

Pandora

Travtelio Burning

Vanity and Greed

René Jean-Paul Dewil

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Table of Contents

Chapter One. Prologue - The Travtelio Building and the Enterprise	9
Chapter Two. Jan Stevens	14
Chapter Three. Expatriates	36
Chapter Four. Team Building.....	68
Chapter Five. Trioteignes	94
Chapter Six. Michel Doriant	130
Chapter Seven. Ommegang.....	153
Chapter Eight. The Labour Union.....	177
Chapter Nine. The Fire at Travtelio	195
Chapter Ten. Epilogue.....	216

The Characters

“Travtelio Burning” is a work of fiction. Therefore, all the names and the figures of the novel are purely the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or to places of interest, is completely coincidental.

Pandora was the first woman in Greek mythology. Each god helped create her by giving her unique gifts. Zeus ordered Hephaestus to form her out of Earth as part of the punishment of mankind for Prometheus' theft of the secret of fire, and all the gods joined in offering gifts. Pandora opened a jar, later called Pandora's box, releasing all the evils of mankind such as greed, vanity, slander, envy, and pining, leaving Hope inside once she had closed it again.

In the following list, the language spoken by the characters is mentioned between brackets, and the figures indicate the age of the persons.

NL: Belgian, Dutch speaking
 FR: Belgian, French speaking
 US: United States of America
 SW: Sweden
 HK: People’s Republic of China, Hong-Kong
 CZ: Czechia

Travtelio Executive Management Team

Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Gerald Godelin (FR, 52)
CEO Secretary	Emma Wauters (NL, 33)
President Business Strategy:	Zhang Ho (HK, 51)
Finance President	René Bastin (FR, 57)
President Legal Affairs	Koen Smets (NL, 39)
President Operations	Barend Adriaens (NL, 39)
President Global Services:	Eric Terhulsen (N, 40)
President Human Relations (HR)	Bernard de Voncques (NL, 34)
Business-IT Coordinator	Julie Geerts (NL, 31)
Vice-President Security	Lieven Segers (NL, 42)
Director Labour Union Relations	Bart Peters (NL, 43)
Assistant to Bart Peters	Marie Donat (FR, 30)
Business Development Director	Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d’Entray (FR, 37)
Business Director	Radek Navratil (CZ, 34)

Information Technology (IT) Division

Director-General of IT	Andreas Verstraete (NL, 57)
Chief Information Officer (new)	Linus Akerlund (SW, 46)
Director and Vice-CIO	Rachel Kyle (US, 42)
Assistant (coach) to the new CIO	Sigvard Sandström (SW, 48)
IT Special Director	Andrew Raga (US, 36)
IT Special Director	Jan Stevens (Ian Clarkson) (NL, 34)

Business-IT Development Manager	Lauren O'Sheridan (US, 34)
IT Operations Director	Michel Dorian (FR, 54)
IT Operations Director (new)	Mark Stephenson (US, 33)
IT Operations Director (new)	Brad Brown (US, 36)
IT Operations Director (new)	Sanjiv Gupta (US, 34)
Assistant IT Operations Manager	Petr Tuma (CZ, 40)
Assistant IT Operations Manager	Karl Geerts (NL, 32)
IT Development Director	Thomas Denis (FR, 63)
IT Development Manager	Roland Devos (NL, 38)
IT Development Manager	Jean Collet (FR, 39)
IT Development Manager	Anthony Jones (US, 29)
IT Development Manager	Jennifer Alcock (US, 30)
IT Development Manager	Zhaò Fai (HK, 39)
IT Development Manager	Jana Navratil-Kovar (CZ, 32)
Director of IT Human Relations	Sara Jansen (NL, 51)
Office Automation Manage:	Paul Evrard (NL, 41)
Secretary to IT Development	Marguerite Dupas (FR, 60)
IT Data Centre Operator	Hugo Martin (FR, 40)
Courier Boy	Jean Vandoren (NL, 22)
Analyst and Software Developer	Daniel Drumont (FR, 63)

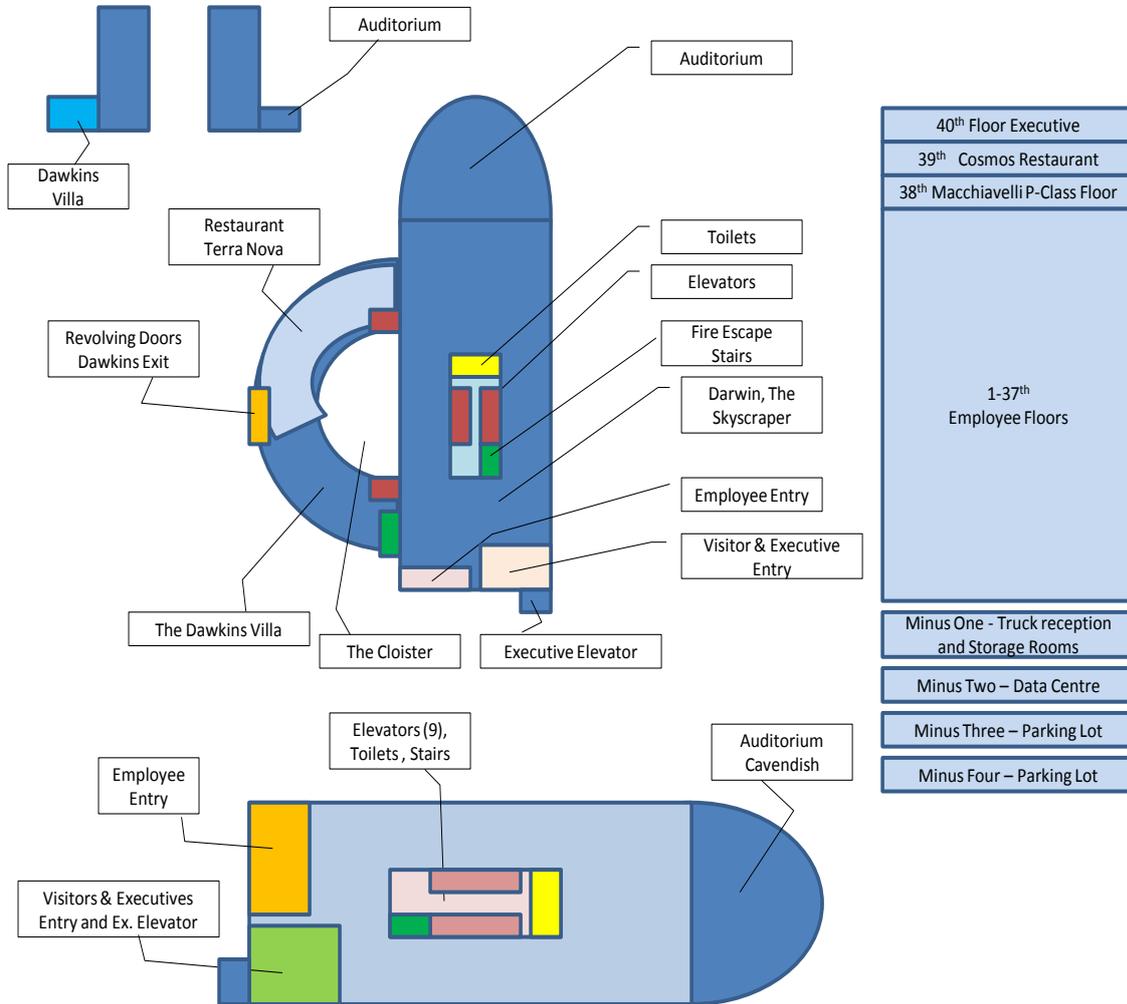
Other, non Travtelio

Owner of Trioteignes Castle	Count Charles de Trioteignes (FR, 35)
Wife of Count Trioteignes	Monique Ghysen (FR, 34)
Finance & Industry Board President	Marquess Alexandre de Brioges d'Exenaerde (FR, 60)
Finance & Industry Board President	Gustave-Robert Trahty (FR, 61)
Labour Union Leader	Robert Daaks (NL, 48)
Assistant Labour Union Leader	Anne Degambre (FR, 36)
Physics Trainer	Georges Trudant (FR, 36)

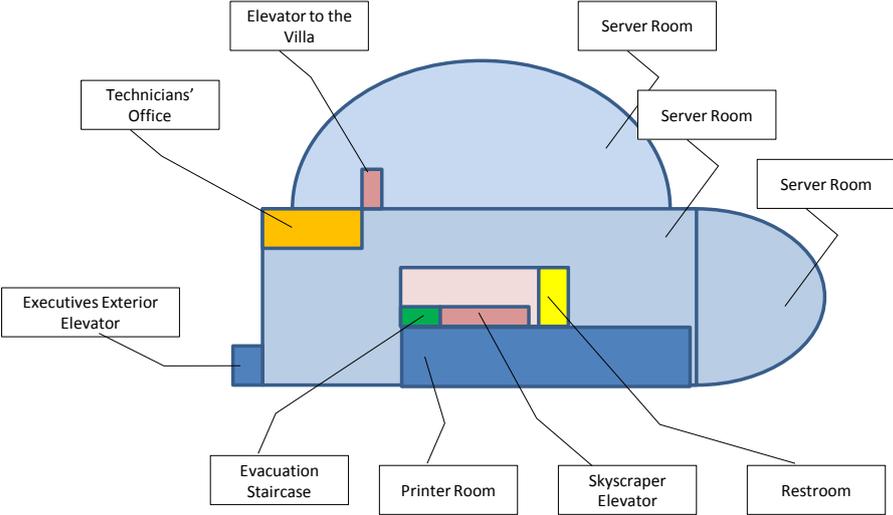
Abbreviations used in the text

CD	Compact Disk
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIO	Chief Information Officer
CV	Curriculum Vitae
EBITDA	Earnings before Interests, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortisation
ESC	Employee Skill Category
GPS	Global Positioning System
HPI	Human Poverty Index
HR:	Human Relations
IP	Internet Protocol
IT	Information Technology
LU	Labour Union
MBA	Master of Business Administration
PC	Personal Computer
SOX	Sarbanes-Oxley Act
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
USB	Universal Serial Bus (standard connection of peripheral devices to PCs)
VIP	Very Important Person

The Travtelio Headquarters Building



The Travtelio Data Centre in its Headquarters



The Travtelio Data Centre on Floor Minus Two

Chapter One. Prologue - The Travtelio Building and the Enterprise

The main building of the company called Travtelio lay halfway between the international airport of Brussels, Belgium, and the outskirts of the city. It had been recently erected in a sparkling clean business suburb that testified to the ambitions of the small, prosperous country in the very centre of Europe.

Travtelio's headquarter was situated in a posh contemporary architectural complex of well-ordered, spread-out buildings surrounded by luscious lawns and parks. Slim concrete towers formed the spine of the structures made of steel grids, covered on all sides by glass panes to emphasise the transparency of the business activities led in the buildings. The enormous glass surfaces reflected the lawns and the trees, yet kept indiscrete eyes out, of course. These buildings held the administrative centres of the multinational corporations that had been allured to a capital city that hosted the seats of the European Union. The tax incentives and other financial boons offered by the Belgian Government for international coordination centres attracted the world's fortune firms. The Belgian Finance Minister, for instance, allowed not only to subtract a certain percentage of interest on funding with loans, debt, but also on corrected own capital invested, on equity. Such incentives were unique in Europe. No manufacturing facilities were allowed in the area of the Travtelio building, only offices dedicated to white-collar work, world-class hotels and grand conference centres. Gleaming office buildings of less than ten years old covered the entire suburb area of about three hundred hectares, all clean and pristine, aseptic, neatly organised, decent, and glowing wealth. Recently, even just a few daringly futuristic buildings had been erected, drawn in round forms of the newest classical architecture of Spanish inspiration.

The Travtelio headquarters had been built early here, so that this structure, more than other similar buildings, had shaped the area and attracted the other premises. Because it had been one of the first, its rectangular monolith of concrete, steel and glass stood higher than the other buildings, dominating a wide lawn of young grass. When the Travtelio behemoth of forty floors rose, the Brussels City Council realised the potential of the grounds. They did not like high-rises however, for these might dwarf their fifteenth century historic city monuments. So they voted for smaller parcels of land to be built upon, for more roads and broader roads, for more space dedicated to parks, and for a limitation of the height to less than twelve floors of subsequent towers. The Travtelio Skyscraper, as it was hence called although it rose very modestly in height compared to similar towers of London or Paris, stood therefore still by far the only highest building in the business quarter, dwarfing the cluster of other business centres.

On top of the Travtelio Skyscraper waved a huge Belgian flag in the fierce winds of the skies. The flag drew the eyes to an even larger panel, set against arrays of cooling equipment for the tower's air conditioning, a panel holding the enormous yellow and blue logo of Travtelio: a stylised horseman forcing his horse to leap high in the air over an imaginary obstacle, the symbol of Travtelio's plight to jump ahead of any competitor in its business. Travtelio's ambition was to top any other company of Europe.

The Travtelio building consisted not just of that one tower. On the north side of the robust, rectangular main mass leaned a half-moon structure of five floors high. The half-moon was hollow inside, so that its offices occupied the floors around an inner patio. Originally, this patio should have been left open to the air, its grounds a green garden of rare bushes and extravagant flower plants, but the Travtelio Corporate Executive Officer, the CEO, had

refused to discard so much expensive space to nothing but flowers. A huge glass dome covered the inner place now. A few low trees grew there, planted in large concrete basins, but the zone had become a gathering place, a forum, a place for walks and talks, for large events, and for evening concerts. Here also were exhibited the huge art photographs and sculptures that proved Travtelio's devotion to contemporary art. The Presidents of the company boasted to visitors that his art might well be the best investment of their finance services, for the value of the art Travtelio owned grew by the year quite faster than the company's return on industrial investments.

All around the patio, the ground floor of the half circle was free of offices. Half of the space held the employee's restaurant; the other half was occupied by shops. A fitness centre, a press shop, a bank agency, a coffee shop, a sandwich bar, and a lounge with comfortable couches for midday leisure, had been arranged there, to the delight of the approximately five thousand people who worked in the buildings. The arcaded walkway around the patio, along the shops and vast restaurant, was soon called 'The Cloister', as it resembled the inner sanctum of many of the ancient, famous Gothic abbeys of the country. Employees called this part of the building plus the patio 'The Villa'.

On the east side, another, bulb-like structure, merely three floors high, emerged from the narrower side of the skyscraper. This was the Auditorium, a huge hall with the inside architecture of a Roman arena, comfortable red seats rising upwards in curved rows, facing a long, rectangular theatre space. A thousand people could sit here, and listen to major announcements of the firm, the presentations projected on huge cinema-like white screens.

The entrance hall of employees and visitors was situated on the ground floor of the Skyscraper, at the west side. Employees entered first through vast revolving doors, to be faced by a row of twenty more revolving doors, through which they had access to the building by moving their magnetic badge over an electronic box. The electronic lock would click and let the men and women pass one by one into what came to be called 'The Lobby'. For almost a hundred years since its founding as a government administration, the firm had needed only a reception desk for visitors. Men and women went and came without having to prove they were employees of this firm, and worked here. When Travtelio became a private company, the first change for every employee was to receive a company identity card, which was also a magnetic badge, without which he or she could not enter or leave the premises of the company. Everybody had to wear this badge with one's photograph visibly, at all times. Moreover, each badge allowed here for access only to some floors, but not to all.

The visitors' entrance area lay next to the employees' entrance, on the right side of the lobby. Both these entrances had a concrete-and-glass canopy over them, outside, so that during rain or snow at least that stretch of the footpath remained dry. With time, this covered space came to be used for another, less desirable activity. It was forbidden to smoke inside the Travtelio building. At first a large group, later a steadily diminishing hard core of smokers always gathered under the canopy to have a quick cigarette, despite the frost in winter and despite the turning winds that always whirled around city high-rises. The sight of the smokers, who were often also drinking in public from a can of beer or juice, was not very uplifting for the company image, but management had not yet taken measures to ban the smokers to other places in or around the building.

Visitors could drive their car down a spiral tunnel into the minus three and four floors, from which one of the centre elevators brought them to the reception area, or they could simply walk in on the ground floor, welcomed by uniformed hostesses. The colours of Travtelio were yellow and blue. The hostesses wore neat blue suits and yellow scarves.

Another structure in the form of a half cylinder emerged from the west façade at the southernmost corner, near the visitors' entry. This structure housed yet another elevator. The first private-company CEO of Travtelio had this elevator installed after the building was finished, because he had hated to have to travel to his fortieth floor in an omnibus train stopping at all floors in between, and being gaped at in a cramped space by his lower-rank employees. The outside half-cylinder of steel attached to the Skyscraper, held therefore an elevator that started in the reserved parking lot at in front of the building. It halted only on the ground floor at the visitors' reception area, and then at the top three floors of the Darwin Skyscraper. This elevator ran much faster than the centre ones, and its shaft had been made entirely of steel and glass. The glass was transparent from the inside, so that the Executive Presidents and their guests enjoyed splendid views over the landscape, from town to airport, whereas they remained hidden from outside views by the glass that remained opaque from the outside.

The architects had named the Travtelio main structure 'The Tower', but Travtelio managers had insisted on calling it 'The Skyscraper'. Travtelio had not built something like Florence's Santa Madonna delle Fiori Duomo Church to their glory. The architecture of their building was much simpler and more frugal. It consisted of a rectangular prism of a hundred meters long, fifty meters wide and forty floors up, four floors deep in the earth. Travtelio employees sometimes remarked it resembled Stanley Kubrick's Space Odyssey monolith encased in glass from top to bottom. The high-rise got its rigidity from a large, massive concrete shaft set in the middle. The light steel grid floors emerged from this tower-within-the-tower. They were held at the extremities by vertical steel beams. All the floors were double, hollow, and within this space ran the power cables, the communication network and the water conduits. The middle concrete shaft held the main elevators, nine in all, the larger water pipes and the water closets of each floor, a fire escape staircase, as well as a wide space that held all the core electric and telecommunication cables of the building. This slim, high tower brought energy and information to wall cabinets on each floor, from which more cables distributed the electricity and the bits to the offices. The middle tower formed the spine of the Skyscraper. The outside appearance of the main building was of a simple, stern, sharp, smart, rectangular glass prism rising to the skies, the glass epitomising the open-mindedness of the company.

All around lay wide lawns, neatly trimmed, but organised somewhat chaotic, the English way. A large stretch of bushes and low trees stood next to a flower bed, in front of a pool-like basin filled with water. The bushes hid the air conditioning intakes on the south side. Further to the north, beyond the Cloister, surrounded by green grass, lay a vast open-air parking lot.

Deep under the skyscraper, and under the Cloister, hid four underground floors. These had been dug in the sandy substrata of Brussels to hold the foundations of the Skyscraper. They also housed a vast minus one floor for truck deliveries and visitors' parking lot, a minus two floor for electronic equipment, and two lower floors of additional, covered parking lots. The underground parking lots might have been sufficient to hold most of the employee cars, but management had decided to reserve the covered garages to the expensive sedans of higher management and of the account managers. The finest company BMW's, Mercedes cars, Porsches and Audi's of Travtelio were parked and protected here. There was however space enough to the north of the monolith to provide for a vast open-air parking lot, available to the employees that drove to work. A regular private bus service linked Travtelio also to the Brussels North Railway Station from 7h30 to 9h00 and from 15h30 to 18h30.

When the Travtelio staff moved from various buildings of mid-town Brussels to the new premises, the recently appointed CEO ordered names to be given to the buildings and floors, not just stark numbers. The name 'The Cloister' stuck for the patio, but the offices floors of that building were called 'The Dawkins Villa', 'The Villa' for short. The main building was named the 'Darwin Skyscraper', or 'Darwin'. The floors of the Villa were called after the Christian Apostles and Evangelists, from one to five as Peter, Luke, Matthew, Mark and John. The floors in Darwin were all named after famous scientists, mathematicians, economists or management gurus, such as Volta, Fleming, Newton, Leibniz, Pythagoras, Bohr, Lavoisier, Heisenberg, Bell, Diesel, Janssen, Solvay, Curie, Einstein, Welsh, Drucker, and so on. The fortieth floor, the highest floor, held the offices of the CEO and of the Presidents of the Executive Board. The thirty-ninth floor was reserved for meeting rooms for these Executives, whereas the offices of the thirty-eighth floor was occupied by most of the Vice-Presidents, though not by all. A few Vice-Presidents preferred offices closer to their respective departments, on lower floors. The highest floor remained to be called the 'Executive' floor, the one lower was named 'Cosmos' and the Vice-Presidents' floor was nicknamed 'Macchiavelli'. This was not very to the taste of the CEO and the Vice-Presidents, but the names stuck.

Travtelio was a production-and-services company. It was a private company, a Belgian 'Société Anonyme', but the Belgian State owned still more than forty percent of the shares. The company's stock was not quoted on any stock market.

Originally state-owned, about sixty percent of its employees were still civil servants, people without any explicit hiring contract, but working under their government 'statute', which applied to all Belgian civil servants of the State's Ministries. Under that statute, no employee could be fired unless – as it was sometimes mockingly said by managers - he or she had done no less than kill his or her father and mother. Since several years, no new employee was hired into Travtelio under this statute, but despite obvious drawbacks, Travtelio did not actively seek to change the contracts for its older employees, because to do so would have been detrimental to its finances. The company had to pay less social security and other taxes to the state for civil servants than for contractual employees, and major strike movements could be expected in the event Travtelio would want to change the more favourable clauses of the civil servant status of most of the employees. Salaries had been adjusted to private company levels, which were usually more favourable also to the civil servants that worked at Travtelio. The transition from a state-owned company to a private company had therefore proceeded smoothly, without major tensions. The former company had had no marketing department and almost no account managers of any significance in the past. Marketing and sales divisions were added, but these were the only main adjustments that had to be made when the Directors General and the Administrator General had to make way for the newly-appointed Presidents and the CEO, many of the new leaders however also having been former civil servants of the company. The higher management of Travtelio was henceforth assured by two Boards. The Executive Board was constituted of the Chief Executive Officer or CEO, the Presidents and Vice-Presidents and a few confidants of the CEO. This Board assumed the daily management of the company and met formally once a week, usually one or often. The Board of Shareholders controlled the Executive Board. The organisation of the company was in divisions. Some of those divisions were business divisions, but Travtelio also had divisions which handled enterprise-wide matters, such as a Legal Services Division in which the Masters at Law worked, a Global Services Division in which various supporting services were managed from cleaning services to security and safety and the department of corporate cars and real estate, a Finance Division and an Information Technology Division. All matters of personnel were handled in a central Human Resources Division, or HR Division, also called Travtelio HR.

This HR Division was an exception, for it also still had HR Departments in every business division, led by a divisional HR Director.

Travtelio produced for and served in Belgium with its thirty-five thousand employees, but the firm was a conglomerate now. It prided in agencies all over the world from Hong Kong and Singapore to Cairo, Buenos Aires, New York and Los Angeles. It organised about forty much smaller companies in various parts of the world, to make of its business name a world-wide brand, and to deliver its services outside Belgium and Europe. It had inherited a lot of old cash-cow money from its state-owned days, with which it quietly founded an investment company. It used these funds to found and help start-ups in as diverse industries as health-care, the electronics industry and the food industry. It was always on the lookout to acquire businesses that might add services in synergy with the mother company.

The Travtelio Headquarters epitomised the main Brussels new and upstart business quarter, the dynamism of the European Capital, and the success of an economic system based on ready investment funds and an intelligent, highly productive workforce, led by a management team that mastered the contacts and the skills necessary to realise the ambitions of its executives, and that was ready to face the challenges of the young European Union, comparable to companies in like size of France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy or Spain.

Travtelio had existed first as a Ministry Administration for over a hundred years, then as a private company for five years. It had lived and thrived under various successive names, corporate logos and stationeries, providing its products and services in different legal regimes.

Travtelio now braced itself for another era in its history. Travtelio's Chief Executive Officer was on the verge of unleashing the forces of change once more over the company. The new rulers of the company felt they were stronger than the gods of Olympus, they were convinced of their impunity, but as in ancient times, these gods implacably applied their simple laws, which punished recklessness with sorrow and downfall.

Chapter Two. Jan Stevens

Jan Stevens was a fraud. He was only too keenly aware he was probably not really a Belgian. He was born in eastern England, in the town of Norwich. At Jan's birth, his father ran immediately to the Registrar of Births and Deaths in the Register Office of Norwich to declare his son, giving the newborn baby his own first name and surname as Ian Andrew Clarkson Junior, and asking for a full certificate.

But two days later already, Jan's mother fled from the Norwich University Hospital, rode with the baby on her lap on a bus to an Avis counter, hired a car, and rode herself, alone, straight to the Port of Dover, where she boarded a ferry for Calais, France. She held Ian Clarkson cradled on the front seat next to her while she drove, until she arrived, totally exhausted, in Brussels. How she passed the police and border control with the baby remained a miracle and a mystery to Jan. Before even looking for a hotel, she rang at the door of a friend of hers, a doctor, threatened to reveal to the man's wife the names and addresses of all the mistresses he had ever deceived his spouse with, probably including herself, and forced him to drive with her to the town hall of the commune of Uccle. There they entered baby Ian under the name of Jan Stevens in the city archives, as being born unexpectedly at home, the mother assisted by the doctor. The address given was that of the doctor. Two witnesses attested to the truth of this birth, but these two were homeless drunks who always lingered in the corridors of the town hall for such cases in which witnesses might be needed and none of the family or friends available. Ian Andrew Clarkson, the English with a namesake father, was from then on also the Belgian Jan André Stevens, born from an unknown father, named after his mother Danièle Adelaïde Stevens.

Danièle remained to live in Brussels afterwards, and Jan's biological father refused to leave Norfolk. Jan never met his father, though his mother showed photographs of the man. Ian Clarkson Senior never bothered about his son. Jan did not miss his father, and before the age of twelve he was also not particularly keen to meet his progenitor, nor did he much probe his mother on the reasons of her flight from Norfolk. When at twelve he asked for the first time about his father, Jan's mother explained how well they lived together and needed not much more. Jan felt but little resentment over a father who did not inquire after him, did not want to upset his mother, cherished his independence, and therefore sought not with any special eager to meet his progenitor. Danièle raised her son alone. She worked, had family money of her own, lived in a luxurious apartment of a nicer suburb of Brussels, had lovers by the bunch, but never married.

Danièle died when Jan was only thirty years old, and around that time also a Norwich solicitor traced him for the inheritance of his father. Jan was surprised when he heard that Ian Andrew Clarkson Senior had left a testament for him and had named Jan his only heir. Ian Clarkson Senior had also never married. He had but one son. He had been a very rich man, the owner of a distribution chain in the East of England, and the owner of several land and house estates in Norfolk. Ian Senior only owned most of the stock of his company; he had not managed the company himself for quite a while.

