieur Cadiou? Hello? Are you there?'

Aha – a second entrance. A side door, ground level, no steps. On the wall facing it, a wooden contraption for drying laundry.

The door was slightly ajar.

Without further ado Dupin pushed it open.

'Monsieur Cadiou?'

On the right, a stair down into the cellar; on the left, a narrow hallway leading to three steps and another door, likewise open.

'Dupin here. We have an appoint...'. His phone rang, and he pulled it out of the back pocket of his jeans. 'Yes?'

'Where on earth are you?' The voice at the other end sounded even crabbier than his own.

Damn! Dupin hadn't taken stock of the caller's number – a mistake that always cost him dear. It was the Prefect! Locmariaquer.

'In the magic forest. Our annual outing. Remember?'

Needless to say, the Prefect knew absolutely nothing about this minor bit of police business he was engaged on – or rather: this personal favour he was doing for Jean Odinet. He was even completely ignorant of the fact that Dupin had been involved over the summer in investigating the criminal goings-on on the Côte du Granit Rose.

'There's trouble at a number of bakeries in Concarneau.'

Dupin gave no response.

'Butter! It's all about butter! There are hordes of angry people on the streets.'

There was a war going on between wholesalers, retail chains and producers. About prices. Not just in Brittany but in the whole of France. The crux of the matter was the dramatically increasing export trade in French butter, which was more lucrative than selling it on the home market. As a result

butter had been in short supply recently – so short that numerous bakeries, restaurants and small supermarkets had completely run out. Tens of thousands of homes no longer had any, and a general ‘butter emergency’ had been declared – France being the world’s undisputed king of butter consumption (far ahead of the Germans, in second place). But of course Brittany felt especially hard hit, and regarded it as a major crisis. By some crazy process the situation had reached breaking point, encouraged of course by the media: earlier in the week it had been reported that a man in Vannes was offering half a pound of demi-sel butter on the internet for 250 euros – and that was not the only such case. An apocalyptic mood had developed: Baguettes without butter?! Crêpes too?! And worst of all: butterless *gâteau breton*?! Death would be a better fate!

‘I’m sure my colleagues will cope’, Dupin replied calmly.

‘It could turn into a general riot at any moment. All it took in 1798 was a shortage of bread!’

Dupin knew this really did reflect the general mood – it wasn’t just hysteria on the part of the Prefect.

‘If a revolution breaks out, we’ll be back, Monsieur le Préfet, you can depend on it.’

‘But...’

‘We’re in the Holy Grail Church right now.’ Churches were always a good excuse. ‘I have to go.’

Dupin hung up. Pure self-defence. He needed to make some progress here at the manor house – and then be at the *Maison des Sources* by 4. Where at last he would get his coffee. And ideally he wanted to ring Jean Odinot before then, too, so that he could sew everything up there and then. He was at the end of his tether.

‘Monsieur Cadiou!’ He was by the side door once again, calling even more loudly than before. And more impatiently. ‘I’m down here!’ With this he darted along the narrow corridor and up the steps.

‘Hello?’ He soon found himself in a large open-plan kitchen/living room. Despite the sunshine outside there was only half-light in here.

Even so, it was easy to see the man lying on the light-coloured stone floor. In a massive pool of blood.

In a flash Dupin was kneeling down beside him. ‘Hello! Hello! Monsieur! Can you hear me?’

No response.

Holding his finger to the man’s neck, he felt for a pulse. Nothing. His body temperature was lower than normal too.

‘Bloody hell!’

Dupin immediately stood up, mobile in hand.

‘*Service d’Aide Médicale Urgente*’, said a man’s voice.

‘Commissaire Dupin, Concarneau police. A man’s been shot. Tréhorenteuc. In the manor house belonging to Fabien Cadiou. Once you reach the village you...’

‘We’re from Ploërmel, we know the area. Status of the victim? Vital functions?’

‘No pulse. No discernible breathing. Low body temperature. Dead, presumably.’

‘How many bullet wounds? And where?’

‘Stomach area.’ Dupin carefully lifted the man’s polo shirt, which was drenched with blood. ‘Two. Two bullet wounds.’

‘We’re on our way.’

‘Make it quick!’

Dupin set about making his next call. Nolwenn, Riwal and Kadege would all be sitting around happily in the *Maison des Sources*.

‘That was quick, Monsieur le Commissaire, well done! We’re...’

‘A man’s been shot, Nolwenn. Cadiou probably, right there in his own house. I’ve just found him. Dead, so far as I can tell.’

Dupin walked around as he spoke, taking a close look at the man on the floor.

‘You’re joking, Monsieur le Commissaire!’ It was clear from her tone of voice that she knew perfectly well that Dupin was not joking.

‘I’ve called an ambulance.’

‘Have you notified the local police? You need to...’ – she paused, then began again: ‘I think...’. She paused again, before continuing in hushed tones: ‘You’re on distinctly unofficial business here. You’re returning a favour for a Paris colleague who helped you out in a case that you were likewise not officially involved in in any way whatsoever.’

This was correct in every particular.

‘I’ll think of something.’ This time she didn’t need to pause.

‘And what might that be?’

‘Something will occur to me.’

She seemed to be thinking.

‘You’re assuming it’s Cadiou?’

‘I... Just a moment.’

Cadiou was an Arthurian specialist and head of some kind of organisation. Dupin searched on his smartphone and immediately found a photo.

‘Yes, it’s him. – Dr Fabien Cadiou. – *Directeur du Centre de l’Imaginaire Arthurien.*’

‘We’re on our way, Monsieur le Commissaire. – We’re on our way.’

With that, Nolwenn ended the conversation.

Through a door in the direction of the main entrance Dupin could see a hall. The stairs to the upper floors would be located there.

He walked towards the door, his phone once again pressed to his ear. It took a while before Jean Odinot answered.

‘So how did the interview...’

‘Somebody’s shot Cadiou. I’ve just found him, inside his house. Dead, very probably. The paramedics will be here any minute.’

‘What?! Cadiou’s dead?’

‘What the hell’s the story here, Jean?’

By now on the first floor, Dupin entered a room – clearly a study, full of books and bookshelves right up to the ceiling. A quick first glance suggested nothing unusual – just a normal degree of untidiness, with no obvious sign of anyone having interfered with it.

‘I... I haven’t...’ - Dupin had never known his friend to stammer and stumble like this. ‘I don’t have the faintest idea what’s going on here. Georges, we...’

‘Well, first off we need a plausible story as to why I’m here at all. The local police will be arriving in a few minutes together with a Commissaire from Rennes – Thierry Queméner presumably. Which means that the *Prefecture* in Rennes is going to be involved as well.’

Dupin had absolutely no appetite for any of this. He didn’t feel in the least obliged to account for himself to anyone – but that was exactly what he was going to have to do. It had been difficult enough in his last case vis-à-vis the responsible Commissaire from Trégastel, when he had only just managed to avoid a major row. And it wouldn’t have stopped at a row: it would have led to a formal complaint against him, and very probably to disciplinary proceedings.

‘I’ll handle it, Georges.’ Odinot sounded as if he had meanwhile recovered his calm.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

In the next room, too – a spacious bedroom containing a double bed – there didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary, and Dupin spotted nothing unusual in the adjacent bathroom either.

Dupin was already on the stairs leading to the second floor.

‘Just leave it to me.’

Another study. Three desks, one opposite the door and the others against the walls to left and right.

Everything super-tidy. Another bedroom, another bathroom: exactly the same layout as on the first floor.

‘Did you have another phone conversation with Cadiou, Georges?’

‘Do you mean after you and I spoke yesterday? No. Just the one call last week. And you?’

‘No. – Have you come across anything suspicious in the house?’

‘Not so far. I’ll carry on looking.’

Dupin had meanwhile arrived on the third floor. Everything was different up here. There was just one large room. Two sofas. Vibrant tapestries on the bare stone walls. An old chest of drawers. Very cosy – but it didn’t look as if anyone had been up here for quite some time: a thick layer of dust covered everything, including the rough-hewn floorboards.

‘This is not good news.’ – a typical remark of Jean’s. ‘Odette Laurent will now make a fresh demand that her husband be exhumed. And the judge will be forced to agree to it.’