Jan/Ian found himself suddenly to be a tens of millions Euro millionaire in English and Belgian funds, yet he did not know what to do with his money. At thirty-four he was still a nobody, but he wasn't sure he wanted to be a somebody. His tastes for glory and power were nonexistent. He had a natural proclivity for refusing all authority, which he often imputed to having lacked a father in his education. He knew that without kowtowing for authority he

would get nowhere, but did he really want to get somewhere in particular? He hated rubbing elbows, yet knew that without friends in high places he would get nowhere.

Jan accepted a seat on the Shareholder Board of his father's company, attended five times a year board meetings, but left his involvement at that. He had been wondering these last years what to do with this heritage. The problem was, he liked Brussels, he liked his friends, was seeing a girl on and off yet hesitating to engage himself further with her, had a pleasant life devoid of worries, and a job that satisfied him fully. He was not an adventurer like his mother. He disliked traumatic changes in his life. In truth, Jan had also not lived so far as a rich man. He had never talked much about money with his mother. Money was always available, as much as any other natural resource like air and water. Danièle had given him the least necessary to live comfortably, to pay for his studies and for his living in the small university town of Leuven. He had found a job immediately after his university years, and earned his own. The only indulgence his mother had allowed him was to kick him out of her apartment on his twenty-fourth birthday, right after he proudly showed her his engineering certificate. She gave him his own small but convenient apartment in Brussels.

Jan had no issues with life. He was intelligent, educated, had studied in Dutch but spoke French with his mother at home. He was as truly bilingual as so many other Belgians were. He also spoke English and German fluently and he could read and understand, though sometimes painstakingly, Italian and Spanish. He had had no trouble at all in finding a job. Travtelio was the first firm he applied to, and he was immediately accepted in the Government-owned company, and sworn in as a civil servant. He was one of the last to be thus hired for Travtelio. He regarded himself as a person living for the moment in a kind of no-man's-land, waiting for something to come by that would change his life, but unable to jump the big leap into another world of his own, immediate initiative.

Jan Stevens possessed a Belgian identity card in that name, registered as living in Brussels, and a Belgian international passport. He also had a recent British passport under the name of Ian Clarkson living in the town of Wroxham, Norfolkshire, twelve kilometres northeast of Norwich. Jan often wondered who he really was, unable to decide for himself, but secretly relishing his double identity, although a man of over thirty. He was a Janus, a man with two faces, too young and immature still in mind to choose a responsible life. His tastes lay elsewhere than with glory and power. He had a natural proclivity for refusing authority. He was his own master. Still, when he stood now at a balcony of the corridor that ran along the Dawkins Villa's fourth floor of the company he worked at, he was musing over all this, promising himself to decide on his thirty-fifth birthday what he would really want Clarkson & Stevens to be. That birthday was only a few months off.

Jan Stevens was an employee of Travtelio. He was only known as Jan Stevens at this company, a Flemish university degree engineer, internal Special IT Counsellor to the Division President. Jan was up to his job. He loved to read and study even after his university days. Travtelio allowed him, even encouraged him to travel a lot, to participate in international working sessions, to gain intelligence about what other European companies of the same business were doing, and his only task was to advise. He had no operational tasks, and therefore no immediate responsibilities. He advised only the high and mighty to where the company could and should move to in information technology, and participated in very secret due diligence investigations into the IT records of other companies that Travtelio wanted to acquire or enter into associations with. This secrecy owed him the nickname of Richelieu, whispered only when he entered thorny meetings, but audibly enough so that he might hear it. Nobody at Travtelio knew about Ian Clarkson.

Jan looked down from the balcony into the Cloister, deep beneath. He remarked the sudden eruption of hurrying men and women that never failed to astonish him. He looked at his watch. It was a few minutes before eleven o'clock. Meetings came by the hour at Travtelio. Managers met often in this company. The electronic mailing and calendaring system on everyone's personal computer was adamant. Meetings were automatically scheduled by the organisers, and once you accepted the electronic message, you were supposed to attend. Each meeting lasted exactly one hour. Every hour people hurried to meetings all over the building, crossing also the Cloister. Ten minutes later, the Cloister would mysteriously return to the silence of a real abbey's courtyard. For Jan too it was time to run to a presentation scheduled in the Auditorium by Travtelio's Chief Executive Officer or CEO, Gerald Godelin.

Godelin was bound to present to the about two hundred Directors of the company the new, latest turn in the fate of Travtelio. Godelin and his Presidents, but mostly just Godelin, had argued these last months in the shareholders meetings that the company needed strategic international partners. The main shareholder of Travtelio was the Belgian State, for the company had only recently been transformed from a Government Agency into a Private Stockholders company, the Belgian State still owning the majority of shares. The Belgian State, in need of funds to close its battered budget, offered forty percent of her shares to any corporation or consortium that wanted to invest in Travtelio and inject its know-how in the company. Godelin wanted no banks or investment companies to hold shares. He wanted a consortium of like interests to become shareholders and partners, a group of friendly production and service organisations that could help the company grow outside its home base and bring in new methods, procedures and know-how. Jan had a good idea of which partnerships would be announced today, for Godelin disliked German and Japanese firms and favoured North American and Chinese businessmen. From the due diligence effort he had participated in, Jan guessed which companies would be chosen as partner, except maybe for a European company. Godelin favoured a consortium of a Massachusetts based company, a Chinese Hong Kong based one, and an as yet undisclosed European firm.

Jan Stevens sighed, drew himself out of his gloomy thoughts into action, and forced his legs to the way of the Auditorium. He took the elevator in the Dawkins Villa to the ground Cloister, passed the exotic trees in the patio, and hurried through a part of the lobby of the Skyscraper, to the Auditorium where Gerald Godelin had scheduled his speech on the state of Travtelio.

Emma Wauters emerged from the Skyscraper's elevators and coasted Jan. Emma was the CEO's secretary. She knew Jan well. About a year ago, when Godelin had been appointed to head Travtelio, he had brought his secretary with him in his bags. Godelin phoned Andreas Verstraete, the head of the Information Technology or IT Division for special personal computers and other electronic equipment in his office. Verstraete then asked Jan to organise whatever was needed with Emma. Jan had listened patiently to all of Emma's extravagant demands, ordered dark grey computers of an American brand instead of the Taiwan gear normally installed, and showed her the special software for the protection of the CEO's mailing system, the secured calendaring software, and the manipulation of the company software. He installed saving procedures for the protection of Godelin's confidential files. Soon he had to order the same for the computers of the Presidents. With the help of a specialised firm he had even devices installed to prevent potential bugging and eavesdropping of mobile communications by competitors of Travtelio. A team of technicians of the IT Division worked with him, but Emma had come to rely on Jan for anything that did not snap as she desired, or needed explanation.

Emma was an ebullient, skittish brunette with a nice, round face, small eyes and a small nose, but full lips. She swayed ample curves, was quite garrulous, but had no effort in remaining silent like a grave on all the affairs of Godelin. She regarded Godelin as somewhat of a son, a son older than she was by far, but nevertheless a child to be cuddled and cherished. Gradually, Emma allowed Jan in her trust and confided in him. At one stage, he knew all the passwords Godelin used on his personal computer. Jan found Godelin to be a dangerous son, but he kept his thoughts for himself on that subject.

After a few months, Jan Stevens and Andreas Verstraete provided a group of IT assistants to help Emma and the Presidents continuously, also with the equipment at their homes, but Emma continued to call in Jan whenever she was not satisfied with that group, and that was often. She called Jan in also when it was not really necessary, liking a chat and a flirt, and Jan appreciated her impish sense of humour. Emma Wauters was about the same age as Jan, married but divorced and hence single. She seemed to like Jan because he satisfied her every whim without questions. From then on, Jan held the relations of the IT Division to Godelin's office.

Emma now walked up to Jan, who also waited for her, hugged him, drawing strange looks from passers-by who knew who she was, smiled teasingly, and asked why she had not seen him at her office lately.

'I guessed your equipment worked fine now,' Jan answered mockingly. He added, 'you have an entire team to help you.'

Jan changed subjects. 'Have you any idea what Godelin is going to say today?'

Emma walked closer to Jan, bodies touching, and whispered, 'Gerald will announce which companies have taken a stake in Travtelio. American, Chinese, Swedish and Czech managers are going to come to the Skyscraper. Many current Directors, especially those who are still civil servants, may be replaced. There shall be changes in management galore! Don't worry about your own job though, that will remain as before. The boss has gone to war again. Marie Donat in HR has had to change the wording of Gerald's speech a lot, but Gerald has remained as tight-fisted as ever. Do not sit near me. Gerald doesn't like me to become too familiar with staff.'

She drew away from him as they entered through opposite doors into the presentations room. Jan sat, but continued to muse about his first years at Travtelio.

2

Jan Stevens had not immediately sought a job in industry after his studies. He had first remained working as an assistant to a university Professor. He worked at a Doctorate and won that title. His contract finished and not renewable after a few years, he had applied for a job of civil servant at a whim, having read a poster in the university's student hall that Travtelio was seeking young, uppy engineers. He was only twenty-eight at that time, and Travtelio was still a Ministry Administration. With time, the company transformed into a private company, the shares however remaining owned by the Government. Jan Stevens witnessed the change. Jan worked as a loner for a few years, but then he was given responsibility over small teams of university-degree advisors. He had success with the reorganisations he proposed, all still very technical, and he gained the respect of the older programmers, analysts and system engineers for his hands-on knowledge. He was the only engineer in IT who could sit next to the software developers and actually understand what they were programming. He was called in, by and by, when the developers could not find what went wrong with their programs. He knew several programming languages, and taught in these, too. He asked to attend conferences all over Europe, and to participate in working groups of international associations, and he obtained easily permission for that. Jan had no secretary, but when he began to fly

frequently, he had to reserve flights and hotels, and the administration of that became tedious. His boss, Andreas Verstraete, proposed him to use the secretary of a Director for his flight and hotel arrangements. Jan came to share a secretary with Thomas Denis, the IT Development Director and friend of Andreas Verstraete.

Thomas Denis was much older than Jan Stevens. Denis was an old rat of Travtelio IT. He impressed Jan much. Denis was large and broad, not tall, resembling an aged rugby player. He was in his fifties, dressed sloppily in almost ragged, never ironed suits and worn-out shirts, shirttails flying in the afternoon. From his cuffs hung sometimes threads of linen, tempting Jan more than once to pull at them, wondering whether the entire shirt would unravel. He always had a harried edge to his appearance. Thomas Denis moved like the general of a battle army, as if he had fought against all the devils of the earth. He considered each employee of Travtelio as a potential devil also, and he knew all the tricks of his men like a regimental sergeant-major. Although a tight-fisted, hard man, he was very much loved and respected by his people. They had an anecdote on him at hand at all times. Thomas Denis looked Jan over the first time Jan walked into his office, and apparently he liked what he saw. Denis took Jan under his wings.

‘So my boy, you are to use the services of my secretary, courtesy of Andreas Verstraete. Don’t abuse of her. She’s a nice girl, a little slow in the mind sometimes, but she is a dear heart, so you are not to debauch her. Also, I am not to be trifled with!’

The secretary of Thomas Denis was Marguerite Dupas and, like the Development Director, she was way in her fifties then, looking like a grouchy spinster, so Jan Stevens had no intentions a tall of debauching her. She also looked much like Thomas Denis, squat, heavy and square. Still, when Jan Stevens was accepted in the arms of Denis, he was to be cuddled by Marguerite. Marguerite booked Jan’s flights and found the best hotels for the sums of travels allowed by Travtelio. She brought him coffee and, more importantly, all the gossip that circulated in the company. Thomas Denis and Marguerite protected him more than Andreas Verstraete, and Thomas never addressed Jan Stevens other than by ‘boy’ or ‘son’, insisting however Jan called him Mister Denis or sir. Such was the habit in the old Travtelio.

‘I know you’re smart,’ Denis would say, ‘I can see you’re smart and I can smell it. Never try to be smart with me, though. Trying to be smart with me won’t work for long, and afterwards I’ll smash you! So don’t spook around my teams, playing the young hotshot! You can ask me anything you want.’

When Jan sought diversion from having remained for hours sitting at his desk, studying and scheming for interesting changes in the way the IT Division might work, he would go over to the office of Thomas Denis for a chat and a coffee. Marguerite set excellent coffee. Jan asked what Denis thought of his ideas for far-reaching changes.

‘This is one hell of a company,’ Denis would muse. ‘You, youngsters from university, have all the luck in the world! There is a saying, though, that a very rich man once asked his advisor how to lose some more money. The advisor said there were three ways. The rich man could take on a mistress or two, gamble on the stock market, or hire in an engineer. The first way of losing money was the most agreeable, the second the most exciting, but the last the quickest. Consider Andreas Verstraete as that rich man. You young engineers, you are still wet behind the ears, yet you have the opportunity to spill enormous amounts. You can play with the largest budgets in the country. And you cannot help playing! When you have an itch, you cannot help but to scratch! You are lucky to have people like me and Verstraete telling you to slow down a bit and not to start tearing down the damn place in one second. Slow down! You have a long life before you. Enjoy being young. Go and chase a few girls. That

should keep your hormones busy for a while. Wait a few years yet with your earth-shaking initiatives. Marry, and have babies. You can learn a lot from how babies get up and begin to walk. You are but a baby in wet pants. Move, crawl, get up and begin to walk before you want everybody to run along you. Be cautious, for you might fall! Nobody expects of you to run the first instant. Everybody will resent you for changes, as the pressure will mount. This is a Government company! I have not yet made up my mind on you! What will you turn out to be? A young potential who will have shed off its turkey feathers to be only a good talker at forty? Or will you have proven your worth and capacity to perform at forty? You don't look so brilliant to me, after all, and you don't talk too much. I think you'll do. But I reserve my opinion for now.'

At yet another moment, Jan asked how one could be promoted at Travtelio.

'I wondered when you would ask me about that,' Denis began. 'It is very straightforward, really! You have to kiss the arses of a few politicians. Promotions are given by a Minister. Of course, the Director-Generals propose a name to be promoted, but that proposal is like a death sentence, for the guy proposed never gets it! It is a law of nature! Use your brains. Try to figure out which political parties will win the next elections, or which parties will form the next Governments. Buy a membership card. Hang out some posters of such a party at the windows of your apartment. Hang around at political parties. Get drunk with one or two Members of Parliament. Help them in their campaign by distributing folders with their picture on at railway stations. If necessary, ask to work in a Minister's Cabinet for a few years. You will be automatically promoted here. Do you know how much you are worth to a political party? You are worth twenty points on a list of political appointments. The political parties created such a list to make sure political nominations were kept in balance. Each party in a Government has a number of points to distribute; parties that are not in power have none. So chose the right party! At each promotion, points are taken from the total a party has. Take care therefore to seek a promotion at the start of a Governmental period! Also, do not fear to enter your candidature for a promotion in an entirely different domain than the one you master. Go for it! When you get promoted, Travtelio management not being complete fools will retain you in the job you can be useful in, here in IT, and somebody else who knows the job in the other Division will replace you there with great pleasure, so that not only you but also that person will get a higher salary. I made a drawing once, an organigram of Travtelio, a picture of who sits on his promotion chair and who does not. The image was a real Gruyere cheese. Travtelio is rich enough to pay for double Directors everywhere. For practically each place I found a promoted Director who sat somewhere else, as well as a replacement. Your promotion will have nothing whatsoever to do with how well you work at Travtelio. Whether you work at Travtelio or not, how well and how much, is totally superfluous. Now, kissing the arse of a politician once every few years is not much to do. You can also stop whenever you like, and change parties. No need to kiss arses here, at Travtelio. You can do here as you please, to work at what you like, to work or to work not. You are free like James Bond! Was he also not a civil servant? You can tell your boss he is a complete idiot. That is your privilege, and it will not impede your career. Of course, our Verstraete is quite well introduced in politics. He has kissed many high-positioned arses, so you should go easy on him.'

Those were the old ways. Thomas Denis had not counted on Travtelio becoming a private company, managed not anymore by Administrator-Generals and Director-Generals appointed by politicians, but by a Chief Executive Officer chosen by a Board of Shareholders, even though that Board was still put in place by Government. The CEO was to be a professional

manager, hired in at an exorbitant salary from industry, and all promotions were to be decided in the future by the CEO.

‘A bunch of masochists, that is what they are,’ Thomas Denis exclaimed, referring to politicians. ‘They hand over power to a totally unknown guy, a guy who seeks absolute power and who will screw them any time he sees an opportunity. Take care, my boy! Within a few years, you are going to earn double salary and you will drive a company car, all expenses including gasoline paid. You will have a credit card to pay your flights and hotels by, and with that credit card you will be treated like a King once you step in the lobby of a hotel. But the days you could say bust to your bosses are over! You will have to learn to kow-tow. I’ll have to rehearse that with you! Go on; try getting on your knees for once. You will kiss arses not once every four years or so to a politician, which is a very easy thing. You will kiss arses each day to the Presidents and Directors of the new Travtelio! Hell and damnation! How lucky I have been not to have to stay for long at the new Travtelio! You will have to seek friends, however loathsome, among the high and mighty on this very floor! That will be the rub that will mean calamity to many a poor soul in current management. The era of abject obedience has begun! Travtelio is a democracy no longer; we suffer under a dictatorship. Hail the corpocrats! Learn to cope with that, or get the hell out of here, as quickly as you can! Go to university, try to become a Professor!’

‘What about you?’ Jan asked.

‘My career is finished,’ Thomas Denis chuckled. ‘The new bosses will want young, handsome men around them, half of them homo’s. That is better for the image of a dynamic company. I am too old to start rubbing sleeves of boys in power. From now on, you will not see my name ever again on reports! I am going to vanish into oblivion. I will do my job so silently nobody will believe I am still handing out the shots in the IT Division. I will be the Invisible Man of IT! I’ll make myself inconspicuous. Ultimately, some eager HR boy will find my name on a list, and they will throw me out. As to you, I would suggest that if you still want to overhaul this Division, you prepare your reports in the nicest wordings and graphics, but also seek today a head hunter company, and hand them your curriculum vitae, so that you can hit and run as soon as one of the new guys start to kick at you. You would be surprised how fast you can run out of friends in a private company! Prepare your plan B now. Start thinking at what kind of other company you might like to be in.’

Jan Stevens was not only a leader of men. He studied constantly the techniques of management, also the newer ones. The technicians of IT Operations, the developers and analysts respected him because he could program, like they, in several computer languages, and Jan could also sit in the control room of the data centres and type in commands to learn the status of the machines and the applications. The operators could not hide anything from him, though they didn’t. When an operator needed a smoke with Jan present, the man could stand up and say, not ask, ‘take over from me, will you?’ and Jan would smile and take over. That was the time when Gerald Godelin became the first Chief Executive Officer ever of Travtelio. Jan did not stroke at the sleeves of his bosses and the operators knew that. He asked the men how IT fared in the first, pioneering days of the beginning of IT. Only the older operators and developers told him of those times. These men had done no formal studies in IT, for such courses were not given yet at schools and universities when IT began to be used in their company. They had been technicians of Travtelio, given courses by the computer firms and had then been thrown in the jobs of developers and operators.

One of the oldest developers who still worked at Travtelio told Jan about the very first multiprocessing computers, which had central memories of small iron rings, memories of

lower capacity than of a current mobile phone, and connected to which were rotating disks larger than a cauldron and on which one could place less bits of information than on a modern personal desk computer. These men had programmed in assembler languages, extremely difficult and basic computer tools. Jan Stevens made friends with Daniel Drumont, a developer who had worked on the first PCs, even from the time before the largest computer firms produced their first standard machines. Drumont told him many tips and tricks on how to develop programs faster and with smaller amounts of memory necessary. This Drumont proved also to be a genius electronics man, who tinkered with the most sophisticated circuits in his cellar. The man had never studied electronics; he was an autodidact in IT and electronics, but he knew more in these domains than Jan Stevens had learned at university. Jan spent many a weekend in Drumont's cellar, soldiering and testing equipment with his older friend. Drumont of course spoke of this to his colleagues at Travtelio. When special solutions were sought, or when bugs in devices eluded the best technicians of Travtelio, Jan Stevens and Daniel Drumont were called in as last hope to look for the errors. Jan Stevens reasoned logically and Daniel Drumont went at the issue with intuition and experience. Few faults escaped them, though their solutions were often weird and warped.

Then, Travtelio had been privatised and later still Gerald Godelin had been appointed Chief Executive Officer of the company.

3

The Auditorium's first ten rows or so were already filled with chatting managers, and more people streamed in. The ranks closed. It was not good to sit in separate, dispersed groups all over the place. It was not good to be considered a backbencher, sitting way up, far from the rostrum where Godelin already stood, bespectacled, reviewing his prepared speech papers. Gerald Godelin was a tall, robust, broad-chested man with a handsome, very masculine face and ample but short trimmed, greying hair. He struck the figure of a football player, lean but broad in the shoulders, tightly muscled belly, elegantly dressed in a dark-grey, tightly fitted, perfectly ironed double-breasted suit. Jan knew Godelin was an avid golf-player, a huntsman, and the CEO liked hellishly fast sports cars. Godelin's face was always slightly tanned, even in the middle of winter, as if he had been outdoors all day. This was not possible in the air-conditioned tower he worked in, so Godelin had to use ultra-violet lamps to produce his tan. Godelin stood straight and firm, as his employees should remember him. He stood to a table at which a few of his Presidents also faced the audience. He looked around the Auditorium, stood tall, alert and battle-ready, and satisfied to see so many of his managers present. The room quietened when he started to speak, the spotlights on his person only. The lights focused on a fine, imposing, sportive figure in the Auditorium, the only man standing, radiating power and acumen, and surely the handsomest man present.

‘Good morning to you all. Welcome once again! I asked you to convene here because Travtelio rolls on to a major new course. I will be brief.

As you recall, we set out together a year ago for a few changes after my first hundred days of presence in this company. Today, I have the pleasure to announce a radical turn of the wheel of fortune, a pack of new measures to propel us into the next era. Competition is readying to slaughter us and to steal our customers, so we have to react and fight. First of all, as some of you may already have heard, Travtelio will use the knowledge of new partners to face the challenges of our fast-pacing world. Our Executive Board decided to look for international corporations that might be interested to bring to us the necessary power, support and know-how to enter new markets, and to modernise our existing services. I am honoured today to

announce to you our partners: a consortium led by a United States of America giant of industry, joined by its affiliated Hong Kong Chinese and Swedish enterprises. These American, Asian and European conglomerates have taken a thirty-four percent stake in the stock of Travtelio. Managers of those companies will soon arrive and introduce us to fledgling markets, new products, services and methods.

This participation makes of Travtelio a truly private company and a global player, as government-owned stock dwindles to below fifty percent. The change is tremendous, as we must move from an inwardly-looking traditional civil-servant company to a hard-driving, combative, fully customer-oriented firm. Many of you have asked me in the past months what our chances were for survival as a private company in a privatised business environment. I can tell you now that whether we will survive or not depends on how hard you work to satisfy the shareholders and our customers. Our new shareholders have invested their money in our company. They expect two-digit growth in profits and ever higher shares value in return for their confidence. The alternative is what I refuse to even consider: these investors pulling back out, torpedoing our hard-earned value, leading to massive lay-offs of personnel. Ultimately, however, not the shareholder but the customer will decide on whether we live or die. We must develop new products and services to attract new customers, fight hard to hold every customer we have, and change our procedures to serve them faster and better. We must delight them with service, surprise them with better than excellent after-service, and present them with glamorous new products he or she cannot do without. We are going to make this company move!

Godelin let these words sink in. Then he continued.

‘The change in shareholders must bring forth a change in attitude at Travtelio. We must compete with the best, not just in our country, but in the world. American, Chinese and Swedish managers will therefore come here to lead a set of development projects in every division to boost us into the new era of business. Not only must your ways of working change. With time, within the year, forty percent or so of our managers have to be replaced to enforce the new mindset. Change shall be our way of life. Our Human Relations President will in a while dwell upon a few of the measures that will accompany our change in partnerships, the measures that will be put in place in the following weeks and months. However, I am confident that you shall be up to the challenge. You must all learn to do more with less. This was not the mindset you had when you were still a fully government-owned and government-led company. Those times are over. Now, you will have to learn to earn your fine company cars and your bonuses. For those who do well, salaries will increase and bonuses will go up drastically.

Remember the Apollo 13 mission to deep space. When the Apollo cabin was in danger of explosion, when several vital functions failed in the spacecraft, the teams on board, as well as Houston Control, did not drop their arms. They started to work, and devised ingenious systems and methods with the slightest of means to bring that mission safely back to earth. I urge you all to see the film of that feat one more time. Let that be an example to you. Ask me not for additional means to please our customers! Ask not what this company can do for you; ask what you can do for this company! Use your intelligence to find and implement solutions that need only the less of our resources. That is why you have a big car and a fat bonus! You will fail in some instances. I know that. Do not give me just the good news. I want to know the bad news before the good, so that we can react together. Failures will be allowed, hidden failures not. I want no sloppy behaviour, no peevishness, and no lack of progress in any domain. Your attitude must be: can do! A battle is on. We must win it!

Also, learn more to make your own decisions. The time is over when you had to run to your Director-General for permission to act. Act! You must act to guarantee returns for our shareholders, and therefore you must conquer and ravish the customer waiting out there. The clock is ticking for us. Our products and services will soon be delivered in a totally free market, a decision of the European Union. That moment is less than a year off. By that time, you must be ready to stand up to the challenge. I have therefore ordered a huge clock to be hung in the lobby, on the ground floor of the Skyscraper. That clock will not run forward. It will run backwards! The clock will indicate how much time is left until the global free market of our business domain is on us. That clock is the clock of doom if you stay asleep! Only when this company is ready to fight back by the time that clock reaches zero, only then will this firm be able to survive. Otherwise, we will all disappear together and most of you will be led off. A war is on, guys, and we have to win that war!

Godelin stepped aside from the rostrum as tremendous applause broke loose. The Human Relations President, Bernard de Voncques, stepped forward, pulling his dark blue suit to smoothness. De Voncques was a small, thin man, with a pale weasel face lined by a small, black beard and hair of a sandy colour already sprinkled with grey. He seemed nervous and shiftily. He fiddled with his tie. He stood in a rumpled blue sports jacket, an off-the-rack suit and inexpensive tie, attire that was clearly not to the taste of the CEO. De Voncques disappeared at first almost entirely behind the rostrum that Godelin had dominated so forcefully. De Voncques stepped aside so that the audience could see him. He only leaned with one hand on the stand, looking for some support there, and looked a long time over the heads of the gathered managers. He looked at his papers once every while, pausing often as he spoke.