Dupin was now on his way back down the stairs.

In their two short phone conversations Jean had only given him the barest outline of the issues behind the interview he had been going to conduct with Cadiou. In the early summer a historian from Paris, Gustave Laurent, had died of a heart attack while on a research trip to England. The stupid thing was that the dead man was the Interior Minister’s brother. Even worse, his wife was apparently pathologically mistrustful. She was also incapable of letting anything go. She didn’t accept for one moment that he had died of natural causes, even though there wasn’t the slightest evidence of anything other than a heart attack. Her husband had clearly been suffering from high blood pressure for a considerable period of time, and the doctor treating him hadn’t really been surprised by the news of his death. None the less, his wife had put pressure on her brother-in-law, and also on the chief of police – who in turn had put pressure on Jean Odinot. Gustave Laurent hadn’t travelled to England alone, but had been part of a group of historians – which had also included Cadiou, at any rate for part of the time. The two men had probably been friends with one another. The local police had of course spoken to them all, but there hadn’t been any kind of detailed investigation. However, this was what his widow was now demanding. Considerable pressure had built up, and as a result Jean – and hence Dupin as well – had ended up with the task of re-interviewing Cadiou. Having been away on travels of some sort, Cadiou had only recently become available for a meeting. Nobody – except Gustave Laurent’s widow – had been in any great hurry.

‘Tell me once again everything you know. Everything, do you hear? I...’ Dupin broke off: what on earth was he going on about?! ‘Don’t bother, Jean, just forget it. It isn’t my case! I’m out of it before it even starts. Have you got that?’

Dupin was serious.

‘I’ll call you back very soon, Georges.’

Dupin was keen to say something else – but Jean had already hung up.

He went back down to the ground floor, and was soon standing by the body of Cadiou.

‘What a bloody nuisance!’ he muttered, furiously running his fingers through his hair.

There was a tremendous bustle of activity.

Nolwenn, Riwal and Kadeg had been the first to arrive, followed closely by an ambulance, the Ploërmel police, and the Paimpont police. The pathologist and the forensics team, both from Rennes, were expected any minute, as was the Commissaire in charge, Thierry Queméner. Dupin already knew him, though only slightly: a pleasant colleague – the affable, comfortably rotund sort – who was due to retire quite soon. It could have been worse, that’s for sure: but even Queméner’s affability would have its limits: this was his patch.

‘Dead. And not just for the last few minutes’, so the young paramedic had quickly declared, though he had refused to speculate about the precise time of death. ‘We’re obviously not needed here anymore’, he had added, before promptly departing with his colleague.

Dupin had mumbled something to the local gendarmes about ‘an office outing’ and what a ‘strange coincidence’ it all was. For the time being they had other things on their mind, so didn’t ask him any further questions.

The man in charge of the local gendarmes, Colonel Aballain from Paimpont, was giving the necessary orders. He had organised the men and given them their instructions, with the result that most of them were out in the yard or on the gravel path leading to the manor house in search of tyre marks and footprints. They had taken care to park on the road: only the ambulance had entered the yard.

Riwal and Kadeg had offered to help – Dupin hadn’t liked it, but he hadn’t wanted to intervene either.

Colonel Roland Aballain had managed to contact Cadiou’s wife – the worst job any police officer is ever called on to do. She was in Paimpont, and two gendarmes were on the way to her.

Nolwenn and Dupin had gone into the yard, and were standing somewhat apart from everyone else.

‘As we can’t think of a plausible lie, Monsieur le Commissaire, I think that resorting to the truth may be our best course of action – or part of the truth, at least.’ An unconventional standpoint, thought Dupin. ‘Say nothing about your illicit investigations in Trégastel, but own up that your Paris friend Inspector General Jean Odinot had asked you to do him a favour, namely talk to Fabien Cadiou on his behalf. – It’s plain ridiculous’ – and Nolwenn’s tone became slightly reproachful at this point – ‘that wherever you turn up, dead bodies immediately turn up as well.’

‘I think that...’

Dupin broke off: Thierry Queméner had come round the corner of the house and was coming towards them.

Dupin went to meet him halfway: it wouldn't be a bad move to show maximum friendliness – and then get away from the place as rapidly as possible. He would follow Nolwenn's advice; suggestions from her were in any case usually the best. Perhaps after all he might somehow get out of this predicament without suffering too much damage.

'Commissaire Queméner' said Dupin in a jovial tone of voice, reaching out to shake the other's man's hand, 'I...'

Dupin's telephone was ringing. He stole a glance at the number: Jean Odinot.

Taking the call would be rude, but Dupin had no real alternative: Jean might be about to tell him what to say to the Commissaire from Rennes.

'One moment if you don't mind, Commissaire Queméner.' Dupin had been on the very point of clasping the other's hand when he turned away and hurried towards the wall bordering the forest. Behind him he could hear Nolwenn salvaging the situation. 'How are you, Commissaire Queméner? And how is your wife? I...'

'Yes?' said Dupin, lowering his voice.

'I've talked to my superior, and he has discussed the matter directly with the Interior Minister himself: it's your case. That's official. You have been mandated by the Paris police and by the Police Nationale. You're a one-man special detachment of ours.'

'What?!'

'You have been specially appointed to head this investigation, and all regional prefectures and police commissariats will be required to assist you in your endeavours.'

It was never at all easy for people to disturb Dupin's inner equilibrium – but Odinot had certainly contrived to do just that.

'What's this you're telling me?!'

'As I said: this is your case.'

'But I don't want it!' And Dupin really didn't want it.

'But surely this whole affair has a particularly interesting ring to it, don't you think, Georges? And we'd be working together again for once, to some extent at any rate. It would even be completely official. Just like in the old days. That would be quite something, don't you reckon?'

Dupin had fallen silent. Jean was playing a joke on him, so it seemed. A joke that wasn't at all funny.

He heard a phone ring a short distance behind him.

'Are you still there, Georges?'

'You're pulling my leg, right?'

'I'm certainly not pulling your leg. You're already in it up to your neck, so there's no getting out. It's your case. And I'm your point of contact in Paris.'

'I...' Dupin broke off. 'I...'

'I'll be in touch again very soon, Georges. I'll ring you...' The conversation was over.

Dupin stood motionless for a moment, then shook himself. He looked across at Nolwenn. Still standing next to Commissaire Queméner, she threw Dupin a quizzical and perhaps also somewhat reproving glance. Queméner was talking on his phone, but ended the call almost at once. A smile of sorts appeared on his face, and he headed towards Dupin, Nolwenn following along behind.

'My apologies, Commissaire Queméner, that phone call really was very urgent, I couldn't not take it, I...'

'I've just heard from my Prefect that you're the boss here now. Couldn't suit me better: my sister-in-law's celebrating her 75th tomorrow – in Nice.' He seemed pleased, to judge by the expression on his face. 'My wife had already started to worry that I wouldn't be able to go down with her, on account of this death here.'

The whole business was like an absurd piece of theatre.

'But now everything's turned out for the very, very best. It's your case, my dear colleague!'

The Commissaire from Rennes didn't make the slightest effort to conceal his delight.

Dupin was about to protest, but Queméner beat him to it. 'To be honest, I'm as pleased as Punch that I'm not involved in this. A well-known, highly regarded personality, shot dead – and in Tréhourentec, of all places.' He waved his hand dismissively. 'Right, then, I'm off. Good luck!'

Nolwenn threw another glance at Dupin, but didn't speak.

'But I need you', retorted Dupin. 'I mean I need somebody who knows what's what around here. Somebody local. Somebody who knows who's who.' Each sentence sounded more hapless than the last. 'Somebody with at least an inkling of what this might be all about.'

'It's about the Holy Grail, I expect.' Queméner had meant this in fun, but for some curious reason the expression on his face was strikingly grave. 'And in anything to do with the Grail, it's notoriously always more about the search than about the actual thing itself. Right then', he added, making ready to turn away and leave, 'you're now the duly appointed Knight of the Grail. – Oh yes, before I forget: the pathologist has been delayed, unfortunately. And stick to Colonel Aballain. He's a true local' – this was said in a thoroughly approving tone of voice – 'and a first-rate policeman, as you'll discover. – And by the way, my boss has said you can draw on all our local resources for your special unit.'