‘Good morning to you. Here follow some of the measures in the HR domain, measures necessary to boost the performances of our employees. In the next weeks we will introduce management-by-objectives. Each employee, let’s call him ‘X’, will be given objectives by his manager, by the people we call his ‘X plus one’. The objectives will be on what must be accomplished in the next year, and the objectives will have to be clearly defined and measurable. Objectives must be derived from what we want our business to be. They must be specific and enable focusing on our efforts and resources necessary to boost our productivity. All personnel will be judged on the realisation of these objectives at the end of the year. We will accompany this with a bonus scheme, so you will all have the possibility to earn more. End-of-year quotes will go from one to five, from bad and under-performing to average, fine and excellent. Bonuses will be provided to employees with end-quotes between three and five. People, who receive two times in a row, in a period of two years, the quotes one or two, may be laid off.

You will soon receive the forms for the objectives, to be handed down along the hierarchy lines of managers. Each employee shall have his or her written objectives. All objectives will thus have to be defined within three months from now.

The objectives have to be defined according to the jobs of each person working in this company. Each employee will therefore be given precise job descriptions. Salaries shall be owed according to this job description and to the salary category that matches it. Categories up until Executive management shall go from one to fourteen. Executive management shall be in category fifteen. In category fifteen we will have of course the CEO and the Presidents, Executive management or P-class management of about ten people.

We will form a larger A-class of staff, the class of the Vice-Presidents and Directors. These will number about a hundred and fifty people, most of you.

We will have an M-class of about seven hundred middle and lower managers, and an E-class of thirty-five thousand employees.

A special incentive program to leave the company will be provided for about five thousand employees. There will however be no compelled leavings. We will install a program of voluntary leavings, offering pre-pension plans and other packages to those who desire to find their fortunes elsewhere. This will be called 'Operation Leave without Pain', or OLP.

Managers of all classes, except the Executive class, will have to prove they are indeed fit to be real managers, not merely technicians and administrators. Therefore, all managers of the A-class and M-class will change jobs every three years, so that they should be able to prove they can perform in a wider domain than what they have been doing so far. This three-yearly change will of course be accompanied by changes in job description. Every three years we will therefore declare all posts of management open and accept candidatures for the open places. Persons of the M-class will also be allowed to postulate for jobs of the A-class.

Now, I have the pleasure to announce another major point. The Government has allowed for a percentage of shares to be handed over to personnel. Therefore, Executive management of P-class will receive a number of shares. Higher management of A-class will receive options on shares, and shares will be presented at advantageous prices to all employees of M and E classes. When this measure will come into operation will be announced later, together with more details.

One of our further measures concerns the company restaurants. We will of course continue to serve first rate food in our current staff restaurant, which will be called henceforth the 'Terra Nova' restaurant, and this restaurant shall no longer be managed by ourselves, but by a specialised catering company. On the fifth floor of the Dawkins Villa we will install a gourmet restaurant for Directors of the A-class, which will also be accessible to corporate account managers. These managers can bring their clients there or provide dinners on special occasions. This will be called the 'Clouds' restaurant. On the thirty-ninth floor of the Skyscraper, we are installing a smaller restaurant reserved to P-class staff, to the executive managers.

This, more modern organisation of our human resources, shall contribute to the creation of a dynamic environment of the can-do mentality our CEO demanded of everybody just a few moments ago. The modalities of these changes will be announced one by one in the next days. Folders describing it all in detail will be presented to you personally.'

After these two speeches, two other Presidents presented briefly the changes and the state of the operations and of the finances of Travtelio, reviewing Godelin's tenure at the helm of Travtelio. All figures were up and bright these last months: higher production, more turnaround in services, higher sales, higher EBITDA of earnings before interests, depreciation and amortisation, higher profits overall, and accompanying higher dividends paid out to the Government that had remained the first owner of Travtelio. Travtelio had not been thrashed yet by aggressive competitors. All its sector indicators were on green. Its stock value stood at ten times earnings. Yet, competition could come crashing in at force on the day of the complete liberalisation of markets, less than a year from now.

Gerald Godelin closed the meeting after less than one hour of presentations. He invited the attendants to a drink of sparkling wine outside the Auditorium, in the lobby.

Groups of managers formed in the lobby, sipping from their tall glasses filled with the white wine. Jan Stevens stood in a corner with Michel Doriant, Sara Jansen, Thomas Denis and Jean Collet, all managers of the Information Technology Division. At first, the managers were too stunned by Godelin's speech to speak out easily. They felt a crushing weight hanging over them, a tightening of all screws, a move that contrasted sharply with all the good news of the fine business results obtained the last year.

Jan Stevens was slightly embarrassed when also Emma Wauters joined them, for everything said here might be reported back by her to Gerald Godelin. The others seemed not to care, on the contrary. They had things to say that they seemed to want to reach the upper floors.

Michel Doriant was the congenial, easy-going IT Operations Director. He was among the older men in the group, so he spoke first.

Doriant said, 'guys, we have just obtained two new gods to adore, Gog and Magog, the shareholder and the customer. We must sink on our knees to these gods and pray for their grace with folded hands! We all know the first and second of the Ten Commandments of Moses. The first is: I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol. And the second: you shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God. Those commandments are broken, now. We have a new religion, and even the liturgy that comes with it. Godelin and his Presidents will stage presentations like this to all personnel, and sing his High Masses, like today.' Doriant sank down mockingly to his knees.

Sara Jansen, the IT HR Director, a thin and small woman, bespectacled with heavy horn-rim glasses, knew already about many of the changes that had been announced. She whispered, 'we must all kow-tow to our new masters. The Americans will send Boeings full of their people. The Chinese and the Swedes, accompanied by people from their Czech daughter company, will only come for decoration. Beware for the bloodbath in managers that will follow!'

Thomas Denis, the fat-bellied hulk, whose large group of analysts and programmers spewed out new application packages regularly, added, 'why the hell then was all that loud clapping in our hands for? We should see the writing on the wall! That guy just announced near half of us will be thrown out of the company within the year, big car and all, yet we all gave him a thundering applause! We should put our heads on the block, yet continue to clap in our hands! Life resembles an elevator, my boys. Until now, the lifts remained rather still. Godelin just set the lifts in motion. Some of the lift cars will move up, and some down. Civil servants definitely ride in the lifts that descend! Godelin also talked about being permissive of failure! Now, we all know what he meant by that! At the first mistake made by us or by one of our personnel, we will be thrown out of the company or demoted and banned, stigmatised and treated like dirt. That is what happens now, and that is what will happen in the future. Was that sarcasm or cynicism of the guy?'

Jan thought all of that was gallows talk, but he was secretly pleased strong messages had been delivered to Emma Wauters, who sipped her sparkling wine, listened but refrained from saying anything, and didn't smile anymore.

'It took me three years to understand more or less how the invoicing and accounting applications worked. It took me so long also to know who and where and when the processes worked in the firm. If after three years everybody has to trade in jobs, we will constantly have managers in place who do not know anything about what they are managing,' worried Jean Collet.

‘Is that an issue?’ Thomas Denis laughed. ‘No manager should be burdened with any knowledge of what he or she is managing! Knowledge deters from decision-making. Didn’t you know that? I heard of this theory, which is obviously put in place here. When a Director doesn’t know a thing about the business he is managing, he of course shies away from tolerating somebody under his orders who knows more than him about the company and its processes, because such a person would become a danger for him or her. The Director chooses somebody who knows even less of the business! Finally, the company ends up with an entire hierarchy of managers who know nothing about what happens in their factories and teams. The only thing they still do is people management, but limited to assembling statistics on the days worked and the subjects handled. In fact, they become administrators. When they have a decision to make, they just call in consultants to tell the employees what to do. That works fine, for no manager higher-up does ever challenge a consultant, who is presented as an expert. Who would dare to put into question the findings of an overpaid consultant? Consultants are highly paid, so costs are driven up, but the Director who hired in the consultant gets applauded because he was smart enough to hire somebody in, and the decision made by the consultant is always infallible, always the one and very best. When two dogs fight over a bone, the third runs away with it, and that is always the consultant. Accountability also is solved elegantly, because the Director will not be blamed for the mistakes of the consultant, and the consultant simply makes certain next time a colleague of his is sent over. Gentlemen, the era of the consultant has dawned over Travtelio!

By the way, I had the impression our big bosses do not recognise the value of internal counsellors, or of researchers. They only think of managers as resources bossing over employees. I never heard the notion of contribution mentioned, whereas all management gurus state contribution to the company is the one and only main quality most necessary in a manager.’

‘You know the traditional difference between managers and leaders, Michel,’ Jan agreed. ‘Leaders draw their teams along by setting examples and by devising new methods and products. They rely on the intelligence of their people to carry out their tasks, and bother them in that as little as possible. Leaders are the people in front of their teams. Managers are the guys behind their teams. Managers push their people forward by statistics, constant harassing, procedures and figures. Godelin is creating a company of managers, not of leaders! Leaders are overhead, and overhead must be cut because it is a cost. But a company without leadership just rumbles along, it lacks literally direction.’

Doriant changed subjects. ‘We are not used to work with objectives, although there is nothing to say against the principle. You guys are lucky to work in anything but Operations. Computers and software crash, but it is not you guys of Development to bear the grunt for that. The only ones blamed are always the Operations guys. I know and you know that applications can’t be built without the occasional error, but when the applications fail and go down, it is we who get clobbered. That will become worse when an American or Chinese Director is placed above us. Are we all going to be demoted by expatriates, expats? Is that what Godelin was telling when he announced changes in management?’

‘I am afraid not,’ Emma Wauters intervened. ‘Gerald is indeed planning massive layoffs among current management. Some of the expats will be Directors, most will have consultancy contracts.’

‘First,’ Jan objected to Emma, ‘Godelin cannot lay off the civil servant statute managers, because those are still protected by their Government statute. They simply cannot be fired. He

can demote them, shuffle them aside, but not diminish their salaries. He can lay off the contractual managers hired the last years, who have not been hired under the Governmental statute, but that would be a strange paradox, wouldn't it, for the contractual managers have been gotten in only recently, at high cost, to fill in gaps or to lead to new products and services. So, what is the meaning of such an announcement? Godelin may not be aware of the issue, but then his HR President has been keeping certain things from him. Or Godelin is cornered, must bring costs of HR much higher and destroy much of the spirit of his managers in the act. I dare to hope he is not that blind!

Second, consultants cannot hold Directors' roles. Consultants cannot lead employees, for that is forbidden by Belgian law. And a consultant who is kept a long time at the firm can argue that in fact he or she was in the same position as a contractual employee of the company, meaning a lot of issues of added taxes, social security, and so on. Does Godelin realise all of that? His HR President should!

'He may have other objectives with such an exercise,' Emma replied mysteriously, but she too remained perplexed. 'The layoffs will also not come soon. Godelin can send quite a few managers out on pre-pension schemes.'

'Yes,' Jan continued. 'Godelin can organise plans for pushing people out, people from fifty years on, promising them no or minor cuts in salaries and slightly reduced pension at sixty. Travtelio is rich enough to support such schemes. The people that fear changes may thus run off, too scared to remain in function. A classic trick to have people accept changes is to create a sense of urgency, a sense of danger. I guess quite a few people may be scared out in this way. Was that the meaning of his speech? One thing is certain, though: all this is going to cost loads of money to the company. The CEO must boost productivity a lot more just to pay for his HR initiatives!'

The men fell silent after that remark, but they continued to stand holding their long, shining glasses of bubbling white wine in their hands. They were all sad, for their days of easy-going work, tough, but rewarding in satisfaction, seemed to have come to an end.

Jan especially reflected on the creation of employee classes. He disliked that categorisation thoroughly. The creation of such classes, he felt, would come with one class being very aware only of its own members, its own elite. But each class would be impervious to the needs of other classes. The classes would make inequalities among personnel very visible. They would corrode mutual trust between people who had to work together and live together. Jan was sure of this, and he loathed the egoism it would create, the end of solidarity, even though he did not understand what in the nature of the human being caused this to happen. Godelin had introduced with one stroke a caste system into the company, and created an elite mentality. That would stir up resentment among managers and employees.

Jan asked to Emma, 'M-class and L-class may mean Middle Managers and Lower Managers. What does the P-class and the A-class stand for?'

Doriant answered in her place. 'Haven't you understood? The P stands for Princes and the A for Aristocrats! Isn't that why the thirty-eight floor is called the Macchiavelli floor?'

All laughed. Emma walked on.

After a while, the men and Sara Jansen put down their glasses and went to have dinner in the Terra Nova restaurant. Jan, Michel Doriant and Sara Jansen stayed on, finished their drinks, talked about their coming holidays, then they too strolled to the restaurant.

4

At that same moment an Airbus of Brussels Airlines diving in from London, made its final descent to the main airport of Belgium, to Zaventem, a little town north of the city, and also north of the Travtelio Skyscraper.

Andrew Raga looked down through the side window of that plane. He looked in this clear day to the place where he would be living for the next months and maybe years. It was his first time to Brussels, but as the plane swung aside and turned, shaking slightly at the change of thrust under its wings, he recognised the Atomium, the large silvery balls of Brussels' epitomising monument, its nine metal spheres representing an iron crystal, a remnant of the Brussels World Fair of 1958. Raga did not think much of it. It was smaller than most of the symbol buildings of US cities. It was not as spectacular as the Eiffel Tower of Paris, or as Saint Paul's of London. He also saw not the skyscraper of Travtelio, the building he would work in, which slid now right under his plane, and he would also not have been impressed with that, being used to the skyscrapers of Chicago and Manhattan. He would have laughed heartily at the name given to Travtelio's headquarters.

Raga leaned back in his seat of business class. He was not satisfied with what he had reached in his professional life so far. He was a manager, quite convinced he could head practically any business, whether in engineering, finances, purchasing, marketing, administration, human resources, or whatever. He had only been a lower and then a middle manager the previous years. His career had been slow in the making, but recently he had finally gotten to the breakthrough that might shoot his rocket up in the sky. He had been appointed to Accounting Director at his last firm, and heard almost at the same time how his company sought for managers to teach a Belgian firm in which it had taken stocks, how to manage the modern way. The modern way was the American way. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for to boost his career, for overseas he would certainly advance faster. He could apply for a Director's job at this Belgian firm and either grow to ever higher positions there, quickly and easily, or return to the US with the aura of having gained European expatriate experience.

Raga had insisted much on an Executive role in Europe, but he had gained only a place as Special IT Director in the Information Technology Division of Travtelio, with a vague promise for more and better. He haggled for added niceties. With the job came one of the biggest BMW cars allowed in the company, as well as a large apartment in Uccle, the fanciest neighbourhood of Brussels worth a rent of two thousand five hundred Euros a month. Many of his expenses would be paid. He insisted on a free subscription to the golf court the Travtelio Executives used. He had also asked and obtained a function as a Board Member in one of Belgium's corporations. He had much worked on that point, because he wanted to return to the US with full hands. He wanted to show off with his credentials, beyond his management job at Travtelio. The CEO Godelin had shaken up his contacts to secure him a Board Membership in a European petroleum distribution company the Belgian Government equally owned shares in. Raga liked that, not believing his luck, but he had been the only American asking for such an assignment, and it had proven easier to obtain than he and even his bosses had expected. The Belgian petroleum distribution company had also wanted to add the services and opinions of an American Executive to its management, so Andrew Raga was lucky. What Godelin had to tell and promise that company, Raga didn't care about and didn't want to know, but Raga realised happily in what high regard the Europeans held American management. He was more convinced now than ever that his request was not overdrawn.

Andrew Raga truly believed in American superiority in all business matters. He had a plan to advance fast at Travtelio, to move higher up on the élan he had now secured. As a Director of IT, he would start by having a talk with the leading Presidents of his American company at

Travtelio, learn to know them, make friends with them, flatter them, and play with them on the golf court. He would ask them what they needed most in IT services, and then deliver just that. He had to push to their presence, remain in their attention, present himself as one of their advisors, not just in matters of IT, and then see to it that his name and face remained in the attention of the Executives when higher postings in management came free. It was a tricky task to make sure his name would come up as the first name these men could think of for new, rewarding jobs. He would have to make himself a friend of every expat Executive, whether American or Chinese, for only when one had friends did one advance; one would be demoted and discarded when one ran out of friends in high places. Raga leaned back in his seat and began to write a list of items by which he might secure the attention and friendship of the Presidents.

One had of course to stay out of trouble, for that would mean discomfiture and being shipped back to the US, but a vague-sounding function like Special IT Director suited Andrew Raga fine, because it was not an Operations job. It was an advisory position, a job without direct responsibilities, and thus also no dangers at the start. As an advisor he could cry for audits and stir up some shit, not only in the IT Division, but also in the business departments. He could present a few nice improvements, propose cost cutting initiatives, and present opportunities for new business. The beauty of that, he smiled, was that he had even nothing to do by himself, except asking nasty questions, questions that he was sure the lower managers of Travtelio would anyhow eagerly propose to him to spite their Directors, for Raga was convinced the old governmental firm was very badly managed. The audits would be done by hired consultants and he, Raga, would present the results and the proposals of change. He might not have done too well so far. He was very pleased, however, with the way he had handled matters to swing this assignment in Brussels to his side. Why, he might even have a good time here and take on an affair with the girls of Brussels. Was it not well known these French girls were fast and hot ones?

Andrew Raga was quite excited at the exotic feel of European women, at lush English girls and elegant Parisian models. Still, he feared a little these European woman, who no doubt would be sophisticated, fickle, demanding, and dangerous while being attractive and exciting. The point was to stay in control. He did not want any danger to his career from a screaming girl at Travtelio's Headquarter. He thought there would be many lonely, nice, easy expat American women coming over to Brussels. These also would fly over to boost their careers. He might find a steady-going US girl, maybe a God-fearing girl of Irish stock to conquer. Was he not tall and athletic, a former ice-hockey player at his University of Chicago? He knew he was quite handsome with his square, masculine features, which pleased many women. He exercised his body daily by jogging and power-training. He had to find out which fitness centres the Executives of Travtelio attended. He was a good-looking all-American guy, and one woman at least had told him she reminded him of a popular film actor. He could be nice, pleasing and dependable in a polite conversation. He looked over eagerly to the other side of the airplane, where just one of those dollies sat, another American manager sent to Travtelio.

5

Lauren O'Sheridan sensed the eyes of Andrew Raga glancing all over her. She acted as if she hadn't remarked his eager studying. She was not too displeased. She knew of Raga, though she had not really met him in Boston. She had been warned by friends of his roaring ambition, but she did not mind that very much. Lauren had only been presented to Raga the day before

they boarded the airplane to London, at a gathering of all the future expats. Lauren was a lower manager at the same company as Raga, but she had travelled to Brussels for entirely other reasons than he.

Lauren was indeed of good Irish stock, her family originating from Boston, though now living in New York, and she was very Catholic. She was single. She had been wondering lately whether she would remain unmarried. This had been often on her mind these last months. She sometimes thought about a family of her own, children, married to a decent, sturdy, US businessman, but she had hesitated always to accept the advances of any of such young men. She had refused several, because she lacked in them that added sparkle in her relations that might have ravished her. Without consciously acknowledging it, Lauren was a very romantic soul. Andrew Raga, a few seats away from her, might be a serious candidate, but Lauren felt not the ardour, the admiration, the ecstasy she craved for. She told herself she was probably too much the coy romantic cow, but wasn't that why she had jumped to the occasion to work and travel in Europe?

The assignment at Travtelio interested her. She was even more excited by the prospect of living for a few years in Brussels. Brussels was provincial, she knew, but in two hours' time of railways or airplane she could be in Paris, London, Amsterdam and Milan. She had checked that out on the Internet. Travelling would cost money, and she had not much. Still, with the added salary of the expat assignment, with her own apartment provided and paid for by Travtelio, she could afford a prolonged weekend once every while. Lauren was not ambitious. Yes, she had taken courses to play golf, and she could hold her own among the golf-playing American Directors. She surmised Belgians played less at that game, preferred soccer, and the club where the American Executives would play their eighteen holes was probably too expensive for her.

What would she do if she did not find a suitor, a suitable man? A form of panic gripped her heart, the sudden panic of heart-racking loneliness. That feeling had grown strongly in her. She had had her share of loneliness. She had thrown herself entirely onto her job and on the challenging work with colleagues to a common goal, but in the evenings the panic of despair would possess her. She had learned to avoid that feeling by keeping her mind occupied, taking papers to read with her from work, choosing a good television program to watch, write letters to family and friends. At one time of her life, she felt, those mean blues would catch her unawares, hold her in their grip and drive her to desperation. What would she do then? She needed a husband! Yet, without the romanticism, without a touch of that so elusive feeling she had reluctantly come to call love, she was convinced she would remain an old spinster. Love it was, if she dove deep in her heart, what she had come to seek in Europe, nothing less than love, that strange feeling, the magic of which however also dwindled and seemed more and more elusive as she became older. If she could not find love, she should surely find the next best thing in Europe: the beauty of art. Lauren longed for the museums of Europe, for the Louvre and the National Gallery, for the Rijksmuseum and the Brera, and in waiting for that she might be satisfied with the Beaux-Arts of Brussels and the charm of Bruges.

6

While the airplane that carried Andrew Raga and Lauren O'Sheridan and several other American business men to Travtelio descended onto Brussels, a man was bound to meet Gerald Godelin in the CEO's Executive office on the fortieth floor of the Skyscraper. The man was Belgian. He had given his name in the lobby and also on this floor as Gauthier

Buisseyre, but his real name was Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin Vicomte d'Entray. He sat now, leaning deep with crossed legs in the leather sofa outside CEO Godelin's office, into where a hostess had whisked him. Godelin's secretary, an opulent, rather vulgar brunette with a very low neckline, had told him to wait a few more minutes still.

Buisseyre disliked having to sit here humbly at the door of Godelin, waiting for the great man, seeing the secretaries trading pleasantries over the phone, angry that Godelin had not dismissed whoever he had been talking to before he, Buisseyre, arrived. He sat now, tickling his fingers on the sofa to show his ostentatious disdain and impatience to the secretaries. He looked around. The walls were painted in dark grey. The sofa was black. The desks were black. Black was the colour of power, he thought, also the colour of the fascists during and before World War II. The colouring taught him Gerald Godelin was a man who sought power and wanted to radiate power.

The secretaries eyed him sideways. Buisseyre was a striking figure. Everything about him exuded pretence, never failing self-confidence and inbred arrogance. Tall and slender, impeccably dressed in an Armani pin-striped suit and an impeccable Ermenegildo Zegna tie in discreet colours with tiny silver speckles, nonchalantly knotted on his light-blue shirt with white collar, he looked as distinguished as a north-Italian Count. He was handsome too, his face finely chiselled in sharp lines, closely shaved, no beard, no glasses. His eyes were very light, almost transparent grey, cold and piercing. His entire being radiated elegance and self-assuredness.

Buisseyre did not have to wait long. Gerald Godelin stepped suddenly out of his office and wished goodbye at his door to a visitor with a quick handshake and a wisp of a smile. He remarked Jean-Gauthier in the sofa, and beckoned him to enter with a condescending gesture of his hand. Jean-Gauthier loathed the gesture, found it instantly of bad taste, but he stood, stroke at the folds of his suit and walked suavely into the office. Godelin held his hand on the knob of the door while his visitor passed. He closed the door after him. The two men sat across from each other at the wood veneer desk of Godelin. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the windows, blinding Buisseyre temporarily.

Godelin began the conversation immediately, in rather gruff, plainspoken words.

'Good afternoon. You are Gauthier Buisseyre, aren't you? Sit down, please. I received several recommendations from friends concerning your application to a function at Travtelio. I understood you are of noble descent.'

Buisseyre replied in his exercised smooth, polished style. 'Yes. I am. My full name is Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d'Entray. My father is a Vicomte, and his sons have a right to the same title. Until his death, however, we are Knights.'

'Your father is an influential person in Belgian politics and business, and so are your two uncles. I know. You have a great family. I have no CV of you. What have you done so far?'

'I have a diploma of Master in Economics from Leuven University, and I also studied for two years at the London Business School for an MBA. I am a Reserve Officer, a Captain of the Belgian army. I lecture in a prestigious business school of Brussels in economics. I have worked at two companies before, an American bank and a Belgian insurance company, four years approximately in each. I would like now to work in an industry-oriented company, and advance to a more challenging job in an Executive position, later still to lead such a company.'

Godelin hesitated, looked appreciatingly at his visitor, smiled somewhat mockingly, and said, 'you have high ambitions indeed. It is all right, of course to seek high functions with your name and capabilities. Friends who know your family well have talked to me about you in the best of terms. That is sufficient to me in credentials. I might be able to offer you a position in

which you can learn and develop. If you do well, you might obtain one of our President functions. Some of my current Presidents may be leaving, soon. However, what would you say you might offer to me and my company?’

‘I can offer you of course first of all my personal, loyal and dedicated services. I am confident I can be worthy of any function you might bestow on me. There is more. My uncles told me you also wish to become a member of our most distinguished clubs in Brussels. They assured me they would be most happy to introduce you in those circles, guide you, and present people to you that could help to support your career to even more rewarding aims. We might propose you to a title of Baron, a hereditary title. My family would be honoured to present you to the right people. The provision of a title of nobility is a Royal prerogative of course, but your name can be presented at the right time and place. A member of the Royal family is seeking to install an office for his charity work, and seeking to assemble funds for a charity foundation. We thought it might be possible to have this organised and installed and sponsored by Travtelio, thus bringing you to the attention of the Court. A title of nobility might then be granted, not immediately, but also in a not too far off future. We would surely be able to speak of you in the highest terms of praise to the Royal Family. Two of the most prominent clubs of the capital are ready to accept you in their midst, would you desire to join them. I have the applicant papers here with me, which as you will notice already hold the names and signatures of the people necessary by the clubs’ statutes to vow for you and recommend you for membership.’

Buisseyre placed a red folder on the table in front of Godelin.

Gerald Godelin leaned back in his seat, folded his hands in front of him, but he did not touch the folder. Buisseyre was surprised. For a moment he thought he had misjudged Godelin. He thought he knew what Godelin was thinking. Taking the papers would mean Godelin owed to a few people, to the Buisseyre family, and a man like Godelin might hate that. But surely, thought Jean-Gauthier, such relations were common practice. How else than by such relations had Godelin grown to his current position? Jean-Gauthier saw Godelin still hesitating, or was Godelin merely cherishing the decisive moment of having finally within his reach the highest honour of his career, his craving almost fulfilled?

Slowly, very slowly, Godelin leaned forward and drew the folder to him. He turned the folder to have the pages in the right direction before him, and then, still lingering, hesitating, he meticulously opened the folder and turned the papers one by one, reading them all, without saying a word. Finally, Godelin closed the folder again, sighed, and placed it in a drawer of his desk.

He said, ‘I can offer you a function of Business Development Director, associated to my office. If you do well, I can prepare you to a President function and promote you within the year. When can you start?’

7

After dinner, that same afternoon, Jan Stevens strolled to the elevators of the Villa and pushed on the button for minus two. He had not been inside the data centre at that floor for a long time, and felt it necessary to have a look. He pushed his badge to a keypad on the wall. The door’s electronic lock switched open on his first try. The data centre in the Travtelio headquarters building was not really a data centre in the full sense of the word, and it had never been intended to be one. The placement of server computers in the basement of the Skyscraper and Villa had been one of Jan’s ideas, but it had been an idea of necessity, and a temporary installation.

Each employee working at Travtelio had at least one personal computer, a PC, on his or her desk. The office automation systems for the five thousand people in the building were organised from out of server computers. The servers allowed cutting the hidden costs of manipulating the PCs. The personal computers on the desks were interconnected for electronic community work services based on the servers. The servers automatically saved the employee's important files overnight, so that the employees would not have to worry about inadvertently deleted files on their desktops, or about broken-down hard disks holding vital information. The mailing system software and all links with the outside world also ran in software on the server computers in the basement, as well as many other applications such as company-wide calendaring, text translation, and many other services. It had been impossible five years ago to place the server computers in Travtelio's main data centre, sixty kilometres out of Brussels, for the communication links at that moment of time simply could not deliver enough speed and bandwidth.

Later, more powerful servers for Travtelio's business applications had also been installed in the basement, despite Jan's protests, out of convenience, and because the main data centre filled up rapidly. Even a printing service for contracts and invoices had been brought in. Michel Doriant, the Director of the data centres, had seen his main centre run out of space due to the sudden growth of Travtelio and the ravening appetite of the company for software services. Doriant had had no alternative than to install a printer room in the basement of the Travtelio Headquarter.

Jan argued that the basement was the wrong place to install a true data centre in. It was all right to place a few office automation servers there, temporarily, since a sophisticated office system that reduced hidden costs of manually loading each PC with its software, saving files regularly and providing good services of virus protection, and so on, could only be installed close to the PCs. Yet, underground space in a tower was not a safe place for computers and people. When a water-pipe broke higher up, for instance, the water could seep through to the floors and inundate the computer room. Electricity and water was not a friendly combination! The space under the centre was used as parking lots. A fire there would surely produce smoke that could damage the electronic equipment with acid particles, ruining them. With the office servers down for days or weeks, the employees in the building would be practically out of work, unable to reach the vital software systems of the company.

Jan Stevens wanted even the office servers out of the Skyscraper with time, back into the main data centre. That move had become physically possible lately, for glass fibres had been drawn between the Travtelio Skyscraper and the main data centre, providing the very high bandwidth for communications, so that the servers could now be placed much farther off. Most of all, Jan hated the printing services in the building. He had at least obtained that a sprinkling system would soon be installed in that part of the hall to quench fires, but water was a computer's worst nightmare, and the investment would be lost if the computers were to be transferred anyhow. He thought any printer room was simply inappropriate in a building like Travtelio's main Skyscraper.

Jan's badge gave him access to the basement floor where the servers were installed. He strolled through the revolving doors and watched the tens of servers humming happily like beehives along the walls. Most of the noise came from the fans of the machines, the fans that drove heat out of the computers.

The rest of the noise was generated by the air conditioners, bulky equipment of heavy closets with white, metallic doors. These had to be installed to carry off most of the heat the normal air conditioning of the Skyscraper could not dispose of. Servers needed constant temperatures

below twenty-five degrees, and a constant humidity to operate safely in. Jan Stevens also did not like these machines. Some of them ran on water, other on gasses, which, when released in the atmosphere, might ruin the computers. The closets also weighed a lot, which brought the weight on the floors to the maximum allowed. The machines generated heat, and the heat originated in the electricity that was fed into this room. So much power was consumed here, that the electricity bills for the server room ran sky-high. In the main data centre, central cooling systems were installed on the roof of the building, devised specifically for such use. That system was a lot more powerful and economic.

Jan brought all the pressure of his advice to move the servers out of the Skyscraper, but the move was also costly, and it demanded careful planning to not disrupt the office services. The move had been postponed several times already, and would not be started this year. First, a new building had to be built, an add-on to the main data centre, a procedure that would take many, many months. At least he had been able to convince the IT Operations Director, Michel Dorian. The servers would eventually be moved out. The issue was not with Dorian. The issue was with the Vice-Presidents and Presidents of the company, who had not released the funds for the move and for the growth in space at the main data centre. At least, Dorian had already installed the glass fibres on his own, hidden, budget, the first item necessary to link the main data centre and the Skyscraper.

Jan Stevens walked among the servers, looked at the telecommunication closets. The connections had been drawn sloppily. He would have to make remarks. Then he spoke to the technician that worked in the place. Only one person worked normally in the room and that man even not all the time. The Control Operators had their offices in the Villa, above ground. They operated the servers from a distance, had only rarely to come down, so that the room here could have been a lights-out centre. Lights were never extinguished, however, for there was always something manually to do in the room: a set of backup tapes to replace, a server to be installed, or new connections to be made on the Ethernet local area network cables. The space had to be cleaned once every while; new cables had to be drawn in the false floor, and so on. One person was always present in the room, responsible also for allowing the physical changes or not, and that was the IT Room Manager. The manager knew each server computer by heart, and knew how to get to the cables of them when connectivity to the Villa operators broke down.

Today, that man was Hugo Martin. Jan Stevens knew Martin as a difficult man, a hulk of a man, limited in intelligence, but an operator who did a good job, for at least he could scare off programmers who wanted to get into the centre unannounced and without papers allowing them to work on servers or on the other equipment. Martin only let people in who could show credentials, papers signed by at least one Operations Manager, change papers. Hugo Martin was a fine watchdog, the Cerberos of this data centre. Jan Stevens could come in whenever he wanted. Martin seemed to like Jan Stevens.

Martin was moving a server. He greeted Stevens with a grin and a smile. Jan had known him ever since he got a job at Travtelio. Hugo Martin had a gross square head covered by ample, black, curly hair. His face was puffy, cherry-red and pasty, and he wore a black, unkempt beard. His thick spectacles hung over a bumpy nose. Hugo dressed in a white vest as if he were a doctor.

Hugo called, 'well, Mister Stevens, I heard our big boss Godelin gave quite a speech today!'

Jan did not answer immediately, but he was amazed at how quick news, particularly bad news, spread and travelled throughout Travtelio and even crackled down to the basements of the Headquarters.

Martin was in a peevish mood.

‘It seems tens of Directors and managers will soon be thrown out of the company, and we are going to get American and Chinese managers in! Boeings loaded with Americans and Chinks will land at Zaventem any time now! I wonder who will be hiked out of the division. I bet Dorian will be one of the first to go. How about you? Are you ready to leave? Packed your suitcase?’

Jan had to smile at the insolence of the man. He understood Martin was trying to gauge what was really on. Jan could handle Hugo Martin. He might have tongue-lashed him in an instant. He did not care for the chiding, however.

‘I am always ready to go, Hugo,’ he answered, not in the least irritated, for he knew just how far Hugo Martin’s intelligence reached. ‘And don’t you be pleased too soon, for such change is far off. Your managers will remain in place, and so will Dorian. Nothing will change for you.’

Two other operators walked in, and Jan went over to speak to them. He wanted to know what new devices they would be installing to save the office files on tape, a subject on which he had a few novel ideas, but for which he needed a few details.

Afterwards, although Jan rambled on for a while, he did not see anything special in the room that might need his attention. He did not go to the printer room, so he went back to the elevator, avoiding a second confrontation with Hugo Martin. He left the data centre and rode the elevator to the Villa’s fourth floor, to his own office, reflecting on whether he was not somewhat of a fool to want to move the servers out of the basement, a space that seemed perfectly safe and in which the probability of any incident was very low indeed.

Jan also thought still about his chances of staying in Travtelio. His thoughts raced. He was an odd kind of counsellor here, advising the Chief Information Officer or CIO since several years as an in-house expert, but that certainly was an overhead job, however useful. He chuckled. If he would be thrown out, that would only mean the decision he had to make anyway would be forced sooner on him. Jan could not remain much longer without returning to England and take on more of his duties there. Until now, he had the excuse of not having been completely certain he was heir to the company of his father and to his father’s estates, although he had already been accepted in his father’s company as such. Since two weeks all issues had been solved on that subject. He would have to decide soon. Yet, he hesitated to leave Brussels. He liked the town, his friends, and his snug little apartment. He had somehow hoped to meet a girl here, but he had not met one he could love. Was he waiting for that? He felt he was not very attractive to ladies, especially not to the intelligent ones. He might as well go to live in England.

Chapter Three. Expatriates

In the weeks following the announcement by Gerald Godelin, Boeings and Airbuses loaded with managers from the companies that had taken shares in Travtelio flew indeed into Brussels Airport. The Travtelio administration was surprised by the sudden arrivals, and not half ready finding enough houses and apartments to rent for the newcomers from abroad. The expatriate managers were therefore lodged for a few weeks in the finest hotels of Brussels, either in the most posh and modern ones, or in the respectable art nouveau, old elegance hotels dating from the nineteenth century.

In one of these hotels, the few expats who marvelled at the typical former glory of Brussels, looked in awe at the photographs showing the participants at the conferences staged in Brussels by the chemist and industrialist Ernest Solvay over the Copenhagen theory of the quantum mechanics of the infinite small, featuring Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, Marie Curie and Werner Heisenberg among many other scientists of the beginning of the twentieth century, the now famous and historic figures of science. The expats had the impression they were to bring contemporary business practices to an ancient and decadent civilisation. The rooms and suites at these hotels cost outrageously, if compared with the salaries of most of Travtelio's employees. The amounts, of course, were whispered at ever higher figures throughout the Skyscraper.

In the IT Division, the Chief Information Officer, the CIO, the Director-General heading the Division, Andreas Verstraete, threw a stack of papers on the table of Jan Stevens. Verstraete told Jan these were the files of the expats that were assigned to the Division. He asked Jan to have a look at them and to confer with him about where these people might fit in in the organisation.

Verstraete hesitated before leaving. He remained standing with his hand on the door knob, and then he sat down in the chair on the other side of Jan's desk. He stroke long fingers through his grey hair.

'Jan, I had a quick look into those papers. Look at the titles and qualities of these people,' he began. 'Keep this very confidential. Even Sara Jansen does not have these papers. A Swedish manager will fly in soon, a man called Linus Akerlund. Akerlund is the only Swedish senior Director of high profile coming to Travtelio. I know, because I have seen all the profiles, not just the ones handed over to IT. The shareholders must be satisfied. Every shareholder company will want a President or a Vice-President, so this Akerlund will receive a division and since he is assigned to us, he will be the new Vice President for IT. Akerlund will not arrive here with less ambition than to lead a division. I will no doubt be pushed to a subordinate position. I cannot accept that, nor will I be expected to accept that. I shall very probably have to negotiate a deal of severance pay, and leave Travtelio. I have no idea how that could be possible, for I am still a civil servant and working under that statute.

Akerlund comes with his personal assistant, his coach, a man with the profile of an HR Director, Sigvard Sandström, also a Swede, of course. That man may replace Sara Jansen, although she too is a civil servant. Another IT Special Director has been appointed, somebody called Andrew Raga, but Godelin told me that this person would more work in the business divisions than in IT, so he may not be a direct danger to your own position. Two other managers, however, American ladies, will arrive with profiles that are not unlike your credentials. Prepare yourself too for turmoil!

Another guy was presented to me as an Operations Manager. This Mark Stephenson has already arrived. He may come in for an interview. I will put him under Michel Doriant, but in the end he may be a danger for Michel's career. Most of the other names in the files are

marked as consultants, so they may only be added to the current managers for a few years, head projects, and then return to the States, Sweden, China and Czechia. Several development managers are arriving, way too many for what this department needs: an American lady, an American guy, a Chinese, and a Czech person who will come later, but hasn't been named yet. All those marked as consultants I am assigning to you, Jan, but you would do well not to consider them as subordinate to you, but as your equals. I suspect they will play the role of auditors, really, gathering information on how badly we managed. They will advise that man Akerlund on who to keep and who to dump. They will pinpoint to everything that doesn't work to perfection in our Division. Would they have sent me to the US, I would certainly have found a lot in their IT that is not perfect, but such considerations are not to the point of this exercise, aren't they?

Show them around, Jan, interview them, think of something smart for them to do, something useful of course, define projects for them, and document all that to me and to that guy Akerlund. Your assignment is temporary. Akerlund may have other ideas about you. There is a last person, a Czech called Tuma, who seems to be of a lower profile. Ask Michel Doriant to find a place for him, but keep tabs on the guy.

If these expats come not as consultants but as managers, expecting a job in the hierarchy, then Travtelio must change their contract. They have consultancy contracts for the moment. It is illegal in Belgium to have a consultant actually lead a team and have the team report to such a manager. Such relations of hierarchy are not allowed for consultants. Of course, that can be handled in an instance, and then we have to prepare mentally for a bloodbath in our department, for not only me and maybe you, but also Sara Jansen in HR, Michel Doriant in Operations, plus Denis, Devos and Collet may be laid off. The last two are under contract and recruited not so many years ago, so they can be dismissed at a click of fingers.'

Verstraete paused a while, yet remained seated in the chair of Jan's office. He looked as if he didn't have enough force to stand up. Jan was a little embarrassed, and didn't know what to say.

'I am tired, Jan, very tired and disgusted. I feel like the last of a generation, a generation that has lost out. All of us, Director-Generals of the departments, are bound to lose our jobs. Most of us, including me, can probably leave on pre-pension salaries and with agreements of golden handshakes. I believe none of the expats will stay for longer than two or three, at the very most four years. But current management will be ousted out, and a new overhaul in management will happen in just a few years from now. I guess also afterwards no Director will stay longer in a job than a few years. You heard Godelin. You had better prepare yourself for that change. The announcement made by Godelin in wanting to replace management every three years will just mean that people will leave the company and be replaced at high cost. The company we have known, with lifetime careers, slow promotion to higher functions and long-time loyalties to the company, is over and done with! Have a look at the figures of the salaries of the expats in the folder, and weep with me!'

Jan Stevens did not open the folder immediately. He knew not well what to answer to Verstraete. He feared his old boss was right. Jan nodded, said he would have a look at the folder, find places for the expats and put proposals on paper.

He said a last few words to Verstraete, supposed to be words of comfort, but the words came out all wrong and sounded cruel in his own ears.

'I believe you are right about Akerlund. He will come over to replace you. There is no escaping to that. We have become friends these last years, you and I, despite our boss-employee relations. You are a power manager. Excuse me for telling this, but you will not bend, so you will indeed seek to leave when this Akerlund arrives. I believe leaving from here honours you more than hanging on. Yes, an era is ending. It is always hard to feel the world

continues on living whereas one has to step back, out of one's lifetime work. Maybe this is a fine but cruel lesson for all of us who engaged ourselves so much in our work. I am sorry. The same thing may arrive to me. Godelin and De Voncques will find golden solutions for you all, former-to-be Director-Generals, but I guess that will mean early retirement. Many others will be dismissed with nothing more than their legal severance pay. If it is a consolation to you: I may stay on a few months, but then I will very probably leave too.'

Verstraete nodded, bowed his head and left.

Jan wished he could have given other words to Verstraete. It was as if the Director-General had come into Jan's office to hear some hope, other phrases than of the message of doom, but Jan always said things the way they were, even when that sounded callous. There was no dodging the fate of Verstraete. Verstraete would have to find other interests in life. His career was over and done with.

Verstraete closed the door of Jan's office behind him, although Jan left that door generally open.

Jan opened the folder and browsed through the papers. They contained the description of the qualifications of each expatriate manager, and also details about where they had been housed in Brussels, as well as the salaries they would receive. Jan gasped. But for a few exceptions, all the expats would be paid high consultancy fees, not salaries. Travtelio would have to pay the fees to the shareholding companies. Some of the expats were not even employees of the American, Chinese and Swedish firms; some of them were indeed consultants, obviously only sent to Travtelio so that the shareholders could make additional money out of consultancy contracts. The consultancy fees amounted from at a minimum of ten to a maximum of twenty times the monthly salaries of the current Travtelio Directors. Some of the expats received as much money in one day as the typical Travtelio manager earned in an entire month. Of course, these would be the amounts paid to the shareholder companies, not to the expat managers themselves, so Jan wondered how much of those amounts would really be paid to the expats. He would find out. With the salaries came company cars and apartments of up to and over three thousand dollars a month, free tuitions for their children in the international schools of Brussels, special allowances for wives and husbands, moving expenses paid, and so on. The total amounts per expat were staggering. European consultants were paid many times less. The shareholder companies were bleeding Travtelio in this exercise set up by Godelin.

2

In the weeks after Verstraete's handing over of the expat files to Jan, the new consultants arrived one after the other at Travtelio, in all divisions of the company. Linus Akerlund was one of the first to arrive in the IT department. He replaced Andreas Verstraete immediately. Andreas kept his nice office however, and stayed on. He had nothing else to do than answer questions to Akerlund. The new CIO wanted to know rapidly who was who and who did what, and how the Division worked.

Verstraete, of course, negotiated his severance deal. He spent most of his time reading his electronic mails, the ones he had despatched before without even opening their contents, and at running video films on his personal computer. He went out of the building to have lunch, mixed only rarely now with the IT Directors. He left quietly a month later.

Linus Akerlund was a tall man with white-blond hair waving above a long, sharp but strong face. He was an elegant, somewhat austere man who laughed rarely. He reacted with sympathy on what happened to Andreas Verstraete, but he could not, nor wanted to undo agreements between the companies.

Akerlund had desired this job, a fine promotion compared to his function in the Swedish company, and an experience in IT management as he could not have acquired at home. For Akerlund, this international posting looked in everything like an elevator moving upwards. Akerlund proved to be decent with the managers of the department. He refused to shake up things more than he had to. He called the Belgian Directors in, and made one thing immediately clear to everybody: the expats were consultants, not Directors, at least not most of them. Some of the expat managers would participate in his staff meetings, but not many. The American lady Rachel Kyle would be his Vice-CIO and Sigvard Sandström, his assistant, would be HR Director, but Sandström would be in charge of coaching and teambuilding sessions and career planning. Sara Jansen would not be replaced by Sandström.

Jan Stevens proposed special projects for the IT Development Managers, for the consultants. He devised projects for the Americans Anthony Jones, Jennifer Alcock, and for the Chinese Zhaò Fai. A few projects were left for a Czech person, a manager who would arrive after a few months only. These managers would not be direct employees of Travtelio. They would remain consultants, associated to Jan, forming a team with Jan, but not really work under his authority. They remained under the authority of Linus Akerlund for all matters of personnel management. Akerlund used the title of Expat Coordinator for Jan.

‘Expat Coordinator, my arse,’ was the comment of Thomas Denis. ‘You are to be the nurse, the foster mother, the nanny. You will have to feed them, hopefully with information and not with your own milk, though one might be surprised. They will suck you dry! They are indeed the worst products of unfettered capitalism! You are to be the Judas, the arch-traitor; why wouldn’t you be their Mephistopheles? I can propose a few tricks to you!’

This was a strange organisation for Jan, but he accommodated in his new role of virtual management. Jan had a talk with Akerlund and Sandström about this weird state of matters. The two smiled and asked him to accept his assignment as leader but not as manager. They counted on his discretion and diplomacy. In the Travtelio archives, Akerlund remained officially the Director and hierarchical head of the expats. Jan could not really order the expats around; he could only propose tasks to them, follow up on progress, help them with information in their missions.

Akerlund and Kyle discussed the projects with Jan. Jan did that also in the first weeks with Andreas Verstraete. Verstraete then repeated over and over again how he would have been able to advance his division further, had he received the funds for so many consultants earlier. Akerlund and Sandström nodded in sympathy. The strange situation might evolve for Jan, but Akerlund and Sandström could not predict how. They expected most of the expats would leave after from one to two years at most. They asked for Jan’s discretion, and they appealed to him to cooperate for the time being. Jan complied, though suspicious of it all. He was embittered about having to help the arrival and introduction of the expats into Travtelio, and yet running the risk of being ousted out by the same. Still, he was strangely curious about how all of these awkward situations would evolve. So he sought not to leave immediately.

Jan met his new collaborators. Lauren O’Sheridan, Jennifer Alcock and Zhaò Fai were nice people, who desired only to do a fine job at Travtelio and have a nice time in Brussels. They upped their noses a little at how the Belgians managed things, but when Jan started to talk about possible contributions from the expats’ companies in terms of software applications and technology, he met embarrassed silence. Jan waited for an answer, until he realised that although the consultants managed well and systematically, although they were intelligent and could indeed bring the projects forward, they had nothing to offer from their home companies.

The US firm had no better, more sophisticated software programs to present. The technologies used in Belgium were more modern than the ones used overseas. Productivity was higher. Jan did not insist. The shareholder companies had contributed brains to Travtelio, not much more. Brains, thought Jan, provided sufficient budgets were granted, were to be had from Belgian and European consultancy companies too. Nevertheless, projects had been defined, people assigned, and the consultants began to study existing systems and to propose ameliorations.

Jan rarely saw Andrew Raga, although he met the man in meetings with the business divisions. Rachel Kyle coordinated with Andrew Raga.

Kyle was a distinguished lady of just over forty. Dark brown of hair, elegant, rather haughty and prim, she was a nice and easy-going lady, once one came to know her. Kyle was the true senior manager of the US group of expats. She settled easily into a no-nonsense, hard-driving relationship with the younger Linus Akerlund. She accepted Akerlund as her boss, though. Kyle had the tougher view on the qualities of the managers in the IT Division.

Lauren O'Sheridan and Jennifer Alcock worked together and seemed to be friends also in their private lives. Sheridan, the slender but rather dry Irish American, took the commanding position among those two. Alcock followed. O'Sheridan was a tall blonde with clear, blue eyes. She had a slim waist, long legs, was always impeccably dressed like a true American office girl, impeccable white shirt closed up to under her chin, always wearing a two-piece somewhat masculine suit of skirt and fitting jacket. She was polite but distant with Jan, and seemed irritated when Jan explained some of the intrigues that underpinned conversations and reactions in meetings.

'Why do you tell me all of this?' Lauren O'Sheridan remarked angrily when Jan explained the implications of the words of a business manager. 'I do not need to know this. We have given our viewpoint. They act or they do not act according to our arguments. Opinions and considerations I do not need!'

Jan drew his head back into his armour, and O'Sheridan had to learn by herself that the Belgian managers did not always react according to American rationale.

Jan understood quickly that these managers, especially the Americans, worked to do a job, to perform to the best of their abilities, but they had no eye or use for the undercurrents in manager relations. They had an enormous, almost blind respect for authority, and worked like true, coolly rational professionals, acting on logic alone. They had no need to know that a yes or a no contained often more than just a simple agreement or rebuttal. In Belgium, all the shades of grey clung to the white and black, and when one was not perceptive of the subtle gradations in between, one might have surprises at the following meetings when people had not done what was supposed to have been accomplished. Jan tried to explain that to O'Sheridan, doubting things might be different in the US, but she remained sceptic and suspicious.

On the other side of the spectrum, Zhaò Fai, the Chinese manager, abhorred plain yes or no replies, preferring always the grey zones, always leaving matters stand obviously undecided for, yet suggestive of a solution he expected to be executed, so that all roads were left open. He could not be held responsible for anything, because he never decided in a definite way for or against anything. Bizarrely, remarked Jan, the Belgian state of mind resembled a lot more the Chinese view than the American one. The projects of Zhaò advanced the fastest probably not always as Zhaò might have liked, but he did not show his apprehensions. He showed satisfaction, and he was right in that! He suggested slight corrections, and those were promptly implemented. In Zhaò's projects a lot of laughs sounded in the corridors and happy smiles, but matters progressed.

Jennifer Alcock was a smart brunette, a woman with the face and slim body of a Californian film-star. She too was efficient, liked to laugh, and had a talent for facilitating and animating meetings. That rapidly became her main function, since most of the meetings were organised in the first months merely for the expats to understand how things worked at Travtelio.

‘What else have these expats been doing here since three months but hearing us out on how things worked at Travtelio?’ Thomas Denis wondered. ‘Godelin has always been as paranoiac as an American Regimental Sergeant-Major, excessively afraid of industrial espionage, whatever that may mean. Now he opens the door to the Soviet secret service! And guess who their Colonel is? Our very own Mister Jan Stevens!’

Still, information was needed before decisions could be made. It was only natural for the expats to learn, before proposing changes. Jan did not expect returns before the end of the first three months.

Anthony Jones was a man of average height, smaller than Jan, still young. Jones usually followed the ideas and decisions of the other team members.

Jan rarely saw Mark Stephenson and Petr Tuma. These were added to Michel Doriant’s operations teams.

3

Americans, Chinese, Swedes and Belgians thus settled in those first months in an awkward relationship, in which nobody really trusted the other, all trying to understand how the others ticked and would react under stress and while in disagreement, everybody anxiously avoiding direct confrontations. The Belgians usually accepted what the expats proposed, yet they summoned their courage to hesitatingly bring to the table obvious impossible proposals or proposals they considered being stupid, and that most often than not due to the lack of knowledge of the expats of Travtelio’s workings.

After three months, Jan thought he knew everybody well enough to call them one by one in his office for a private conversation. He had the same message for every expat. He explained he wanted a good job done with the defined projects, and assured them that in a real professional view the job was the most important thing in their relations. He pledged that therefore he would not work in the least against any of the expats, and wanted to help them honestly to smooth out relations with all the Belgian employees. He asked the expats to trust him, and he repeated several times in each conversation he had the same interests as they had in delivering value to Travtelio. With the projects a success, not only the expats would receive credit, but also he, Jan.

‘You lower your pants in saying that,’ Thomas Denis growled. ‘You look like that nice little puppy that lies down on the ground with its belly up to the bulldogs. Put up a fight or get out fast, boy!’

Lauren, Jennifer, Fai and Anthony did not react in many words when Jan began his short speech, but they seemed relieved afterwards. The expats looked at him in surprise, as if meaning to say that of course the job was the only matter that counted in their relations, what else, and the job had to be done. Jan had the impression the atmosphere relaxed at least a little. In the weeks thereafter, more often than not one or other expat would come in to chat in Jan’s office and ask him background information on systems, processes and people. They exposed small problems with one or other recalcitrant Belgian. Jan gradually came to be accepted and

trusted by the expats. The group tightened thus, the team was forged, which was what Jan had wanted in the first place, and which was after all Jan's natural way of leading groups. Jan heard increasingly other Travtelio managers talk of the 'Stevens Gang'.

Akerlund, Kyle and Sandström also remarked what was happening. They seemed sufficiently pleased not to break up the organisation around Jan. Jan was the centre to which information flew in, and then out again to the other team members. He was a centripetal force to which the team members flocked. When Sandström entered Jan's office for a matter of HR papers, he was surprised to find all the expats around Jan's table, chatting and laughing together. After those few months, the first results and proposals for changes in direction of the development of applications began to be delivered by the consultants. Jan Stevens had, in the most natural way of things, without straining, even without himself being aware of the matter, assembled the largest think tank of Travtelio, not only in IT but also in business processes, and created a large virtual team of tightly working together expats and local managers. He came to think that this kind of organisation was the future of large enterprises.