'Forensics experts? IT and so on?'

Dupin had come out with the question through sheer force of habit.

'Precisely. Arrange it all through Rennes. – But in practice, of course, you've already brought your

own team with you.'

Dupin was going to say something back, but let it go.

The Commissaire from Rennes walked off with a spring in his step.

Dupin had to restrain himself yet again, but found it even more difficult this time.

'Madness! It's pure...'

'Our case?' said Nolwenn, interrupting him, her brow deeply furrowed. 'Why is it our case? What on earth did he mean?'

'On Odinot's recommendation, the Minister for the Interior and the head of the Paris Police have handed the case to me. I'm to be a "special investigator"' – a desperate pause ensued here – 'on behalf of the Paris Police.'

'I...'

Nolwenn stopped short: a dark-coloured car was approaching, driving far too fast. Two policemen leapt out of the way. The smart-looking Volvo braked near the entrance to the manor house and came to an abrupt halt, making a hellish noise on the gravel.

The door on the driver's side flew open. A woman in a dark grey outfit darted out of the car and made straight for the house. Dupin rushed to catch up with her.

'Madame Cadiou?'

Only now did the woman seem to notice him. Bestowing an empty glance on him, she immediately disappeared inside the house without saying a word.

By the time Dupin reached the room, Blanche Cadiou was already kneeling beside her dead husband. Her eyes were on his face – a fixed stare showing no trace of emotion.

Dupin had stopped in the doorway.

The forensics people still hadn't arrived – to Dupin's relief, as it meant that they were alone.

Blanche Cadiou remained totally motionless.

Two or three long minutes went by.

'I'll do it, I will. I'll find the killer.'

Dupin only just made out her words. Blanche Cadiou had hissed them rather than spoken them – they were sharp, cold, pulsating with tension. She slowly stood up.

Dupin approached her cautiously. He could now see the tears on her cheek. He saw pain and horror, but also a kind of unrelenting anger.

'I am Commissaire Georges Dupin.' Standing now to one side of her, he paused for a moment, and then continued in carefully measured tones. 'Is there anything we can do for you? Would you like me to call you a doctor, Madame Cadiou?'

'No.' Her answer was instant, resolute. She made no attempt to look at Dupin. Her eyes were fixed on her husband. She seemed to have recovered her composure in a trice.

There was renewed silence, and then she spoke. 'Do you have any information yet, Commissaire?' Her question was delivered in an almost spookily flat tone, without emphases of any kind.

'Nothing whatsoever. And you, Madame Cadiou: do you have any inkling of what might have happened here?'

Turning to look at Dupin for the first time, she scrutinised his face.

'Are you in charge of the investigation?'

What should he say? Alas, yes, the way things stood at the moment. Even if he were going to try to change the situation – and try he certainly would – this was not the right moment to go into it.

Dupin tried to give his voice the ring of complete conviction. 'Yes, I am.'

She nodded silently.

'Difficult though it must be for you, Madame Cadiou, does anything at all spring to your mind that might have a bearing on this terrible event? Any idea who might have done it? And why?'

'No.' She shook her head almost imperceptibly.

'Have you noticed anything unusual about your husband recently? Within the last few days? Anything unusual in his behaviour, his mood?'

'He was the same as he always was.' She brushed her dark brown hair from her forehead.

'Any rows? Any conflicts? With anybody at all?'

Another fleeting shake of the head, as though she were thinking about something else altogether. Her eyes were once again fixed on her husband. She was plainly in a state of shock.

Dupin was conscious nonetheless of the immutable principle at the heart of all such investigations: anyone could be the perpetrator – anyone without exception.

'Especially at the beginning of an investigation we need every bit of information we can get, Madame Cadiou. Any tiny detail that occurs to you might be useful, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you.'

'Everything was completely normal. He was the same as always.'

'Your husband knew Gustave Laurent. In the early summer he was...'

'Boss!'

Riwal came rushing into the room. Dupin knew from the expression on his face that something drastic must have happened.

‘Boss!’ He was struggling in vain to retain his composure. ‘Another murder! There’s another body!’

Blanche Cadiou had immediately swivelled round to look at Riwal.