In that period, Sigvard Sandström showed up regularly at Jan's office to talk to him about all and nothing. Jan knew of course that his was only the way of Sigvard to check on how people felt in the department. He and Sigvard chatted and they discovered a mutual interest in history and in a certain kind of historical novels.

Once more Sandström entered his office, but this time he chortled with a worried look on his face. He came on an errand from Linus Akerlund. It seemed all the papers Jan had received with data on salaries, benefits and bonuses for the expats had to be kept only by the Vice-Presidents of the divisions. The papers had been secretly annotated so that if leaked outside Travtelio, they could be traced to origin. Verstraete should not have given them to Jan. Sandström asked the papers back, as well as any photocopies that had been made. Jan had made no copies. He hesitated for a moment handing the papers back personally to Sandström. Then he reminded himself of the function of coach and confidant of Sandström to Akerlund, so he handed the papers over with a straight face. He assured Sandström he had made no copies. Sandström merely nodded, relieved, said Akerlund would appreciate, and left immediately. Jan followed him, as if he went to another floor, and saw Sandström enter Akerlund's office, where Akerlund and Kyle seemed to have been waiting for him. Somebody in corporate HR had understood the papers might be dangerous if released in the press. Akerlund had been more than worried Jan had gotten hold of the strictly confidential data.

4

The last expat to arrive was a Czech lady, Jana Navratil-Kovar. Jan Stevens had a CV of her, but no photograph or description, so he did not immediately recognise her as an expatriate when she stepped into his office. When she stood suddenly in his open door, he was so surprised he later supposed his mouth had dropped open and stayed that way for a long time.

Jana Kovar was a tall woman, maybe taller than he, and blonde of such a light hue he thought she had white hair at first, which was strange because she was still a young woman. Her hair was ample, but cut short around her face and neck and ears, so that it merely added to her height and slenderness. Most remarkable were her light grey eyes, eyes that always seemed to pierce Jan whenever thereafter she looked at him, but which let through Jan's own gaze, as if they were transparent.

That first time she came in, she flashed a slightly mocking smile on her face, because of course she knew well what effect she had on certain men, especially here, in Belgium, and saw Jan was no exception. Her face was pale too, almost ivory white, and she had the long, strong bone features of the Nordic type of woman, so that Jan for an instant guessed wrongly she was a Swedish expat. Her face was white and bloodless, her eyes translucent, and her hair almost white. Therefore, her swollen, very red lips, though without a trace of lipstick, struck Jan as very sensually alluring. Her cheeks were straight, even a little drawn. Her nose was small but long, delicate, her eyes large and not deep, the eyebrows quite large, unplucked but neatly cut, somewhat defying. Jan stared, but he couldn't keep himself from devising the woman, his head tilting. She wore tight blue jeans pants and high, black fine leather boots over her jeans, a white shirt that lent at least some impression of colour to her face. The shirt was tucked in her pants, but hung loose and wild over her chest. Her waist was slim but firm, her legs incredibly long, her hips not wide, yet broad compared to her waist, enough to make of her profile the ideal feminine that might have driven Marilyn Monroe to envy. It took a while for Jan to understand that this woman was not a Swedish vixen that had remained hidden so far, nor a Greek singer he admired and who resembled her, but the Czech expat he had been expecting one of these days. Jan remembered her curriculum vitae from the folder he had read before she entered his office.

The woman entered his room and asked, 'excuse me, please. I am looking for Jan Stevens.' 'Yes. Come in please, have a seat. I am Jan Stevens. You must be Jana Kovar, a Czech consultant manager, or am I wrong?' 'I am Jana Kovar, yes,' she smiled. 'Linus Akerlund and Sigvard Sandström told me to report to you. I am to discuss my job with you. I arrived yesterday, and came straight here.' 'Fine, fine. Well, I will not be a boss to you, but I do coordinate the projects the expat managers lead at Travtelio. We have still a few projects defined. I have a folder here, with their subject and objectives. You might look them over. They have been agreed upon by Akerlund's staff people. You can pick out one that interests you most, or we can define new ones for you. We have a priority on this list, but we would also like you to do primarily the work that interests you personally, and the project you believe is closest to what you know best and have worked on already in Czechia.'

Jana then started on a conversation with Jan while they ran through the list together. Jan explained her more about each project. Finally, Jana picked out an audit of the data warehousing installation at Travtelio. The Data Warehouse was the largest database at the company, used for market predictions, archiving, and customer management. Jan had had doubts about the profitability of the Data Warehouse, an extremely expensive store in terms of computers, disks and software, practically the most expensive set of applications in the division, and he thought costs could be much lowered in that domain. Data and applications that did not bring serious benefit to the company might be deleted. A Belgian consultancy company would perform the audit, but a team of Travtelio developers, analysts, and project managers would participate. The team needed someone to lead, not in people management, but in direction and definition of tasks. Somebody had to check on what the consultants were doing, and on whether they stuck to their subject. Jana proposed to lead the audit because she had some experience with those systems in her Czech company. Jan agreed. They talked the project over for about an hour.

Jana had seen nothing yet of the Travtelio building, so Jan proposed to show her around, wondering why the hell he had done that, for he had not proposed such a tour to the other expats when they had arrived. Yet, he felt at ease with this woman, and definitely amazed – or was it attracted – to her. Jan took her with him to present her to the other Directors on the

floor of the Villa, and then he showed her the Cloister and the in-house shops, the Terra Nova restaurant and the arcades. They took the elevators to the thirty-seventh floor of the Skyscraper, where he showed her the panorama of the northern suburbs of Brussels. Jan brought her then also to Sara Jansen, to whom Sandström had told Jana to check in afterwards, to arrange the last formalities. While Jan walked with Jana, they drew surprised and admiring looks from the people in the offices and in the corridors. Jana was just a little taller than Jan, and she was a striking, exotic figure in this surrounding. Jan was confused about his feelings. On the one hand he was over-awed by the remarkable figure of this cold beauty. On the other, he felt himself attracted and puzzled by her simple warmth when she asked a hundred questions about Travtelio and also about Brussels. Jana obviously had not travelled much. Jan marvelled at the innocence of some of her remarks.

Jan had finished his tour with Jana Kovar only since a few minutes, when happened what he had been expecting. Thomas Denis strolled casually into Jan's office, in shirt and his hands in his pockets, whistling a happy tune.

'Have I seen white ghosts on the floor? Who was that pale Aphrodite I saw gliding past my door with you in tow?'

'Her name is Jana Kovar, Thomas, a Czech expat. I still have to present her to you.'

'No, you won't,' Thomas Denis chuckled. 'You had that occasion already. You are too afraid of competition. You're too anxious to keep this one for yourself. I can tell. I can see even now spit still dripping from your mouth. You are drooling. Your eyes popped out when you looked at her bottom. When this one snaps her fingers, you will jump. My boy, don't say no to me, to an old rat in the sex business. This one has bedazzled you in two seconds. Do I hear bell sounding? Do I see stars glistening? Where are the fireworks going on? Tell me, how do you plan to bring her to bed?'

'Oh, shut up, Mister Denis. She is a colleague. I just met her!'

'My boy, I can recognise when another man is smitten better than an angel recognises a wretched soul to save. She has strung the tune, and now you must dance. Watch out for exotic beauties! They are rot and damnation.'

'She isn't exotic. She is Czech, for heavens' sake!'

'Same thing, oriental, isn't it?' continued Thomas Denis.

He walked back out, hands still in his pockets, saying, 'don't forget I warned you. And don't forget to present her to me. Somebody has to keep an eye on you. Still, consider competition is on. My first move will be to warn Emma Wauters she has a rival!'

When Thomas disappeared through the door, Jan threw a heavy paper folder at him.

From that time on, Jan would see much of Jana. They met several times a week in meetings concerning the projects, in staff meetings, and Jana knew at approximately what time Jan and his friends went to lunch in the restaurant, usually close to noon. She would come to sit at the table where the Belgian IT managers used to gather.

Jan's friends, the IT Directors, were a little surprised at first and ill at ease for sharing a table with such a striking pale beauty, especially also because she was the only expat who came to have lunch with them, but they got used to her figure and joked freely with her after a few days. Jana talked little, usually only about her work. Sometimes she spoke of Prague, her home town, but she mostly asked questions herself about how Travtelio worked, who she should contact for this or that, and what the people at the table thought about an issue. Jan and the other directors became rapidly used to her. She often sat next to Jan, but wasn't Jan her coordinator?

4

Around that time, two computers crashed their programs in Travtelio's main data centre. The computers were not just any common type machines. They were mainframes of the older kinds, mainframes that held massive applications vital to the daily working of Travtelio. No backup computers existed for them, because their hardware and system software were very expensive, worth millions of Euro. Since there was no backup for them, the computers had to be stopped when their programs faulted, and be loaded back practically from zero. That was a very tedious procedure. Added with the time it usually took to locate the error and correct it, a day was easily lost. Yet, hundreds of people in Travtelio worked with these applications.

Linus Akerlund called Michel Dorian to his office. Also Sigvard Sandström was present.

Akerlund started the meeting and touched immediately the heart of the matter.

'Our two mainframes crashed yesterday. We lost almost an entire day of services at Travtelio.' This was said matter-of-fact, without emotion, without accusation.

'I know,' Dorian began. 'We have no backups for those machines. Too expensive to have backups! This has always been the problem with this mainframe type of computers. I have been urging, together with Jan Stevens, to bring our applications over to less expensive servers that run open, public operating systems. We have been promoting other programming languages on the newer type of computers for a few years now, but our developers cannot transfer all of our application software in just a few years. If this work was sped up, our programmers would be doing nothing else. Our developers cannot rewrite all of our application software in just a few years. So, unless we pour many millions in backup computers, outings like this will happen again. Errors just cannot be avoided in IT. The last major incident dated from four years ago, so this is also not a frequent event, luckily.'

'How did this happen?' Sandström asked.

Dorian's throat was dry by now. He bowed under the piercing eyes of Akerlund.

'This time, the business departments put very suddenly tens of interim administrative personnel at work. They wanted to do away with the delay in overdue paperwork. Nobody warned us. That work overloaded the systems. I am truly sorry, but I don't think I could have avoided the problem.'

'The problem was a major one,' Akerlund remarked. 'Hundreds of people were out of work yesterday, including highly paid interim workers who just sat behind their PC screens turning their fingers. The crash cost Travtelio a lot of money.'

Dorian said nothing. There was nothing he might have added.

'The problem has been noticed at Executive level, and I have taken the blame for it,'

Akerlund continued. 'The problem may hardly have been avoided, but we might also have had better procedures in place to react more quickly.'

'Procedures have been published and distributed to warn us when business divisions need more computer capacity,' Dorian tried, 'but business people do not care about what happens in IT, and they seem not, understandably, to deem it necessary to warn us when they throw in more people to use the programs, at the risk of overburdening the computers. That is not much of an issue on other kinds of servers, but it is devastating for mainframes.'

'All right,' Akerlund concluded, silencing Dorian with a gesture of his hand. 'I must react. We have an American Manager of Operations with us, Mark Stephenson. Mark will take over IT Operations. You will henceforth act as his assistant. Your salary, title and office will not change for the moment, however. Consider Stephenson a super-manager, whose first task it will be to find out the weaknesses in our operations and to put newer and better procedures in place to avoid such disasters. I am sorry, but this measure was imposed on me.'

Sigvard Sandström added, 'your title and salary will not change. We give ourselves a period of six months to determine how this works out. Stephenson will also have the title of Director of course, but the day-to-day management will still lay with you. Does that suit you?'

Doriant bowed his head. He was a manager down on his luck. He could refuse and leave Travtelio. Travtelio had no legal right to fire him, because he also still worked under civil servant statute, but he might be pushed into oblivion, into a minor job in another department. Travtelio HR might start a procedure to fire him by accusing him of having committed a grave error, in which case even his statute might not protect him. He thought about his family, the way his wife would react. He could accept this proposal and hope for the best. He hesitated. He thought about leaving Travtelio anyway. He doubted however he could find another, a similar job at this salary, at his age. If he resigned he could not even benefit from unemployment payments, because civil servants that resigned had that issue in Belgian law. He would have to beg Travtelio's HR President to hold him for many more months under contract, forfeiting his statute, and even then the unemployment rates would be infinitely lower than what he earned here.

Michel Doriant bowed his head again and answered, barely audible, simply, 'yes.' 'Fine,' Akerlund went on. 'That is decided, then. I still want you to attend my staff meetings, together with Stephenson. I also want you to be present at all of Stephenson's Operations staff meetings. Is that agreed?' 'Of course,' Doriant replied, still avoiding looking straight at Akerlund and Sandström. Doriant stood up from his chair. The conversation was over. His career had just crested. It could only go downwards from now on. He had aged in a few seconds' time. Without another word he left.

Akerlund and Sandström remained in the office. They held silence for a long time. Then, Akerlund said, 'that was a nasty moment. Godelin urged me to fire the guy. Godelin does not seem to understand the difference between a contractual employer and a civil servant, of which Travtelio still has many. I find that strange, even though Godelin came from a private company. You seem to understand better the HR relations here than some of the Belgian Executives!'

'I had long talks, days of talks, with Sara Jansen,' Sandström answered. 'She explained me all the intricacies of the civil servant statute here, and what it meant for personnel. Also, you must know Doriant has only been IT Operations Manager since a year and a half. He led many other teams before, but it has been only lately, together with Jan Stevens, that he has started to change a few things in operations. Install paper procedures to avoid crashes like have occurred will take years, because what Doriant said just a moment ago was true. Changing the applications will cost loads of money. The IT Division did not have the budgets for that in the last years.'

'He is the Director, so he is responsible.'

'Have I not heard Godelin state errors should be forgiven if corrected?' Sandström retorted. 'So we should have granted this guy a second chance,' Akerlund continued, 'and kept him in place. Still, Godelin insisted I shove Doriant aside in favour of Stephenson. The Americans insisted too. I cannot disregard that wish. At least I didn't fire the guy! I will tell Godelin I pushed Doriant in a lesser job. How good is this other guy, this Stephenson?'

'I am surprised the Executives explicitly asked for this Stephenson,' Sandström replied. 'I looked into his CV. It is thin. He was merely a lower middle manager in the States. He has never been in a position to lead or manage four hundred people and a large budget like in IT Operations. The largest group he ever led was five people, and then people of very low qualifications. I wonder how Godelin came by his name. We had to keep Doriant in place to avoid worse. If Doriant is cooperative, we may light a candle. If Doriant reacts aggressively to Stephenson, we may have an even bigger problem on our hands than two computers crashing. I must start looking out for a decent substitute for Stephenson plus Doriant!'

Akerlund kept quiet, leaned back in his leather chair and sighed.

‘This was a terrible moment, indeed! If however, Dorian is right, then new procedures will take time, providing even they can be efficient, which I doubt. Such procedures never were very efficient either in Sweden! We will have to drive the IT budget up to provide for backup computers and the rewriting of those applications. I will have to fight for that at executive level. We may still not avoid future crashes, but with the backups matters may get better. Isn’t that ironic? I regret having to shuffle Dorian aside, and not being able to tell that guy what I really think of this, not being able to discuss things over decently with him. In Sweden, I would have kept him on. I have to be careful here. Godelin does not like me. I wonder why, but he doesn’t. Maybe it is because I am not American. Godelin also despises the Chinese.’

Akerlund said somewhat later, ‘I still wonder why Godelin wanted Dorian out so quickly and with such force. He wants to get rid of all civil servants, of course, and he wants to get rid of elder managers. There is a lesson here for us, too, Sigvard!’

‘So true,’ Sandström smiled warily. ‘Each politician cries out nowadays for workers to stay on longer in their companies, but in all enterprises such as Travtelio people of over fifty or fifty-five at the most, are at the summit of their careers. Maybe they can still grow in promotions with powerful backing from shareholders or influential people, but normally over fifty-five their careers end. All CEO’s bow in understanding when they hear messages of keeping on employees longer, but they all seem to regard workers of that age as finished. Age may be the reason also why Godelin does not want to give a second chance to Dorian. Dorian is dispensable in his eyes. The CEO wants a dynamic enterprise, so the enterprise must look young. I ever saw a photograph of the Directors of an electronic chip manufacturing corporation. On that photograph, all the managers were elderly people. Under the photograph the name of every director was mentioned, plus the number of years he or she had worked at the company. All the guys had worked for at least ten to twenty years at that chip company. Age and experience were considered an advantage there, a sign that led to confidence in the firm for customers. Travtelio has not that kind of mentality!’

Akerlund thought a little longer. Then he said, ‘I have to go and tell Jan Stevens about something else Godelin handed over to me. Godelin has been at embassy meetings, meetings of the high society of Brussels. The CEO has apparently been making his way into the higher circles of Belgium. An influential Minister who has been on a study and business trip to India promised to help the Indians get a foot in Belgium, so the Minister urged Godelin to hire in Indian consultants, claiming they could deliver at cheaper prices than any other.

No low-hanging fruit if you ask me, but Godelin wants action on this. I have a letter from the Embassy of India with a few names of IT companies that provide such services. I do not like at all to start now in offshore outsourcing, but Godelin insisted. Jan Stevens will have to look into this.’

Sandström stood and wanted to leave Akerlund’s office.

‘Wait,’ Akerlund said. ‘This Jan Stevens, will he be the right guy to look into this Indian consultancy? Would he be capable of finding such companies, the right ones, and would he be discreet enough?’

‘I think he will be up to that job,’ Sandström replied. ‘He has the profile of a strategist. He is the kind of man who likes to learn and find out about things. He is not the manager type. He is also quite loyal, I can assure you. I talked to him. He will be discreet.’

‘How do you know that?’ Akerlund asked briskly.

‘You have received files on each Belgian manager, as the President of this Division,’ Sandström smiled mysteriously. ‘You handed the HR files over to me, remember? Sara Jansen doesn’t know of the existence of those documents, and I haven’t shown them to her. The files have been put together when this company changed from a governmental to a private company. Godelin wanted to know what meat he had in his cauldron. There has been an exercise then, a thorough exercise, by which all the director functions were declared open. Each manager could apply for three open jobs, including his own if he wished to. All these people, all managers were then interviewed by HR specialists, some of the very best it seems. Each IT Director was confirmed in his or her former role. So, we have a full character description of all the managers.’

‘Do the Belgians know we have such files on them?’

‘I don’t think so. They must know the files exist somewhere. They don’t know we have them.’

‘Is that legal?’

‘As far as I know, any firm may hold files on personnel, provided they are kept in the HR service and not misused. I am the HR Director here. All employees also have a right to consult their HR files.’

‘Do they ever consult their files?’

‘Very rarely. Sara Jansen told me that, of course for the documents she has. She has to allow somebody to open her documents only once every while.’

‘Wait. Did you not just say she did not have these special profiles?’

Sandström smiled, but he also had a worried look on his face.

‘Right! The profiles I spoke of, the Director profiles, are not kept in the regular documents of the division. Still, I suppose, if somebody found out these documents still existed, he or she had a right to consult them.’

‘Provided they can prove the documents existed, which they cannot?’

‘My guess is they might provide enough suspicion in a Court of Justice that the old personality check files have indeed existed, and also have not been destroyed after the exercise. Jansen told me the managers seem either to have forgotten about the documents or they don’t want to know about them.’

‘That is a damn awkward situation,’ Akerlund sighed after a while. ‘I am not comfortable at all with all that. I feel like being a voyeur, like somebody who pries into people’s private lives. I would like you to build your own profiles, Sigvard, and have reports of those added to Sara Jansen’s documents. Nothing private in those files, only things relevant to company work. Then give those other documents back to the HR President!’

‘That will mean new interviews, new exercises, and have everybody answer to lists of questions, maybe during teambuilding sessions with the managers. We need additional budget for that, then.’

‘Do it,’ Akerlund said decisively, ‘and when you have enough information, hand those other files back!’

Sandström did not underestimate the intuitive power of Akerlund. When he heard an order repeated twice, he knew Akerlund meant what he said and showed he was very worried with the matter.

Somewhat later, Thomas Denis showed up at Michel Doriant’s office. Jan Stevens was also talking with Doriant. These two, and also Sara Jansen, had been the two Directors who had come to talk frequently to Doriant. Doriant understood for the first time in his career how many colleagues but how few friends he had. No one else but Denis, Stevens and Jansen had come in to say a nice word of comforting to him.

The comment of Thomas Denis was simple and depressing. ‘Yes, my boy,’ he said to Doriant, ‘these guys first put a fat rabbit in our pot, let us stew it for a while, and then they take the pot

away. I have not expected less. You are the first of a long list to come. Head the line! If it can be a consolation to you, money is all! A feast is when you can drink and eat well. Finish a bottle of Champagne this evening. You have been relieved from responsibilities for the same salary. Isn't that wonderful? Take your money, shut up, keep the rabbit stewing, grab it out of the pot before handing over the pot, and enjoy. This Stephenson guy is going to make a darn mess of Operations. Let the guy put his neck in the noose and hang himself. Don't be the nice guy I know you are. In meetings, never accede on anything, just smile mysteriously, and don't ever nod! Look how you should smile in meetings.'

Thomas Denis imitated a smile of such sweet, hideous innocence he would have ashamed a popular comic monster in his first film. Dorian and Stevens laughed.

5

The rock music droned hard and loud, then an electric guitar wailed high, drums deafening, a trumpet shrieked. Andrew Raga had felt the vibrations of the music from outside the bar. The band sounded worthless, but enthusiastic and tireless. Raga looked into the dimmed bar with disgust. He did not like this kind of small, dark, red and blue lighted kind of beer bar, yet it was here the expatriate managers of Travtelio had fixed rendezvous to one of their come-together parties. There would be dancing, talk, some getting to know newcomers working henceforth in the Travtelio divisions, probably a lot of flirting, maybe a lay afterwards. He expected the French Cognac and Scottish Whisky to be decent, however. He untypically disliked Bourbon, hated the burned sugar taste of some of the American brandies, but he was sure to find here the Highlands single malts he appreciated occasionally. Raga was a frugal drinker, courtesy of foul hangovers followed by severe and awful sickness of the stomach and the accompanying headaches. He had experienced these a few times only, the times he had really stepped over the brink when he was still a student at Chicago University. He would be careful now. He would be merry, enjoying himself, and not be stupid, here. Too many eyes around would gauge him. Raga would be a jolly fellow this evening and night, not a drunken fool.

The bar was actually a cellar in the centre of Brussels, near the Grand-Place, in the old town quarter. Raga had to go down a few steps and descend into the bowels of the Gothic buildings above, under the red brick vaulted arches of the stairs, to be hit by the terrifying noise of the band. He was late. The feast was well on. He wore a light dark suit, white shirt, no tie, his shirt open a few buttons under his neck. That was how far he could show he was relaxed and ready for some laughs, too. Many other men wore elegant suits and muted ties.

The bar was over-crowded. When Raga was at floor level, he saw the band at the far end, just four musicians and a slim blonde-wigged singing girl. Nobody moved for the moment on the small dance floor, merely an open space close to the band, where at most ten couples might stand. The hall was not wide, but deep. Tables, chairs and benches stood along the walls. He knew most of the people he saw, probably better than any other expat, for he had talked to most of them. Raga had made a habit of walking casually to at least one or two of them each day. That was the best means, he surmised, of knowing what was going on at Travtelio. He grinned, for he called this his way of management by walking around. Raga remarked the absence of Swedes, except for one or two lower managers, and no Chinese.

Raga stepped slowly forward, saw a table about in the centre of the right wall, a table at which sat Rachel Kyle, Lauren O'Sheridan, Anthony Jones, and two other Americans, Jennifer Alcock at the farthest end. O'Sheridan sat on a bench with her back leaning against the brick wall. There was a tall blonde before her, who looked very slim at the waist, but he could not

bring her home. He could not see the face of that one. Suddenly, O'Sheridan saw him approaching. She pushed towards the right, opening a space on the bench, and she pointed to him he could sit there. Raga might have acted as if he hadn't seen her gesture, and push into the boisterous youngsters just near him, but the prospect of teaming up with that gang was even less appealing than throwing himself in the grips of Lauren O'Sheridan.

Andrew Raga had met Lauren at meetings and learnt to know her somewhat better. Raga surmised now he knew all about the type of Lauren. Lauren was the typical well-bred, all-American, Irish-descent girl who was after a loving husband. She would probably be frigid and awful and boring in bed, but would catch him with a ring on his finger and a brood of children in no time. No thank you. A flirt was to be expected this evening from O'Sheridan, a lay no. He waved a hello, and sat down next to O'Sheridan, thanking her profusely. While he sat he caught a running waiter, held the young man by the arm, and ordered him to ask what everybody at the table wanted to drink. Glasses stood almost empty, he had remarked, while he approached. When he turned, he looked astonished at the woman in front of him. This one was a real stunner. He stared. She was a heavy-breasted white beauty, a Swedish girl, no doubt. Her face glowed luminously; her eyes flashed in the stroboscopic beams of coloured light that were now sent harshly bright into the tavern. O'Sheridan saw him look, a quite innocent look however, for Raga had learned a long time ago to keep surprise and appreciation for women concealed inside.

O'Sheridan said, 'this is Jana Navratil-Kovar, Andrew. You have not yet met her, I think. Jana, Andrew. Jana works in IT too. She is a Czech expat, just arrived.'
Actually, Jana had arrived quite a few weeks ago already. Raga just had not discovered her yet. Out of his right eye, Raga saw Rachel Kyle watching him. He tried to ignore that look. Kyle knew all about him. He and Rachel had been lovers for a while in the US, several years ago, very passionate lovers, Rachel's Mexican origin lusts soaring over him. That affair was long over, however. Raga had first tried to shove Rachel aside to conquer the job of her husband, and then he had dumped Rachel for a younger broad. Raga didn't fear Kyle too much, though. Kyle would not boast with what had happened between them.

The talk at the table was casual, limited to inconsequential chatting. Phrases had to be short and shouted to overcome the loud music. The atmosphere at that moment was not conducive to long conversation. O'Sheridan moved her body to the tunes on the bench, not more than the others at the table, but enough to once every while touch Raga's side. Beer was drunk at the table, pale, foaming beer in long, slim glasses. Raga had asked for a double Glenfiddich on the rocks. The blonde in front of him was drinking white wine. A classy bitch, Raga thought. Raga chatted as much as the others. Anthony Jones had already too much drink in him, Raga could tell. His talk was cocksure and buoyant. When he stood he swayed a little on his feet before he steadied. Anthony was eying Jennifer, and Raga was surprised at Jennifer's sympathetic reactions. Something was definitely going on between those two.

The music calmed down. Way in the evening, the band stopped playing and a disk jockey poured softer music into the cellar. Three couples began to dance, and Raga also asked Lauren O'Sheridan on the floor. They moved close to each other, slowly, not too close. Lauren laughed hard, throwing her head in her neck when he told the latest joke on Travtelio. He did not dance again, later. The tall blonde in front of him intrigued him. She was much in demand. She danced several times, never twice with the same guy. She talked a lot while she danced, he saw. O'Sheridan also danced a few times. Then, Raga asked to dance with Jana. They exchanged a few words on the dance floor. He learned she came from Prague, worked on a project in IT, and had met but few expats so far. When he had Jana between him and

O'Sheridan's eyes, he drew the Czech closer to him, so that he felt her chest. She immediately drew away from him. The conversation ended. She held him at a distance until the end of the dance.

Later in the evening still, Raga kept staring at Jana. Raga thought of himself as a handsome guy, masculine, well-built, athletic, muscled, tough and bright, clean-shaved, smelling good. He tried all evening to impress O'Sheridan, which was not difficult for she responded well, and also this Jana Kovar. Impressing Jana seemed rather like assaulting an impregnable ice fortress. Only towards the end of the evening, after he had made her a particularly overt compliment, he thought he drew a flirty look from the grey eyes, or at least a glimpse of interest. He had to go to the other tables too, however, say a few polite words and trade a few laughs with them. He squired around the women and exchanged a joke here and there. It was late before he returned to O'Sheridan's side. The music had practically finished by then, the dancing was over. The party would end soon. People were leaving. Raga heard a bribe of conversation going on beyond O'Sheridan. He pushed closer to her, so that their bodies touched. Lauren did not withdraw.

Rachel Kyle was speaking. 'The Belgians, except a few, are not really strong, professional managers.'

Jennifer Alcock objected, 'they talk a lot among them. They make decisions together, not just only one of them. Decisions are easily accepted afterwards that way, easily implemented, too.' Anthony Jones added, 'everybody here seems to be highly educated. The difference between managers and employees is a lot less clear and sharp than I am used to. I actually saw a room full of technicians reject a proposal of their manager, a new process formulated and accepted. The strange thing was: the manager did not seem to have lost his authority. Everybody just looked as if he had expressly provoked such a reaction.'

'These guys use technology a lot more than we,' agreed Kyle. 'We use manual labour and processes better. They have this Jan Stevens to present to them all the new electronic niceties, and they grasp technologies or new uses of existing technologies fast and eagerly. I am puzzled by the role of that Jan Stevens. I find him completely in overhead. He can be fired any one of these days, yet he seems useful about everywhere I meet him.'

Jones said, 'we still use phone mailing in the US. The Belgians use electronic mail massively, and I mean massively! I get a hundred e-mails a day. Mailing overwhelms me. They seem to love writing, if only in a few words, and they all know English, even at the worker level! Most of them express themselves in three languages. I've been in a meeting where a guy spoke English out loud, whispered in Dutch to his left neighbour and French to the neighbour on his right.'

'They also received courses, sessions of two hours, I believe, of how to welcome expats and how to deal with them. An American lady explained to them we would be as scared of them as they of us. The guy who told me that was also angry because the speaker talked about how American expats washed at least once a day. We also shower daily, he said, as if the Americans thought Belgians would not wash and were dirty on their bodies.'

'I wonder sometimes why we are here,' said O'Sheridan. 'The Belgians manage differently from us, but not worse. Their worker productivity is awesome. We haven't reached these levels of using systems and machines.'

'Professional management, defined processes and procedures is what they lack,' threw in Raga. 'We can beat them at management any time. In the US, we have more readily available funds to invest. It is only here I realise what a powerhouse of economy the US is, based on the power of our capital and our finance industry.'

Raga continued, 'in management, I find them sloppy, emotional, undisciplined, unequal in level, and often unreliable. I think we can handle them anytime. We are a lot better in management of corporations than they.'

Jana Kovar looked at him with strange, reproaching eyes, then. Raga saw she didn't agree. He thought he remarked disgust and anger. He stopped speaking, though he could have added further arguments. Then he surmised that if Belgian management was not up to American standards, Czech leadership would be even less so. He had not scored with the blonde vamp. Damn all these Europeans, he thought, we can give them a lesson in ruthless management and finance whenever we want. He turned to Lauren O'Sheridan.

The conversation went on for some time. More and more people left. The talks stopped, the music stopped, the bar emptied. Rachel Kyle stood up also, stretched, and by that sign the others at the table got up from their chairs and benches. Andrew Raga stood the last, acknowledging Kyle's unofficial leadership over these Americans. He helped Lauren O'Sheridan in her coat, then also Jana Kovar, and as if by accident his hand lingered on her shoulder. Jana did as if she had not felt anything.

'Can I bring you home?' whispered Raga.

'I came with Lauren O'Sheridan,' answered Jana, refusing to fall for the baiting. 'Thank you, but I live not far from Lauren. We came together, in my car. I go back with her.'

Raga followed the ladies and the Americans of the table, out of the bar. The cool air outside surprised them all. They left for their cars. It was drizzling outside. Raga stepped alone into the night.

****6****

Michel Doriant had not been removed from office because he was an older manager and a civil servant, and also not really because he had been the Director of Operations responsible for a crash of mainframes that hosted software applications used by hundreds of workers at Travtelio. The real reason for his demise originated in a conversation he had had quite some ago with the Vicomte Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d'Entray, only known then to Doriant as Gauthier Buisseyre.

Doriant had met Buisseyre in the Terra Nova restaurant. He had not known who Buisseyre was, and certainly not that this was a man who could have his lunches for free at the Cosmos restaurant on the thirty-ninth floor of the Skyscraper. He did not suspect that Buisseyre participated in the meetings of the Executive Board with Gerald Godelin. Doriant and Buisseyre had come to talk over innocent things, the weather, birds, hunting and fishing. Doriant hunted in the Ardennes, and so it seemed did Buisseyre. The men met more often afterwards, not in the Terra Nova, but Buisseyre occasionally passed by Doriant's office. They even went hunting together in the hunting fields rented by Doriant. Buisseyre was a jovial fellow, let Doriant use his hunting rifles. Doriant admired Buisseyre's dogs. The IT Operations Director thought Buisseyre was one of the secretaries or assistants in the administration of the Presidents on the thirty-eight floor.

With time, Buisseyre dropped in regularly on Doriant to say hello. On one of their talks Buisseyre asked about computer records, especially about the mailing records of the company. How long did IT Operations keep archives of the mail records? Were these records encrypted or readable? On which disks were the records kept? Who had access to them? Who held the passwords and where were the passwords stored to have access to the records? Which applications were needed to read the archives? Doriant answered truthfully, without revealing

applications and passwords. When the questions became insistent and frequent, Dorian grew suspicious and his defences went up.

It was of course Thomas Denis who broke the news to Dorian.

‘What are you cooking with this Buisseyre guy?’ Denis asked him while they sat also with Jan Stevens. ‘Don’t you know this Buisseyre is a nobleman and a hangman of Godelin? Beware of him! The man is not a bulldog. He is a black Danish pitch bull, killer, a vampire, a blood sucker!’

Michel Dorian waved Denis away, but he was very surprised. It dawned on him Buisseyre had befriended him because he needed something.

Dorian had discussed IT security and the archiving of mails and financial data with Jan Stevens. Some time ago, Stevens had studied the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, or SOX, a law voted in the US as a reaction to the corporate accounting scandals of Enron, Adelphia and Tyco International. The act covered issues of corporate governance and internal financial controls. It had very high impact on IT records keeping. Stevens had also shown Dorian the implications of the Basel II regulations in the financial industry. Travtelio was not subjected to the SOX regulations because it was not a publicly listed company with only private shareholders. Travtelio was not noted on the stock exchange, certainly not on any US stock exchange, even though among its shareholders was a US company. Stevens suspected sooner or later Travtelio would have to comply with the US law, and he thought it good practice to comply, even if the European Economic Area and its Members of Parliament found Europe not in need of such a stringent law, despite similar scandals as happened in the US. Stevens and Dorian had systemised the archiving of the data, in line with the SOX law as much as they could, without involving the business divisions. Because they had talked so much about what might happen in breaches of security and privacy, Dorian had become sensitised to such subjects.

Dorian had therefore quietly withdrawn from Buisseyre, avoiding answers by directing conversations to other subjects. Then, Dorian also asked Sara Jansen to find out who his convivial friend Buisseyre was. When he heard where this Buisseyre really worked and what his position was, Dorian put a long distance between himself and Buisseyre.

The reluctance of Dorian to provide Buisseyre easy access to the records of Travtelio distressed Gauthier much. Buisseyre became irritated with Dorian’s sudden evasions. Dorian even refused to see Buisseyre outside Travtelio.

But then, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre met someone else who might yet lead him to Travtelio’s electronic archives.

Buisseyre checked on a Business-IT Coordinator, a go-between of the business divisions and the IT Division, a man called Andrew Raga. Buisseyre had found the right person in Raga. If there was one thing Buisseyre could smell from very far, it was ambition, as much ambition as he craved for himself. Buisseyre was surprised to find out Raga was utterly ambitious and greedy. Buisseyre befriended Raga, that is, in his meaning of friendliness. He needed Raga.

Raga knew quite well who Buisseyre was, the grey eminence of Godelin. Raga was flattered and awed. He did not have any respect for the title of nobility of Buisseyre, but he held in high respect the list of contacts Buisseyre cited. Raga checked, and found out Buisseyre was indeed a member of all the clubs the man had mentioned so eagerly. He also found out that Buisseyre had access to a member of the Royal Family of Belgium who was a member of the Gösstlingen Group, a rather secretive group of heavyweight industrialists and bankers who met regularly, always in secret, to discuss world events and major directions of the world

economy. Raga was impressed. From what Buisseyre told him, he began to understand some of the importance of old-boy, or old aristocrat connections and relations in Belgium. He realised he would never be accepted in those circles. Hence, he would never reach the status of Chief Executive Officer in one of the large Belgian or European corporations with seat in Brussels, unless these companies were American owned and therefore controlled not out of Brussels but out of an American city. His next step however could be a Presidency over one of Travtelio's main divisions. He might remain a few years in that position, and use it as a lever to break into the executive spheres back home or elsewhere in Europe, maybe Paris or London. Raga saw it in his immediate interest to team up with Buisseyre. Soon there were no greater pals on earth.

When Buisseyre told Raga about his issues in getting by Dorian to the records of Travtelio, Raga did not ask why. He understood all too well the power that came with the information. Raga had never tried before to reach and use such confidential data on his own. He guessed rightly Buisseyre was sufficiently high up in the hierarchy to cover him up. He said he thought he might have a solution, which was all Buisseyre had hoped for.

Raga had a crony in IT called Mark Stephenson. This Mark had worked with Raga in the States, had admired Raga, and had gotten his manager post by Raga. Mark was devoted to his former boss. So much devoted, laughed Raga, he sometimes wondered whether Mark did not have a hang on him. Raga suspected Stephenson was secretly homosexual, so he had the man hung on a string, even though he, Raga, abhorred homo relations - Raga was an ardent church-goer in the States, a believer. Stephenson worked now as an assistant to Dorian. Mark might get to the records. So, Raga first talked off-handedly to his guy Mark, only to hear that Dorian had tightened procedures on passwords and accesses to archives, especially on those concerning Executive levels. Raga then started talking to Buisseyre about setting Dorian aside and put Stephenson in Dorian's seat.

'That man, Stephenson, is a fool,' Buisseyre remarked after a few days. Buisseyre had not only access to the secret personnel files of all Travtelio's Belgian managers, courtesy of Godelin, but also to the expat files.

'This Stephenson has never managed anything but a team of a few morons. He is not capable of leading an entire IT Operations group.'

'True,' Raga replied. 'But it is not because someone has never led a large team of such importance that he isn't capable of it. Moreover, he is an expat, and aren't expats much better managers than the rubble of old civil servants here? The shareholder companies will welcome an expat replacement for Dorian. Rachel Kyle will keep her mouth shut in the IT Division, for fear of the shareholders. Akerlund can be silenced or passed over.'

He grinned. 'I also think Stephenson will be a disaster in the end, but the disaster will take time before it shows. I will tell him to be careful, not to change things. When a disaster happens, the issue will not be on our heads, but on the head of the IT Division, and Godelin detests Akerlund. Besides, do you want to get to the records or not?'

Buisseyre could not but consider that reply as very logical, so he quieted on any misgivings or apprehensions.

'The problem is,' Raga said, 'how can we get Stephenson in Dorian's function and have Dorian ousted out?'

'I'll start working on that,' Buisseyre replied.

Buisseyre was very lucky in the matter, for not so long after his conversation with Raga, the main computers of IT crashed, and that angered a few of the Presidents in the Executive Board. Akerlund was embarrassed. Buisseyre played neatly on the frustration to the hilt. A victim, a guilty man was needed. He offered one. He cried out this Dorian deserved to be

fired, and that proposal appealed to the bellicose character of Godelin. Doriant had to be thrown out of Travtelio in shame! How could the man have fumbled so badly? Doriant could be dismissed, added Buisseyre, for a replacement was readily at hand. Was not the assistant of Doriant a US expatriate manager? The proposal silenced also the Presidents who were representatives of the shareholder companies.

Godelin decided he did not want to see Doriant again in any place of distinction, and he ordered Akerlund to dismiss the man. The same day Doriant was set aside, Buisseyre having conveniently forgotten Doriant was still protected by his old civil servant statute. Mark Stephenson was appointed as the new chief of IT Operations.

It was somewhat of a nuisance afterwards that Doriant could not be fired, remained in place in Operations, and might be looking over Stephenson's shoulder, but those were minor issues, issues Stephenson could and should handle. And so Stephenson's career got a tremendous boost, one he could not even have ever dreamt of.

'Of course you can handle this,' Raga assured him. 'When you are faced with an important decision or suffering a setback, ask Doriant, or come in and talk to me. Doriant cannot really refuse you advice. You have a budget now! I will help you hire in a consultant to assist you with any dire decision.'

This happened not long before Andrew Raga and Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre gained access to the database of all the financial data of Travtelio and of all the mailing records, also the confidential and special protected mails of the Presidents and Executives of Travtelio. The passwords for these encrypted mails could easily be recuperated, courtesy of Stephenson. Raga and Buisseyre could read everything that was going on between the Presidents of the company, and even what was sent by Godelin to outside the company, to his most trusted external partners and friends. They could thumb through the records at will.

Without Buisseyre and Raga knowing it, they were accessing the Data Warehouse of Travtelio, the Data Warehouse Jana Kovar and a team of consultants were auditing.

7

Actually, Jana Kovar had escaped from Czechia. She was not even Czech. She was born in Slovakia, near the border of ancient Moravia, in a place where it was sheer impossible to trace descendance of families to Czechia or Slovakia. Her family had moved to Prague when she was sixteen years old, her father a trader hoping to find better fortune in the capital of what was then united Czechoslovakia. Prague was the capital of both regions, of Czechia and of Slovakia, but in 1993 the two lands split amiably from a federation in two independent, sovereign republics. Jana studied at Prague University then, and she spoke much better Czech than Slovak. She had nothing in common anymore with her former home country, but she could also not appeal yet for a Czech passport. Since she was born in the Slovak Republic, from Slovak parents, she was considered legally a citizen of that country. Jana did not care much of what state she was a citizen, though Prague was dear to her. The only real issue for her nationality was that she could not buy and own a house in Prague, this being reserved to Czech citizens only. She could rent though, worked in Prague, and lived in a small studio until she met the man who would become her husband.

Radek Navratil was equally a Slovak appealing for Czech citizenship, a manager working in the same company as Jana. Jana was aware she was attractive, but unlike most other blonde beauties of Prague, she was cold and distant with men who tried to make friends with her. She had a reputation of being frigid among men, and maybe she was that, a little. Men also thought her too tall, too haughty, too elegant, too intelligent, too busy and too bossy.

Jana Kovar had been very lonely in the years after her studies, student friendships rapidly broken up after university. The first really handsome man, who came close to her and worked himself through her defences, overwhelmed her. This man, Radek Navratil, was boisterous, cocksure, powerful and yet charming to women. When other men were thrown off by Jana's icy beauty and by her prestige in the company, Radek was only piqued and eager to rise to the challenge. He conquered Jana, so that in no time they slept together, then lived in Jana's apartment, and married.

Their relationship soured within the year. At first, Radek wanted no children. Then, when Jana learned to know her husband better, Radek fearing to lose his influence on her and wanting to link her to him more than by a ring, it was she who refused children. Behind the handsome face of Radek, Jana discovered a ruthless, almost primeval, violent, and much less intelligent man than she thought she knew. Radek was also a racist, a Czech nationalist with definite extremist opinions in politics. He despised everything that was not Czech. Radek Navratil used his masculine physique to impress women. Women flocked around Radek. Jana found out her husband was a heartless deceiver, very inclined to philandering with her female colleagues. It seemed she had been blinded from her husband's weaknesses. When she slashed out at him with whipping words, he responded with fists. Jana threw Radek out of her apartment the first time he tried that, but the next day he stood weeping at her door, apologising, and shouted how much he loved her. She took him in again. Radek calmed down in the months after that scene, but with each month Jana's respect for her husband was put to the challenge, and finally melted away entirely. Then, the violence started anew, and this time, Jana had to hit back with claws and kicks. Radek knocked her down. She had to be stitched up in hospital. She moved into another apartment, and did not allow her husband to come near her afterwards. Radek then harassed Jana constantly at work, apologising abjectly, wanting her back.

Jana needed a break in her life to think, to find out what she really wanted. It was then she read about a long overdue announcement of open postings for managers in the Belgian company Travtelio. Within a week, she closed her apartment and boarded an airplane for Brussels. She lived for more than a month in a world-class hotel of the city, visited and shopped, and began a promising job at Travtelio. She received a nice, modern apartment in Uccle, on the other side of the town, drove with gusto a small Mercedes through the frantic traffic of Brussels with gusto, and filled her place with comfortable, cheap furniture out of her moving allowance. She lived well, but she was very lonely. She had tried to make friends with the expat women, but the dark Rachel Kyle had rejected her immediately, considering her a non-entity. Enmity flared almost instantly between Jana and Lauren O'Sheridan, for no reason, automatically, but then subsided. With time, she would talk frequently to Lauren, but not become her friend and confidant. Jana never understood how she could be thought of as being a competitor for these women, but in an odd way it seemed they considered her so. Jennifer Alcock was friendly but also held Jana at a distance.

Jana felt only lonely in the evenings, however, and during weekends. Her colleagues at Travtelio, the Belgians and less so the other expats, had taken her up in their group. There were very few Czech expats at Travtelio, and Jana knew none of those from before. She realised a group of people was nice to her, mainly because of the coordinator of the international projects, a man called Jan Stevens.

Stevens had introduced her to the others, Americans, Chinese and Belgians, but he rarely spoke much with her. She met his colleagues more often in meetings and sat sometimes discussing with them for hours. She rarely spoke for longer than ten minutes with Jan, yet he

always appeared when something important had to be decided. The strange thing was that also in those meetings, Jan rarely talked much. When he did say anything at all, he only spoke at the end of the meeting. Sometimes he did not even say a word, but when managers or employees proposed a process or a change, more often than not the speaker would look at Jan for a nod or a frown, and then be visibly comforted in the proposal or start asking for opinions. Jan was not the boss of the managers, but everybody sought his consent.

Jana was amazed at the show of so much quiet charisma of leadership emanating from Jan Stevens. The man had hierarchical power over nobody and he exercised not much power. He was a nobody, discreet and polite, not particularly handsome but tall, very formal in his relations with all expats, closed as an oyster, the boss of no employees, yet probably the most silent force and calm centre of the technical part of the Division, next to Akerlund and Kyle. Jana surmised the influence came from the positions Jan had had before the privatisation of Travtelio, the hierarchical position he had occupied then, and the reputation he had built up in those times. The reputation and respect lasted. Jan also seemed to be friends with Sigvard Sandström, the crimson Cardinal of Akerlund. She had surprised them once, standing in the door opening of Jan's office. She listened to an animated discussion the two were having, not on a subject of Travtelio business, but over the latest historical novel of Colleen McCullough.

Jana was intrigued, puzzled, hung between attraction for this otherwise common, amiable Jan, and her refusal for the time being to enter yet any other commitment with a man. His blue eyes and very regular face tempted her to gaze. She almost slapped her face when she caught herself at this. She sensed he was much intimidated by women, except in business and professional relations. She was well aware how she looked and why she put men off. With Jan she wished to be otherwise. She took no pride anymore in her white beauty, sometimes wishing to be a plain girl. She felt Jan was a shy man, who avoided women at work because that was his ethic, and she appreciated that. She was amused at seeing how she intimidated him when they were alone. Jana was attracted to Jan Stevens.

Still, Jana enjoyed herself in Brussels. She travelled at least one day during weekends to towns such as Bruges, Antwerp or Liège, spending almost nothing, not even on lunches. Once a month she spent her entire weekend from Friday evening to Sunday evening in Paris, London, Amsterdam or Köln. After a few months of this life she was happy, tranquil, but also bored and lonely.

8

As Gerald Godelin had promised, things moved at Travtelio. The Cosmos restaurant on the thirty-ninth floor of the Skyscraper became famous for its glamorous panoramic view over Brussels. It was a place of legend that the employees of Travtelio might dream of but could never reach. Tales abounded of Limoges porcelain plates with the emblem of Travtelio stylishly gilded on them, of silver cutlery and silver coffee sets. The chef of the Cosmos was one of the best cooks of Brussels. Many a lower manager would have offered his right hand to be invited there and lunch with a President. An invitation to the place was considered the biggest honour one could be honoured with by the company.

The Clouds restaurant was readied at about the same time. Jan Stevens was allowed to book there for lunches. He used it to invite the Indian managers who came to discuss with him possible joint ventures and outsourcing services. He found out that the names provided to him by Godelin in the embassy's note were merely among the smallest, relatively unknown companies in which he could not have confidence as reliable partners for Travtelio. He

discovered three major Indian companies with headquarters in Mumbai, however, with which serious and decent deals could be signed.

An Indian consultant could only stay in Belgium for one year on a work permit, even Travtelio vowing for the work, and using Indian employees as consultants was not very advantageous as compared to Belgian or Europeans. Interesting only was setting up teams of developers in India, for instance to maintain older applications, or to have the Indian team write entirely new applications with only a few Indian analysts and managers in Brussels coordinating between Brussels and Mumbai. These coordinators were also highly paid consultants, about as much as any other, but the total benefit on the developers still amounted to about ten to fifteen percent of global costs, which was not negligible. It was not low-hanging fruit, as Akerlund liked to say, but it was not to be left aside, and Stevens thought the matter very feasible.

The office of Godelin continued to issue initiatives. Most of the changes were not in business though, but in HR measures.

It began with a 'clean desk' policy. The idea was once more inspired by Godelin's paranoia for competitors. Visitors who came to the Skyscraper and the Villa might snatch important files from desks while they walked by. So, no papers were allowed on desks or on bookcases while the employee who used the desk was absent. Everybody stuffed the papers in the cupboards.

Then came a 'winter cleaning action'. Each employee was only allowed half a cupboard to place his or her personal belongings in. Paper was not to be used; electronic files had to be kept. Paper had to be cleaned out. This action rolled through the Travtelio building floor after floor. Containers filled with old paper clogged the entrance near the elevators.

The following action was a 'clean walls policy'. Many people hung posters against the walls, schemas of electronic circuitry, organisation charts, and posters of holiday sites or exhibitions in museums. All had to go. The warehouse operators had of course calendars and posters of nude women in their offices. The posters were prohibited. This initiative was soon called the 'clean the nudes act'.

Next, the 'open door policy' was proclaimed. The managers of Travtelio had offices, offices closed by aluminium walls and doors. Henceforth it was forbidden to keep the doors of the offices closed. Jan Stevens did not remember when his door had been closed the last time. He wondered what the use of doors was if not to be closed once in a while. Somebody in HR had the same reflection.

A little later, overhead costs had to be cut, and the Executive board wanted to close a large building of Travtelio in the middle of Brussels. The sale of that building would boost the financial results of the company that year. A thousand people worked in that building however. Higher management decided a thousand could be additionally squeezed into the Skyscraper and the Villa, provided the floors were converted entirely to open office space. No manager, not even the directors, could hold a closed office. Of course, Presidents and Vice-Presidents kept their large, walled offices.

'I do not believe in priests who do not live by what they preach', was the comment of Thomas Denis.

Many managers felt humiliated for having to work in open spaces. Offices had been regarded as normal for managers, but also as somewhat of a status symbol. Michel Doriant felt humiliated. His bitterness increased when he saw Mark Stephenson take possession of the old office of Michel Doriant, which remained closed. Offices became a status symbol even more than before, a symbol of the few very privileged.

All the aluminium panels of the offices had to be removed. New, luxurious carpeting had to be laid to line the floors, and that meant everybody in the headquarters had to be moved. Jan Stevens dared not think about that cost. The thirty-seventh floor was to be made free of people and refurbished for open space offices. Office desks were pushed one against the other. A few low coloured cloth panels were inserted among the groups that asked for it. High cupboards were thrown away and replaced by lower bookcases, half-height dressers that lined a narrow corridor around the elevator shaft space, so that hardly two people could pass one another. When the thirty-seventh was ready, the thirty-sixth and part of the people of the thirty-fifth floor moved higher up, at desks spaced on the minimum of the six square meters allowed by law for offices. The six square meters in all were applied not to individual desks but to groups of desks, pushing employees still closer together. This moving of people was accomplished in record time, and newcomers from the mid-town building streamed in. Employees began to complain about the noise, about less effective air conditioning. Queues of people lined up for lunch in the Terra Nova daily, for the restaurant had not really been foreseen for so many. HR asked to spread lunches. A scheme was published with the best time to eat per floor. Jan Stevens threw the schedule away, and so did most employees, for their lunch times were determined by the end and beginning of their meetings rather than by their own willing.

Somebody in HR found out that Travtelio spent too much time on meetings. Clocks were hung therefore in every meeting room. Posters with advice on how to shorten meetings by preparing beforehand and sticking to the points, were also hung in the rooms. Then, the number of meeting rooms was diminished, and some of the rooms were converted to multiple open areas without chairs, where people had to stand and talk around high tables, as if they stood at the counter of a bar. The bars had no success, but since there were now fewer meetings rooms to book, people sought rooms wherever they could find them, often very far from their own floors. More people were seen running through the building at the hour.

Another act took away all secretaries from all managers below the Vice-President level and below Director level of Directors managing less than five hundred people. Jan Stevens and Thomas Denis would lose their secretary. The secretaries were sent to administrative tasks. Jan Stevens never found out how Thomas Denis succeeded in keeping on Marguerite, though he suspected Sara Jansen partner to the conspiracy. Marguerite Dupas continued to brew very black coffee for the four of them.