‘What?!’ This was completely crazy.

‘A second dead body...’

Dupin hurried over to his Inspector. Kadeg, Nolwenn and the Colonel from Paimpont had now all appeared behind Riwal.

‘Who is it, Riwal?’

‘Paul Picard. A professor from Paris. A mediaevalist and archaeologist. He’s just been found, out in the forest’ – Riwal’s face turned pale as he spoke – ‘close to the *Fontaine de Barenton*. They’re waiting for you there, boss. They...’

‘Cause of death?’

‘Stab wounds. Loss of blood.’ Riwal drew a deep breath. ‘This is no coincidence, boss. There’s something going on here. You’ve...’

‘Sheer rubbish!’ Dupin said this half under his breath, but everyone heard him.

‘He’s a colleague.’ Madame Cadiou, still standing beside her husband, spoke in a robotic, monotone whisper. ‘Paul Picard is a colleague of my husband’s. A friend. He came here for the conference.’

‘Conference? What conference?’ enquired Dupin at once.

Riwal was clearly already in the picture. ‘A conference on recent developments in Arthurian research. It’s an annual event. This year it’s about some spectacular excavations.’ Riwal had meanwhile recovered his composure.

Dupin paced to and fro for a while.

All of a sudden a massive case had arisen out of nowhere – and he wanted nothing to do with it, absolutely nothing! He needed to speak to Jean as a matter of urgency.

‘Where is this conference taking place?’

‘At the *Centre de l’Imaginaire Arthurien*’, replied Riwal, ‘in the *Château de Comper*, Monsieur Cadiou is the Director there’ – he paused – ‘sorry: was the Director. The conference was supposed to start just about now and carry on until Friday. Seven experts in all. The crème de la crème of Arthurian scholarship. The other five have been waiting for these two; they assumed they were simply delayed.’

‘Are they still there?’

'At the *Centre*, do you mean? Yes, so far as I'm aware.'

'They're to...'
– Dupin hesitated, then finished the sentence all the same – 'They're to stay there, all of them. None of them is to leave the *Centre*. I...'

'Here I am!' A small, scrawny man with a bald head had suddenly appeared behind Riwal. 'So where's the body then?' The newly arrived pathologist gave them all a cheery nod. Dupin was hostile to pathologists in general, and he could already tell that this one was going to be no exception.

'We'll meet outside in a minute or two', he said, turning to Riwal. 'I won't be long.'

He went back to Madame Cadiou, who was still standing by the body of her husband.

'Does anything perhaps occur to you now that might throw light on these events, Madame Cadiou?'

Dupin knew he was piling on the pressure, but he had no alternative. 'I mean with regard to the second death, the professor from Paris' – he hadn't taken in the man's name. 'What's going on here, Madame Cadiou?'

Dupin looked her straight in the eye. They were intense, dark brown eyes – and to his astonishment exactly the same colour as her shoulder-length hair.

She shook her head. 'I really can't tell you anything at all' – she paused – 'I just wish I knew at least something that would help.'

'You said your husband and the other victim were friends, not just colleagues?'

'Yes.'

'Good friends?'

'They didn't see a lot of one another. But yes, they were friends.'

'And they had the same research interests, if I'm not mistaken?'

'Yes, they did.'

Dupin would have liked to ask more questions, but it wasn't possible – he had to leave.

'Very good, Madame Cadiou. Once again, I offer you my sincere condolences.' It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't in fact offered her any condolences at all as yet. 'It's a terrible tragedy. My colleague from Paimpont' – he really did have to get the man's name into his head, though he was particularly deficient in this respect – 'My colleague from Paimpont will remain on the spot as head of the team here. You can talk to him whenever you need to. – And if anything does occur to you' – something that happened quite often after the initial shock – 'then please ring me straightaway. My colleagues will give you my number.'

Madame Cadiou had meanwhile turned back without a further word to look at her husband, who was already the object of the puny little pathologist's attentions.

It struck Dupin that the forensics team had still not arrived.

‘What I need to know above all else is the time of death’ he said as he turned to leave. ‘Once you have ascertained that, please inform me without delay.’

The pathologist stopped what he was doing and started to reply, but Dupin had already left the room.