‘Where are your thoughts,’ Thomas Denis shouted. ‘Did you really think one moment I could have thrown Marguerite to the lions like a Roman virgin? No way!’ Marguerite Dupas had suddenly changed jobs. She was now an Assistant Developer, whatever that meant, a new title created just for her. One assistant developer was needed for the personal comfort of Thomas Denis. Sigvard Sandström closed an eye, because he loved good coffee too, and Thomas had a flask of Swedish brandy hidden in a closet. Sandström had coffee each day at ten thirty and at four o’clock with whoever of Denis, Stevens, Jansen, Doriant and himself could be in Denis’ office. The five came to be known as the VSOPs, the Very Superior Old Pals. Even Zhaò Fai ventured inside sometimes. Akerlund only smiled when he passed Denis’ office at those hours.

The smaller coffee machines that stood on secretaries’ desks and also on employees’ desks were suddenly considered a danger, and of course these machines used up electricity, so they too were prohibited. Marguerite Dupas and Thomas Denis hid their coffee machine inside a low cupboard, even though Denis had to drill holes and adapt the levels.

Travtelio Global Services Division installed huge automatic coffee dispensers. The coffee at the automatic dispensers was for free. Caffeine addiction became rampant. People walked through the building with small plastic cups in their hands. Sometimes, of course, they spilled the coffee on the carpets.

Once the coffee machines were installed, it took not long before all the waste baskets got filled daily with the white, plastic cups delivered by the machines. Such waste and pollution to the environment was intolerable.

Travtelio distributed a free porcelain mug to every employee and had the coffee machines only deliver coffee, no more cups. That was economic on plastic and on waste management, but now all employees ran around with the porcelain mugs in their hands from meeting room to meeting room. Employees could of course rinse their mugs at the water closets, but few men did that. Management had foreseen that issue, for the mugs were not glazed white but black, also inside.

Managers who received visitors could not offer them anymore a coffee or a tea, since they had no secretaries anymore, and no cups were delivered by the coffee machines on their floors. The Directors bought plastic cups on their budgets and the secretaries of the Vice-Presidents delivered them to the managers, who then kept stacks of them in their cupboards. Other managers brought their visitors to the Cloister area and offered them a coffee there, in the shops.

When Jan Stevens attended meetings at the top floors of the Skyscraper, which happened only very rarely, he noticed small cubicles hidden to the side of the corridors, where other kinds of coffee machines stood on display on the tables of neat kitchenettes. Here he saw the fanciest, glittering machines of a Swiss brand that brewed coffee from shining aluminium capsules of various colours, capsules which held the finest Arabica's and other delicious kinds of coffee from exotic countries. The cups here were of white china engraved with the name of the brand.

In another frenzy of economy, HR calculated that there were far too many desktop printers in the company. Henceforth, there would be only two bigger printers at the two corners of every floor. Mark Stephenson was a hero of that move. Thousands of desktop black-and-white laser printers, which could easily have lived for ten more years, were thrown away and replaced by fewer, new, high speed printers. These printers were also copiers, but they clogged so much that employees had to seek for substitutes and print on machines at other floors, which meant going back to their desk and repeat the printing command. When the printers were used as copiers, people forgot to turn them back to printing mode after the copying sessions. More people walked through the building, walking time lost to productivity. The Directors of Travtelio soon found there was a serious issue of security with this way of printing. The Directors ran to a printer to look for the confidential papers that the machine would soon spit out. They then waited a long time before all pages sent before to the machine rolled out. More working time was lost this way. The Directors rapidly bought small desktop laser printers on their own budgets, and linked them to their PCs again.

The Global Services division discovered the cleaning of six thousand desks cost too much. So, dust rags were bought for each employee with a note asking the employees to dust their own desks and desk equipment. Thomas Denis walked around, using the dust rag as a fashion shawl around his neck, until Marguerite could not stand it any longer and tore it from him.

9

Jan Stevens was on one of his visits to the data centre in the Skyscraper basements when he met Michel Doriant for the first time that day. Doriant was talking to two office automation technicians, and to Hugo Martin, in what looked like a very animated discussion. Jan hesitated

interrupting them, even to say hello, but Dorian saw Stevens entering and went over to him, stopping his discussion. Jan and Michel shook hands. Jan still helped Dorian absorb the shock of his demotion. Dorian had been avoiding staff meetings, despite the fact that he was still invited.

Jan asked now, 'how are you doing, Michel? I haven't seen you for a while. Are you all right?' Dorian made an ugly face. 'No, I'm not fine at all, as you might have guessed. All the processes we have put in place to handle IT incidents systematically, the processes for defining incidents as problems when they occur regularly and find definite solutions for them so that the incidents do not happen again, our meetings over issues with staff, all that has been dumped by Stephenson. Stephenson guillotined those processes as unnecessary overhead. Fire-fighting of incidents is enough for him. I have seen incidents now happen all over again, and each time the incident is remedied of course, but nobody installs a procedure to see to it the problem does not occur anew!

Stephenson's most quoted saying these days seems to be: who cares about quality? The guy is probably too young to have heard and learned anything about the economic disaster in the US when Japanese manufacturers thrashed US car manufacturers on quality, drawing millions of car buyers away from Ford and GM to Toyota and Honda and the like. We are children of the quality movement. In our own Antwerp and Genk, where our car assembly factories employed thousands of workers, courses on quality management got organised every month, and we learned from those courses too, from American quality gurus by the way. This guy Stephenson learned nothing! He is just stupid and arrogant.

He also drew away all the people that can think by themselves to operational tasks where they do not have to think anymore, and he fires contractual personnel we hired in for some of the most difficult tasks. The name he called these people by was wanton leeches!'

'So you get excited over the great Mark Stephenson, I hear. Have you told him he rides on the bad track?'

'Of course, I told him that over and over again. He simply refuses to listen. And the incidents are not all. My people are not even allowed anymore to meet with supply companies. We are not allowed to talk in teams over which equipment to buy. Stephenson wants a proposal on his desk. Then, he meets suppliers and the account managers. He, and only he, decides on what to buy from whom. Only Stephenson meets suppliers. He does not ask prices from more than one supplier. I still have a few contacts with the most decent account managers of our suppliers. They whisper to me Stephenson suggested to them that if they want to bring in computers, disks or other equipment, they have to please Stephenson well. They have to invite him to golf courses, concerts, sports games. The invitations offer him free access, of course. The man will fly to Germany soon, in the private jet of one of our main software suppliers, to be cooed for three days in Berlin and around. He has been invited to world championships in Madrid, to exhibitions of art in Rome. Stephenson alone decides over which equipment Operations buys.

Our teams get demoralised by that. They have to install equipment that doesn't fit well. It takes them much more time to tune the machines to have them work seamlessly together. That creates incidents, which Stephenson ascribes to their incompetence! In networking we have to mix and match equipment, from two new vendors, and those devices do not fit well together, so parts of our network have become notoriously unstable. Stephenson does not solve problems! He creates them.'

Jan Stevens saw large stacks of white sheets of pre-printed paper being brought in.

He asked Dorian, 'what is that? Are those invoices? We don't print invoices here, do we?'

‘Oh yes, we do, now! The printing shop in here is being enlarged and printing goes on almost all day through. A lot of printing is being drawn away from our main data centre to here.’

‘That can’t be!’ Jan exclaimed. ‘I thought I urged you to draw all printing out of here, back to our main data centre.’

‘Sure,’ Doriant replied, ‘you told me that. And I agreed. But Stephenson has found out that he could lower transport costs of printed matters by bringing everything here. Our suppliers like that, you see, for Brussels is closer to where they produce and preprint the paper! Lower costs for them, nice gifts like Champagne bottles for Stephenson.’

‘This place must not become a second main data centre,’ Stevens argued. ‘It has never been designed for that. We have no adequate safety provisions. Only our main data centre has been built to cope with the danger of a printing shop.’

‘Don’t tell me that,’ Doriant replied, and shook his arms. ‘Tell that to Stephenson! You know, this guy doesn’t know a damn thing about data centres, nothing about security and safety, and nothing about computer installations. He pushes computers in here, without even asking himself whether we have the electric power supply for them. When we object, he says we are paid to solve issues, so he says it is for my people to find solutions.’

Doriant shook his head. ‘Stephenson merely decides on cost figures. He brings in the cheapest equipment, the devices that come with luxurious dinners in the best restaurants of Brussels, nice travels, and I dare not think of what other advantages to him. I would not be surprised if he was caught with his hands in the till! Financial controls have been slipshod lately. You and I know it is best to limit ourselves to the fewest suppliers for a certain type of devices. He just makes IT Operations install what pleases him. In that, he doesn’t stint money. The saddest, however, is to see him destroying so much of what we have been building up these last years. Stephenson will doubtless be leaving in a couple of years. He will be leaving when he cannot avoid catastrophes anymore. He will leave a mess to his successor! In the meantime, he will have well profited. When he leaves, he will boast in the professional press how he whiplashed this organisation to discipline and lower costs. The job of bringing order again in the chaos of ill-matched devices and software will be for his successor.’

Jan grinned, ‘do you remember that story Andreas Verstraete told when he left Travtelio? Andreas said he had prepared three closed envelopes for Akerlund, numbered one to three. Akerlund was to open envelope number one now, the two others each after one year of management. In the first envelope was a paper on which was written “blame it all on your predecessor”. The paper in the second envelope said, “start making changes”, and the one in the third envelope “prepare your three envelopes”.’

Doriant could still laugh. He chuckled. ‘I will give Stephenson those three envelopes, but he will have to open them every four months. He is well into his first paper, though, for he blames me for each incident, for everything that goes wrong. Still, I haven’t heard of one decent proposal to remedy. He just makes matters worse.’

‘I’ll have a word with Stephenson, and also with Rachel Kyle, and with Sandström,’ Stevens promised.

‘I already talked to Akerlund, Kyle and Sandström,’ Doriant said. ‘They refuse to act. They cannot act, for the shareholders put Stephenson in place. They heard me out politely and nodded, but they didn’t act. Kyle thought I was slandering an American manager. She said I was jealous of a guy who had taken over my job. She simply despised me. I saw how well Akerlund and Sandström listened, but they did not say one word against Stephenson. Are they waiting to catch Stephenson on gross errors before setting him aside? That may take ages, for

our people are good. They do their best to avoid the worst faults. I will have gone crazy by the time, trying to solve the issues that man creates, and hushing up the disasters we could avoid only at the last moment. You know what I should do? I ought to do nothing and let a disaster hit IT Operations, then hide in a corner and push Stephenson in the mess of his own creation! My tragedy in that is: I am simply not capable to stand aside and let this department go down in such a disaster.'

At that moment, Hugo Martin stepped toward Dorian and Stevens.

He cried, 'this centre has become a public comedy theatre, a railway station! I am supposed to keep people out of this area, but everybody has gotten badges with access to the centre now! I cannot hold somebody back anymore. When I tell guys I have never seen before they cannot just walk in here, they shove a paper under my nose signed by a manager, ordering them to bring their stuff in. They just drop equipment here or there, have me sign a delivery paper, and go. I caught two with their fingers on the switch of our servers, ready to turn off the power supply. Look in that corner. Two computers are standing there, brought by a firm we have never used in the past. The computers have been standing there since three weeks, unattended, unconnected, never even put to power. I have no work instructions; I wouldn't know how to make them work. Do you guys still know what you are doing?' Martin was clearly excited.

Mark Stephenson stood suddenly behind Michel Dorian.

'What are you two doing here?' he scowled at Jan Stevens. 'Do you not know your own rules? You have nothing whatsoever to do in the data centres. Only operations people are allowed in here. You are not operations guys. Go and play upstairs. Let the real guys work!'

Jan Stevens felt muted outrage well up in him. He clenched his fists. Yet, he refrained from a quick retort for a few moments.

Before Jan Stevens could answer, Hugo Martin broke in. 'Why the hell is all that paper brought in here? We don't print invoices here! The printing is done in the main data centre. I have no place anymore to store all that paper! I have to line the pallets along the walls. Some even clog up entrances. Do I place the paper on top of the computers? Do I put computers one on top of the other? Have you any idea what this paper is doing to our air conditioning? Paper creates dust. Printing creates dust. All the people that come in out of here create dust. They leave the doors open almost constantly! The dust will fly into the computers and into the disks. The machines will crash! This is crazy!'

Stephenson flared up. He held his ground. 'You will do as I say! You just do as I say! Your job is to find a place for what we bring in, and help our suppliers. So, do that! It is not, definitely not, your job, to think about the why and the what. Stick to your job! It is simple enough.'

Michel Dorian interfered, 'Hugo is doing what he is supposed to do. He is the guardian of the centre. He feels responsible for this place!'

'The hell he is,' Stephenson cried, 'and don't you interrupt me or try to object to my orders, Dorian. You have done enough harm in this joint. This place is finally coming into its own, and it is being used as it should be! Go away! Your place is not here. I forbid you to come down here. I forbid you to set one foot in any of my data centres! You are just an advisor I don't need. That goes for you too, Stevens! Go and advise yourselves! Go and play in your own useless sandbox. And you, Martin, you had better do as I tell you or you will be out of here and on the street in no time!'

Stephenson stood with a hand and stretched finger under the nose of Hugo Martin, who was clearly humiliated and angry. Stevens thought Martin was going to hit Stephenson. He thought Martin quite capable of that. Luckily, a man drawing in a cart with stacks of paper came from the printing shop and pushed his load to the entrance. Both men had to separate on either side of the cart. Stephenson followed the cart with long steps and disappeared through the doors.

Martin and Dorian were flabbergasted. Jan Stevens grabbed the opportunity to smooth them. ‘Martin, you had better look out from where that paper cart came, and please, calm down. Calm down!’

‘Calm down?’ Hugo Martin shouted. ‘Calm down? Do you know what is going on here? This place has become a madhouse! I am supposed to be a guardian, but this has become a chicken den. Everybody comes and goes at his own whim, all with papers signed by you, Directors, stating they can do whatever they like in here. I get treated like I was shit. I do not want to be responsible for what is happening here!’

‘All right, Hugo, all right! We know what is happening. It will all be sorted out,’ Dorian grunted. ‘Now, calm down and go back to your work.’

Hugo Martin left, stepped in the direction of the print shop, but he kept on grumbling to himself.

Michel Dorian turned to Jan Stevens. ‘You see what happens? Stephenson also bullies people around and proffers menaces. He rants against them. He plays hardball. I am disgusted. So disgusted! This happens everywhere in my groups.’

Dorian and Stevens went to the elevators. While the elevators moved up, Dorian leaned against the wall. He remained silent, shocked by the reactions of Stephenson and Martin. Jan felt as disappointed and discouraged.

Until then, everybody in the IT Division had listened to what Jan Stevens had to say. Today, he felt powerless to change things for the better, to smooth out the folds between teams, to have everybody work and discuss together as one team. He too knew he had stepped into a new era. The company he worked in seemed each day to move more from an easy-going democracy to a hellish dictatorship. The time was over for him too, as it was for Hugo Martin, when he could say whatever he wanted to a manager higher up in the hierarchy. The managers had listened in the past, but not anymore. Hierarchical authority was all that counted, instead of groups working together. Jan sensed this in his IT Division, but he had to acknowledge he saw it everywhere in Travtelio. Still, nowhere had he been pushed with his nose so crudely into the matter as here. Stephenson was right, Jan thought. He had nothing to do anymore in the data centre of the basement. He was not anymore the person who could give his opinion on everything and be respectfully listened to. What was he still doing at Travtelio? He was merely an errand boy for a few expats, and those were now so well installed they did not even need him any longer. He had been doing less and less at his desk. He had no work. He went home earlier than before. He felt useless. That was why he had strolled down to the data centre, to have a look there. He glanced sideways at Dorian, and remarked how his friend was also lost in thoughts, head bowed, probably having the same on his mind as Jan.

When the elevator arrived, Dorian briskly said, ‘Martin is way over his nerves. He is a simmering cauldron. He has trouble at home. His wife is threatening with a divorce. Stephenson risks being punched on the nose if he continues to shout like that at Martin. Martin is nothing more than a lice to Stephenson, and Martin feels that. We always explained to Martin what he had to do, we gave him more credit than he deserved, and he functioned

well so far. Stephenson humiliates him, just tells him to stand by and shut up. Stephenson seems to particularly work his bad feelings out on Martin. Luckily, Stephenson walks in on the basement only every two weeks or so, and he does not meet Martin every time. Martin also started drinking. I caught him at it.'

'Can you replace him?'

'I could in the past, not anymore. I have no authority anymore, Jan, to do that. I am merely, as you heard, a useless advisor, and it suffices for me to say something for Stephenson either to ignore it or to do the contrary, probably just to spite me. I am extremely well paid for being a useless advisor, but the only thing I am allowed to do for the moment is to proffer opinions in meetings. My opinions are listened to when Akerlund or Sandström is in the meeting, otherwise ignored. I am also losing my grip on the managers in IT Operations. You know how it is. The worst men feel only Stephenson counts, so they tend to flatter him by following his instructions only. They all began to do as they like, as long as they can get a yes from Stephenson. We have no coordinated strategy on buying equipment and software anymore, no direction. I locked horns with Stephenson on that subject, but I am not the boss anymore. He does as pleases him, whatever the arguments.'

Jan Stevens nodded. He was as powerless as Michel Dorian. Power in IT had changed hands. Both managers felt their charismatic authority slip through their fingers like clear water.

10

Sara Jansen was talking about the subtle changes in power to Sandström at that same moment. She too felt, even earlier than Dorian and Stevens, how the atmosphere was wrought with the ripples of dissension. She perceived the IT Division was slowly transforming into a set of separate individuals, each seeking to realise his or her own program and aspirations. Each individual tried to survive on its own in the new constellation. Each and every one tried to gain recognition and acceptance for individual actions. New allegiances were sought.

Competition was on.

Belgian managers stayed aside, against the walls, complained Jansen. Many meetings were still going on among the groups when several groups had to work together to bring new equipment in or to adjust software, but what had disappeared were the discussions among the leaders of the groups on the choices themselves. The involvement and cooperation of other managers but the leader of each group was not sought after anymore. Each one for himself was the new motto that seeped through. The division had changed into a number of competing groups, each group working for its own aim, not anymore for common goals. Jansen tried to explain this to Sandström. She struggled to tamp down her frustration.

Sandström heard her out. He listened patiently, and he understood and believed her. His own feelings were dubious over the matter, but sympathetic, for he had already experienced such situations in his own company too. He sighed. He grew impatient with Sara.

'Wake up to reality, Lady,' he thought. 'This company seeks now to establish responsibilities. Responsibilities have to be assigned to individuals, so that punishment follows errors, despite what Godelin said. Responsibilities are not supposed to be diluted anymore in a mass of entangled groups and team decisions. Don't you realise you are mutating from a public owned Government agency to a private, hard-driving company? This is how all world-class private companies work nowadays. I know so well all you are saying to me. What you are telling me is how change happens. Change always leads to frustration until a climax is reached. The climax of confusion then brings about an explosion, something like strikes among personnel, or a new understanding. With expats, here, understanding will be hard to come. The expats couldn't care less about what happens at Travtelio in human relations, or even about what

happens to Travtelio in se. They are here to make money, as quickly and as much as they can make, money for themselves, of course. Oh yes, they will do a fine job, and your company will progress in a few domains.

Have we reached the climax? I think not yet, but what do I, Sandström, do now: let the climax come and then step in as the great consoler, or begin now to smooth away the ascent to the climax? You think the change is all for the worse, but with time the new understanding will come. One thing is true, however, the expats have to go from here before you can find a new balance. That is still a few years off.'

Sandström said to Jansen in a soft voice, 'Sara, I know. Maybe the time has come to forge more support among the managers, a renewed feeling of togetherness. The trouble is: why would the all-time employees of Travtelio work together in earnest with the expats? They see the expats as dangers for their careers, and I cannot blame them, really. They thought until now that this firm was theirs, and they expected gratitude for their work. They expected more than their salary of Travtelio. They will not get more, however! Travtelio has the right to take and to give what pleases her, what pleases the CEO! That CEO has been thrown in here quite like an expat, by the way. When Travtelio wants to place expats in here, then it has absolutely the right to do so, whatever the employees of Travtelio think of that. It will be hard to make the expats understand they will leave one day, not too far in the future, and to make the Belgians understand their jobs are safe as long as they perform and put up with the expats. I cannot undo all the measures higher-up HR has introduced, and, frankly, those measures come up regularly in private companies. All change will be and is resisted by staff, the main reason being that higher management has not explained well enough the urgency of matters. Travtelio needs new budgets, so savings are sought in odd places. Some money is invested to save a lot more. For instance: personnel are being pushed together here in the Skyscraper and Villa, to save tens of millions by the sale of the building in mid-town. That is all for the good of the company.'

'A lot more money is being thrown away on consultants, unnecessary moves and so on, than money gained, Sigvard! What about that megalomaniac initiative of Marketing to acquire a trimaran sailing boat and to participate in the great sailing competitions of the extremely wealthy all over the world? Millions are dragged into that project. It has been announced as a marketing stunt of Travtelio, a present of Travtelio to the Belgian State, to have the Belgian colours fly also in the prestigious sailing contests sponsored by the largest multinational firms of the earth. Do we really compete with those firms? What is Godelin doing with that ship? He invited the Royal Family to the inauguration. That boat must help him get his nobility title. We all know that, but does that not mean he is squandering money for Travtelio to serve his ambitions?

I acknowledge a few management changes for the better, such as in account management and commercial policies, but I also see much more money being wasted. People in regular positions leave and are not being replaced. Their jobs are increasingly being taken over by consultants, and we pay those consultants more than double the salaries of our own contractual employees. Our outsourcing expenditures have doubled. I know we had to add costs to our own people, costs of holidays and of courses, but still the cost of consultants is lots higher than the cost of our own employees. We have at least fifteen to twenty percent higher costs on hiring in consultants. It simply makes no sense for Stevens for instance to gain ten percent or less in certain functions with Indian employees. We spend with one hand much more than we gain by the other! We are chasing the wrong horse here!

And there is more. Consultants do not work on weekends, because that is not in their contract and also because we would have to pay a lot more. So, weekend work is pushed on to our own, regular personnel. Their contract states such work is not considered as overwork, so they have

to work on Saturdays and Sundays and Feast Days at the same amount as any other day. Remember the old commandment of minding the Sabbath and keeping it holy? Our people have started grumbling. They too want to be at home during weekends, the only days they can be together with their family. We are transgressing a lot of habits, Sigvard, and people resent working at odd hours, at night, during weekends, whereas better coordination of bringing applications on the air in batches, or in versions grouped together, could avoid such overwork. And that is just one example! What are the Executives of Travtelio doing? I will have to have a chat with some of them, and tell them they are on the wrong path of doing things.'

Sigvard replied, leaning towards Sara, imposing his physical power on her.

'Take care, Sara! The course Travtelio has taken has been agreed upon by all Executives. Look around you! All the Director-Generals you knew have gone, disappeared. Are you sure you will be heard and be listened to, when you go to talk to the new Presidents? What is on the list of priorities of the Presidents? They want to please the shareholders with higher revenue and benefits. They want Travtelio to be known as a tough company, hard-driving in customer relations and supplier relations. They want to crush competition. On the how-manieth line do you think stands employee well-being? Employee well-being would be perceived as a weakness, Sara! Employees are resources in this view, Sara, and resources have to be kept happy by trinkets, but to be used until worn out, like any other resource. An employee is a resource assigned to a task and the task must be done in the least time possible. If not, another resource up to the task must be used.'

Sandström paused after this outburst. He pushed his seat away and started to walk around his desk. He had been too violent. He had seen Sara cringe, and he had not wanted that.

He continued. 'Look, the IT Division has to function smoothly. I think it is indeed drifting to a direction we don't feel is right. I agree with you in that. I am preparing a teambuilding session for all the managers in IT, to smooth out the folds. We can discuss what goes wrong in those sessions and think together on how to rebuild the team spirit. After all, only as one team will this Division be able to reach its goals. I need your help with this. You will have to help me to regain the confidence of the Belgian managers, whereas I can explain already before the teambuilding exercise one or other thing to the expats. Most of the expats are not bad guys and girls. I am confident we can placate everyone. They will understand they have not been sent here to disrupt the organisation. So, let me organise this teambuilding session. I have done that before in Sweden. I know how it can be done, how to proceed. We will work on this together, however, if you want. I am sure you can help me by observing the reactions, so that I can redirect some of the exercises. Afterwards, we can discuss what to do next. Will you help me set up the calendar of the meetings?'

'Yes, of course,' Sara replied. 'We do not have a tradition of teambuilding exercises, so I do not really know how that is done, but I can help you by telling how people may react to some of the things you did in Sweden. We are not in Sweden, however. I can be useful, and learn.'

'Fine,' Sigvard concluded. 'Now, where could we go to have a nice time too between sessions? Do you know of a nice hotel, maybe somewhere in the mountains or in the forests?'

Sara Jansen laughed. 'We have no mountains in Belgium, Sigvard. We do have woods, though, and a coastline. How much can we spend?'

Chapter Four. Team Building

Jan Stevens drove his car at a calm pace on the highway from Brussels to Namur. He was on his way to the teambuilding session of Travtelio's IT Division in a hotel of that town of Wallony. He drove slowly, because he dreaded the exercise. He had mixed feelings about what was to happen. Sigvard Sandström would want the managers to fraternise. Jan had to accept the expats, because the shareholders and Gerald Godelin had decided that way, but he had no wish at all to please and be friends with Mark Stephenson and the like, and he could hardly forget the venue of Akerlund had meant the demise of his mentor and friend, Andreas Verstraete. He also disliked supposedly joyful events during which, however, everybody would spy on each movement one made. How many managers would flatter the new leaders and try to score points with them? He sighed. He would have to pass the event without committing himself to anything, hating the hypocrisy of it all. He decided to remain ensconced in the shadows of the others. He would have to play coy.

Jan drove alone. He was the only Belgian manager to live in Brussels, and had no inkling to invite expats in his car. He rode to Namur after work. He was supposed to arrive at the hotel around seven p.m., at a four stars hotel situated on the site of the citadel of the town, built on a high and broad plateau above the valley of the Meuse Stream. The sessions would start with a supper. Jan knew Namur well, the old middle-class minded provincial place, capital of the Region of Wallony, which stretched peacefully at the confluence of the Meuse Stream and the Sambre River, a town that marked for him the beginning of the Ardennes, the forested region of that French-speaking part of Belgium. Jan had friends in the neighbourhood of Namur. He often went shopping in the town, and he loved to walk in the ancient streets or along the rivers, taking long walks along the towpaths, on which he imagined centuries before horses drawing the flat-bottomed boats to the town. This was the country of the first landscape painters of Western Europe, of Joachim Patinir and Henri Blès, painters who were born just a little farther, between Namur and Dinant. These men must have been impressed by the magnificent but wild and dramatic river views of their native region. They continued to depict them in fantastic views when they worked in the wealthy medieval towns of Antwerp and Brussels. Their pictures, Jan knew, had been appreciated especially by the Cardinal Borromini of Milan, a thousand kilometres to the south. He smiled then, for his musings had brought him from Brussels to Milan, yet here was Namur.

Jan left the highway, drove through the city, then upwards over the winding street to the citadel. The citadel was an enormous complex of bulwarks, Vauban-style star-shaped stone fortifications with a history of a thousand years, but mostly forged into its present shapes by the seventeenth century. King Louis XIV of France had fought here, and his Minister Vauban had continued the fortifications. Beyond the plateau of the citadel stood the hotel, a nineteenth century Meuse-style building with a monumental entrance topped by a tower structure. The hotel was a grand building, surrounded by lawns and flower beds, a lush site in this time of early spring. Jan pulled his car over to the parking lot in front.

Many large, mostly black or deep grey Travtelio company cars stood already parked in front of the hotel. Jan was among the last to arrive. He went into the reception hall, asked for his room keys, and admired the view, wide and open beneath the citadel, a view on a bend of the Meuse. He walked to his room, showered, and dressed casually for supper. He went down the staircase and asked a waitress where the Travtelio supper would take place. The waitress headed down a hallway to the dining area. She brought him to a large room, where a table was set with white linen and shining porcelain plates, high glasses and silver cutlery, low flowers

in bowls displaying lively hues on the white. The Travtelio IT managers were having a drink, standing at the end of the room. Jan Stevens approached the nearest group, and said hello. Akerlund, Sandström, Kyle and O'Sheridan talked together. They seemed quite happy, whereas Jan was really tense. In another group stood Jana Kovar, Zhaò Fai, Mark Stephenson and Jennifer Alcock. In a third group chatted the development managers, Denis, Devos, and Collet, with Michel Doriant. Jan Stevens went to that group, and engaged in the conversation. Soon, Sandström invited everybody to sit; supper would be served. Sara Jansen arrived then also, too late as usual, hurrying as usual. Jan Stevens sat at one of the corners of the long, rectangular table. He listened absently to the arguments and spoke little. He did not like such gatherings of large groups, and even less suppers during which everybody eyed everybody, waiting for the first mistake or wrong movement or awkward statement that could be challenged to receive good marks from Akerlund, Kyle or Sandström. He disliked the underlying stress of the supper. He kept mostly silent, quite happy to have only one neighbour on his left, Sara Jansen, who talked constantly on her own left. In front of him sat Jean Collet, who was possibly even a more taciturn figure than Jan.

The supper passed uneventfully. When everybody stood up, Jan felt quite relieved he could return to his room to sleep, for after all it was already after ten o' clock. Sandström told however the first session of the teambuilding would start in the room adjoining the dining room. There, another table was set up, covered with a green cloth. The table had been placed in an open U-form. The managers had to sit on one side of the table, the outer side, to face a white board. Jan Stevens sat down at the same corner he had used during supper, remarked from out of one eye how people hurried to sit in the middle. He faced on the other side of the U Sandström and Jansen.

'Our first session will be short,' Sandström explained. 'I do not believe in tough, very physical teambuildings, and we must use our time also to decide on how to bring our Division forward. So, you can relax during the next two days. There will be no paratrooper, hard physical exercises, except a few simple walks around the citadel, here.

Tomorrow morning, after breakfast, we will discuss what we want to accomplish in our Division. Before dinner we will have a walk, for which you will have to choose a partner. The short walk and conversation will only last half an hour to one hour. After dinner, I would like us to determine our profiles in an exercise consisting of a questionnaire to fill in. After the coffee you will have the occasion to say out loud what you think of each other. Before supper we will have one more short walk. The bar will be open until eleven o'clock. Until that time, drinks are on the house, which is on Travtelio; after that, what you drink is on you. Take care however; the following day is not an easy one. That second day, after breakfast, we will discuss the results of the profile questionnaire. Then, to conclude the morning, we will have a few light physical exercises to scrape off the rust. At dinner we will meet Andrew Raga, who will tell us some of the things the business divisions expect of us. We will digest our dinner during another short walk, and then define actions to take home, small projects and initiatives that can really boost our departments in the direction of the main points to accomplish, defined the day before. After coffee, around five o'clock, we drive back home. The aim of these days is to learn to know each other and enhance our relationships. We are also here, however, to enjoy ourselves, relax, and to learn to work together as one team.

Now, I propose we start by presenting each other. We will start at the head of the table, with Jan Stevens. Jan, can you please tell us in a few words where you came from, where you did your studies, how you arrived at Travtelio, whether you are married or not, what you expect from your life, and tell us a little also about what you feel Travtelio means to you. Please tell us also what you expect from these sessions. When you have finished, your neighbour on the

left should start by telling one great quality you might have – if any, and one great weakness or fault. Then your neighbour should also present herself.’

Jan was a little surprised to be called out first. He guessed he deserved that for having wanted to hide at the end of the table. So, he told about Jan Stevens, not a word about Ian Clarkson. He was born in Brussels, spoke Dutch and French fluently, having attended Flemish schools but spoken French at home. He was not married, expected to meet his soul’s mate in the future, would like to found a family and live happily ever after. Travtelio meant a job for him, money that came in regularly, a place also to meet colleagues and friends, and an occasion to learn more and be creative. He was a very curious man, he said, and life was splendidly filled with many marvellous things. He expected some fun from the teambuilding sessions and of course also to learn to work better together to realise the goals of Travtelio. Jan committed to nothing, and revealed nothing of his real self. Sandström remarked that, of course, looked disappointed, but he did not winch and looked at Lauren O’Sheridan who sat next to Jan. Lauren said Jan’s greatest quality was his readiness to help anybody that needed something, his weakness the fact that he was quite the introvert type. In turn, each manager spoke then, the one granting a little more insight than the other, according to how much wine he or she had drunk at supper, and according to how relaxed he or she felt this evening. The presentations droned on and on.

Finally, Sandström wrapped up the meeting. He concluded, ‘fine. Exceptionally, the bar is open till midnight, and for free. Take care, however: tomorrow we have a busy day!’ Everybody left the meeting room. Jan Stevens did not say goodnight to anybody. He went straight for his room, finished a small bottle of white wine he found in his mini-bar, and slept.

The next morning, breakfast was rather morose. Sandström understood well nobody wanted to show his or her true nature so soon. The conversations did not flow very freely. Each manager, especially the Belgians, remained formal and closed, and considered the teambuilding as a professional session of gauging and probing. Sandström also drew the assembly back to Travtelio work. He proposed to define five important attention points the IT Division should work upon to better its image, five strategic aims or weaknesses to address this year. He asked everybody to write down five such strenuous goals for IT individually, in silence, on post-it papers. The post-it papers were glued to the board, brought together in clusters of similarity. Then points were given by each on the identified subjects. Eight attention subjects had been detected. Each manager could distribute five points to three subjects at the most. The points allocated, the five highest scores were counted. The final subjects, in order of importance were: develop more and better software applications, be closer to the customer, provide better services of higher quality, enhance communications, and lastly, understand our employees better.

By that time it was almost noon, so Sandström proposed the first walk-and-talk. Sandström let the managers chose their partner, without intervening in the choices. Linus Akerlund chose Sara Jansen to walk with; Lauren O’Sheridan asked for Thomas Denis; Rachel Kyle took Jan Stevens by the arm. Jana Kovar went with Roland Devos, Zhaò Fai with Jean Collet and Mark Stephenson was left with Jennifer Alcock.

When Rachel Kyle went outside with Jan Stevens, Jan proposed to her to stroll by the high points of the site with the finest, deepest views over the Meuse Stream. Later, he walked downwards with her, to a wooden hall which had been the Museum of the Forest, but which housed now the Wedding Hall of the commune of Namur.

Around noon, it began to rain. Very rapidly, the rain poured down. They hurried back before the end of the walk, Jan having thrown his anorak over Kyle's head to protect her head and hair. He got drenched, and had to change clothes in his room. During this outpour of rain, many couples had sheltered in other buildings and under the large trees of the citadel. They had not ventured out in the rain. Steven had drawn Kyle on, despite the downpour. Jan remarked afterwards Kyle had not appreciated that, and he acknowledged his error. He thought the rain would last. When the other managers told proudly how they had escaped the short storm and remained dry, having waited until the rain abated, Jan cursed himself for having been a clumsy fool. He sensed he had blown up a few bridges of respect with Rachel Kyle, the Vice-President of the Division. Kyle considered him an idiot, he felt. He had not scored well with her, and was not this whole session an exercise in scoring well with the Presidents? Kyle avoided him for the rest of the teambuilding.

After the walk, they had dinner. In the afternoon, Sandström handed over a list of questions. He asked everybody to answer the questions truthfully. This questionnaire, with the individual answers, would allow defining the psychological profile of the managers. The results would be discussed the following day. Sara Jansen worked on compiling the scores.

The real crucial exercise of the day started after the coffee. The session was called, 'what do you think of each other?' A manager had to stand still in the middle of the U-shaped table, and every other manager had to give a score between zero and ten to the poor person standing in the middle. Sandström would ask why that score had been given, but only to a few managers, chosen at random.

A tendency became clear rather soon. No Belgian manager received a score higher than five or a rare six, neither from his or her colleagues nor from the expats. The most severe, low scores came from Rachel Kyle. She hardly ever gave a score higher than five, an occasional six. The expats received scores from six to eight, generally higher than the other scores, even for Mark Stephenson. Akerlund, Sandström and Kyle had not to submit themselves to this kind of critic.

Jan Stevens was called in at the end, but not alone. He had to stand together with Lauren O'Sheridan, because they worked much together and much also on the same subjects. The scores they obtained were particularly low, the reason given they had messed too much in the affairs of the other managers, and that was true also because they worked on long-term directions and projects for the Division. Mark Stephenson gave them a three, Kyle a five, Doriant a seven, the others had stuck to five.

Akerlund caused a surprise then, which woke up the managers from boredom and lethargy. He was the last to give his score, and gave a nine, having granted before no score higher than seven. Akerlund signified thereby he wanted a long-time strategic view for his Division, and he showed his support to Stevens and O'Sheridan. Even Kyle stared at Akerlund, as if wondering what had come in to him to grant such a high score.

O'Sheridan later whispered to Jan Stevens she was glad with the score, but she told Akerlund should not have done that, giving this too obvious support. She feared now even more reticence and jealousies from her colleagues. Michel Doriant had received a decent six overall, a seven from Akerlund, except for a three from Mark Stephenson and a four from Kyle. Stephenson got no less than five, and one four from Jan Stevens. Overall, the scores did not relax the atmosphere of the Belgian managers present.

In the walk that followed, Jan Stevens walked with Sandström, but even during that stroll Jan Stevens remained rather tense. Sandström remarked to Jan the teambuilding was still wrought with tension, resentment and reticence. Jan agreed, and asked whether Sandström should have expected something else. Sandström sighed and did not answer. Then, he said that if people

like Jan could not and wanted not to work closely with the expats, they would have a very difficult time for a couple of years, and very little fun. Jan nodded, replied he knew. The two men joked and laughed less than they usually did in their offices of Brussels.

After supper that evening, all the managers went to the bar to drink a beer. Jan Stevens did not particularly like beer, certainly not in the evening. He did not fancy the pale, foamy Flemish beers or the darker, heavier Wallony abbey beers. He asked for a whisky. That surprised many, but he stuck to his one drink, while especially Denis, Devos, Collet and Stephenson drained one beer after the other. O'Sheridan, Alcock and Kyle also drank beers, more than one, but a lot less than the men. Kovar stuck to white wine. Stevens looked at her, but she did not once glance at him, and laughed in another group.

It became quite clear here, which informal groups had been formed, and that was crucial information for Sandström. Akerlund, Sandström and Kyle formed one clique. O'Sheridan, Jan Stevens, Michel Doriant, Sara Jansen, Thomas Denis and Zhaò Fai sat at another table. Anthony Jones, Devos, Collet, Jana Kovar and Jennifer Alcock sat in the last group. Mark Stephenson was much on his own, though he huddled after a while to the group of Akerlund and Kyle. Sandström watched the groups.

At eleven o'clock, Stevens was the first to go upstairs. He heard Denis and Collet calling after him, inviting him to drive down the citadel and finish their evening in the bars of Namur. Stevens knew how difficult it was to find a decent bar open after eleven in Namur, so he declined, and went to his room. He slept badly, the tension of the day still on his mind.

The next morning, right after breakfast, everybody met again in the meeting room. Sandström and Sara Jansen showed on the board the results of the profiles. Sandström could determine five profiles from his question list, the profiles of director, manager, strategist, teacher, administrative and employee. Akerlund and Sandström came out with the director profiles, but Jan Stevens chortled. He was convinced those two knew the questions and how the answers could lead to these profiles. It would have been an embarrassment for them to come out of this exercise with for instant an employee profile. Most of the others had manager profiles. O'Sheridan and Jan Stevens did not come out with strategist thinker profiles, which was somewhat of a surprise, also to themselves. They had manager profiles.

There were three other surprises, however. Michel Doriant got an administrative profile, the profile of somebody who was a stickler for details, was punctilious, but had trouble detecting the grand patterns of events. Stephenson and Alcock and Jean Collet ended as employees, people who had it not in their character to lead others. Stevens remarked how stunned Doriant was with this result. Doriant felt humiliated. Stephenson looked angry; Alcock had not expected another profile. Afterwards, Akerlund and Sandström looked a long time at the results on the board, discussing the individual profiles.

Michel Doriant spoke to Jan Stevens meanwhile, 'I don't know how I got that profile. I thought a good eye and attention for detail was important in Operations.'

'It cannot be otherwise, I sincerely believe,' consoled Stevens. 'You are worried, I can tell. You shouldn't be! Have you ever failed in your job? Have you done less than previous Directors of Operations? Could anybody around the table here have done better? I think not! It is pretty stupid, in my opinion, to draw conclusions out of a few answers to smart questions. All this looks so artificial! One does not measure a man in mathematics, in figures, reduce him to a simple one-word profile. Whatever a man's character or reactions, there is but one valid criterion in an enterprise: has that man performed well, or not? I do not think you did a bad job.'

'Thanks,' Doriant replied, 'but good job or not, I got stigmatised here. My sole consolation is that Stephenson did even worse than I. We are being cooked.'

‘Like three kilos of sea-shrimps from our Flemish coast thrown in a cauldron of boiling water,’ Thomas Denis added. Thomas had eavesdropped with increasing interest, so now he walked up to them and he heard Dorian’s last words clearly.

‘How many shrimps are there in three kilos?’

‘About thirty thousand, I would guess.’

‘How much does Godelin or Akerlund care about us?’

‘They care about an individual as much as the fisherwoman for one of those shrimps in her pot.’

‘Not shrimps, but red crabs with hairy legs and nasty pinchers!’

‘Crabs eat shrimps, Thomas.’

‘I suppose so, yes, indeed. We get boiled and devoured by the crabs. Crabs from overseas, brought to us by Boeings.’

That, Stevens feared, was also true, though he didn’t say so to Dorian and to Denis. He was disgusted with this exercise. The teambuilding was supposed to be easy-going and the managers were to have fun, but suddenly the session had taken another turn, almost casually, a much more sinister one. The profile setting had killed illusions, expectations, dreams, for a few managers. What was that good for? Jan refused to acknowledge this would fuse the managers together. He also resented the profiles had been showed in public, to all the other managers, whereas he would have preferred this to remain private. The profile setting confirmed Jan’s fears the teambuilding would merely be an exercise in manipulation. From then on, definitely, he refused to lend credit to the event. His anger rose.

By that time, some of the true nature of the managers came slowly to the surface. Stevens watched everybody and began to compare the people present with various animals. He had found such a comparison useful in meetings before. He compared Akerlund to a brown bear, slow moving and of gentle appearance, but capable of sudden bursts of ferocious energy. Sandström was an elephant, powerful and calm, Kyle a dangerous tiger that snatched out with claws at unexpected moments. Sara Jansen was a ferret, O’Sheridan a white horse, Zhaò Fai a large panda, Dorian a working mule. Denis and Devos were beavers, Collet a large dog, Alcock a cat. Stephenson was a goat. What would Jana Kovar be? He couldn’t place her as an animal; he found nothing to express her grace. Was she a white horse too? No, she would be a unicorn, a mythical animal. Jan was surprised at his list. He wondered which profiling was the best, his whacky list or Sandström’s list. Sandström, seeing Jan lost in thoughts, knocked him on the shoulder with a finger, and showed him the door through which the others disappeared.

The men and women walked to an open place hidden in the woods behind the hotel. A group of white, plastic chairs had been placed there roughly in a circle. A tall and slender man with a boyish face and fair hair stood in the middle of the chairs. Sandström had hired an external consultant for the physical exercises that followed. He introduced the man as Georges Trudant.

‘We start the first exercise!’ Trudant cried, clapping in his hands. ‘Everybody sit down. Form a circle. You must sit so that you can form the largest circle possible, yet touch with your knees your neighbours on your left and on your right. Then, you must also touch the hands of your neighbours! Afterwards, close your eyes and think about something nice.’

Jan Stevens sat between Lauren O’Sheridan and Sara Jansen. Lauren looked at him with wide open eyes. What was this nonsense? Steven grinned, and Lauren puffed out in laughter. She glanced at the sky. Stevens continued grinning. This is truly a Belgian exercise, he thought, bringing an American lady to open her legs so far she touches other legs on left and right, and then open her arms to either side. Americans hate touching others. This is an exercise devised for guys. The more he thought of this, the more he laughed, and O’Sheridan saw him, blushed

in her deepest red, and then made reproaching eyes at him. She complied, and then closed her eyes. Jan touched the knees of O'Sheridan and of Jansen, sought their hands, and then also closed his eyes. They had to sit this way for a few minutes. Trudant asked them to think about what they wanted to accomplish in life, the most ambitious thing they could dream of. Then he ordered everybody to open eyes again, and relax.

O'Sheridan whispered to Stevens, 'that was stupid!'

Jan whispered back, 'I totally agree. Have we fallen in with a queer sect or something?'

Trudant cried, 'silence everyone! Nobody talks now!'

Trudant called out again, 'all right! Now, everybody come to me! Do you see this circle in the middle here?'

A white circle of about two meters diameter was painted in the centre of the chairs. Trudant continued, 'everybody has now to stand inside that circle! All of you! I don't care how you do it, but nobody can stand outside that circle!'

Jan saw it was impossible for all to stand inside that small space, but Jennifer Alcock seemed to know this kind of exercise. 'Everyone stands on one foot,' she cried, 'a few inside can stand on two feet. The ones on two feet hug the ones at the outer rim and hold them tight so that they do not fall out. If that is not enough, two or three guys or dolls, the lightest, are to be held in the air on top of our shoulders.'

Akerlund and Sandström stayed outside. The others flocked inside the circle. It took only a few minutes to hold everyone inside. Zhaò Fai and Jennifer Alcock sat on the shoulders of Dorian, of Stevens and Collet.

This was of course an exercise in physical contact and togetherness, in mutual support, and the group succeeded brilliantly. Would they now support each other also at Travtelio? Would Mark Stephenson now help Michel Dorian? Would Thomas Denis now help Stephenson in a friendly way?

'Over my dead body,' Thomas Denis grumbled when Jan whispered that question to him.

For the third exercise, Trudant brought them to a tree from which hung a rubber truck tyre on a steel cable. The tyre hung about a meter and a half from the ground.

'You have to pass through that tyre, all of you, one after the other, from this side to the other side,' Trudant shouted. 'You cannot touch the inside of the tyre, however, nobody, never. You may touch whatever you want, but not the tyre. You can help each other, but the only way to get to the other side is through the tyre. Start!'

It took five minutes to discuss how to do this exercise. It looked easy enough, but it wasn't! The issue was with the first person to go through the tyre, and with the last. The first one would have to be worn horizontally and pushed through the tyre. That person would have to keep very stiff, feet first, other arms holding the body and literally throw the body like a wooden plank through the tyre, hoping he or she would curb enough on the other side not to touch the circle.

'We will have to shove him through head down,' Jan remarked, 'for head up he will never be able to curb his back.'

The group decided to push Zhaò Fai first, the lightest and the smallest of them, and Fai succeeded well enough.

The following ones were easy enough to shove through, for now there were other hands on the opposite side.

O'Sheridan whispered to Jan, 'please let Jana pass just before me. I'm in skirts. She promised to hold my legs and pull my skirt tight. Will you heave me up by the shoulders, please, Jan?'

Jan complied.

More and more hands became available, then less on the first side. Remained the last one, no hands left on the first side.

Jana Kovar came up with a solution. ‘Jump high, grab the cable, swing your legs through the ring, and jump through. Nobody found a better solution. Stephenson was the last to get through, but he did touch the tyre. He jumped to the cable, swung his legs in the tyre, but in the last moment, while he jumped down, he touched the circle with his shoulders. Nevertheless, Sandström and Trudant seemed pleased.

They had three more, similar team exercises, after which they all stood panting but smiling, cheering, touching shoulders, even Doriant. Sandström smiled too. It seemed Sandström’s and Jansen’s games got somewhere to forging a semblance of team spirit.

‘Give a baby a candy,’ Thomas Denis remarked, ‘and the child will come to you for the rest of its life. They are buying us out with bread and games, the old Roman trick the Emperors played to the plebs. Have we become snottoring babies again? Isn’t that how we are considered here? The last time I played a children’s game was fifty years ago. Do they really think I must go senile? In a Business Division, I heard the guys had to build a car from wooden beams and plastic containers. In yet another Division, the entire teambuilding was staged as if the battles of the “Lord of the Rings” were re-enacted. Yet another game led managers for an entire day on a survival exercise in the woods of the Ardennes. I find this all humiliating. Akerlund and Sandström and Kyle are patronising bastards. We are the children, they are the grand teachers who can give the children a lolly to suck on, then they crack a whip and we run. I would never dare to tell to Marguerite what we have done in Namur!’

‘I feel the same way,’ Jan replied gloomily.

‘What the hell is going on, what do you think you are doing?’ Thomas Denis asked then, standing before Jan with his fists on his hips. ‘I thought you were crazy about that white witch, but the young Irish sheep seems to slobber all over you. I watched that blonde goat over there, that Kovar. At times, she looked at that Lauren as if she wanted to commit murder. This so-called teambuilding exercise is going to end in a massacre of passionate crime!’

Jan laughed.

‘Maybe we should not be sourpusses, let others do the moping, and have some innocent fun,’ Jan evaded.

‘Innocent fun? You call that innocent fun? Oh rot and depravation! Are you weaving tales for me? There is no innocent fun here. I hate this. We are observed at every move by a bunch of voyeurs. These guys and dolls have a dirty mind. Run off now, boy, and occupy yourself with that ash-white fish. You have my blessing with that one! Let the Irish sheep roam over the pastures. That one will not bring you happiness. This rigmarole here makes me sick. I have to throw up!’

‘The heavy beers of last night in the night bars of Namur are what makes you puke, Thomas!’

‘I guess so! Hang on. I’ll be back.’ Thomas Denis sought the hotel bar.

The group walked inside the hotel to have a drink before dinner. They remained in their light sports dress and windbreakers, for there was no time to change. They milled about.

Andrew Raga entered the room, dressed up as a smart business representative. He took a glass of Champagne and walked into the dining room. Raga was completely out of tune now with the group, which might have been a sought-out effect. He was smartly dressed, fresh and alert; the others were in training pants and T-shirts, sweating and dirty.

After dinner, there was first another walk. Stevens looked for O’Sheridan, but Sandström had Lauren already by the arm, and Jana Kovar stood suddenly in front of him, proposing to walk together. Jan saw Andrew Raga pushing through the group in her direction. Kovar saw Raga come too, and Jan wanted to tell her somebody else wanted to walk with her, but he stopped when she showed a sudden pleading look in her eyes at Jan.

‘Come on then,’ Jan said and he drew Jana by the hand to the door, away from a surprised Andrew Raga. Lauren O’Sheridan withdrew from Sandström and accosted Raga. Jan and Jana stepped quickly outside. Jana walked immediately to a side track on the right in front of the hotel. She glanced over her shoulders. Most of the others went left, to the flower beds and to the wood, higher up the citadel. Jan knew then she sought to escape from Raga. Jana still held his hand, and he found that very remarkable and astonishing. It was as if Jana Kovar had taken possession of him.

Jana asked, ‘where can we go? Shall we go the woods? Can we go and see the Meuse Stream?’

‘Wrong way down there,’ Jan replied. ‘That way is to the Sambre River. The view over the Sambre is nice too. I have another idea. Do you fancy perfumes?’

‘Perfumes?’ Jana cried out in surprise ‘Sure, I like perfumes. Why do you mention perfumes here?’

‘You’ll see,’ Jan said. ‘A little farther down there, along this road, is a perfumery. Belgian perfumes are not very well known, but this one is quite famous. It has only a small laboratory, but there is a shop, and we can visit the laboratory. I know the guy who creates the perfumes. He blends various scents, natural and artificial ones. Professional perfumers and dedicated customers know about him and his shop, enough for him to have a thriving business. I’ll show you, come on!’

He headed briskly forward. Jana Kovar followed Jan, at ease now.

‘So,’ Jan started, ‘what was it you wanted to tell me?’

Kovar had not expected that question. She answered in truth, ‘you seem to be a guy all women flock to. Why is that?’

‘Oh, oh, this is going to be a psychological question time,’ Jan thought. ‘Take care!’

He grinned, ‘I feel comfortable with women and women seem to feel comfortable with me, too. I like the company of women, and I prefer their company to men.’

Jan laughed at his stupidity. He was talking nonsense.

‘Could it be otherwise,’ he continued. ‘I suppose women feel I am harmless, which I think I am, but I also prefer the conversations of women over those of men. The conversations always seem to be more involving, interesting and intelligent.’

‘Harmless?’ Kovar laughed, ‘are you harmless to women? Are you gay?’

Jan blushed now, and he shouted in mock outrage, ‘I’m not gay! Not ever! I like women! I just respect them too much to force myself on them. I’m not a predator!’

‘No, you’re not a predator, rather a nice, small lap dog, Jan Stevens. And you are very formal, like a gentleman, Mister Jan Stevens.’

Jan glanced quickly over to Jana.

‘I don’t think I am so special,’ Jan continued. ‘I try to be respectful to women, especially to very beautiful, elegant women. They deserve that.’

‘Is that why you avoid certain women?’

‘Maybe, yes. I know I run from beautiful women, often. Beautiful women impress me too much.’

‘Do you run away from me?’

‘No, of course not,’ Jan replied, fast, and knew he had made a foolish mistake.

‘So you think I am not beautiful?’

‘You are fishing for compliments, now,’ Jan said, trying to avoid Jana’s looks. ‘Let’s walk on. Time is running. There is the perfumery shop!’

They first looked over the embattlements of the old citadel, from where a magnificent valley over the river unfolded. Jana warmed her face in the sun and let her lean figure be admired by Jan. Jan wondered by what charm or accident or turn of fate Jana had confided herself to him. He drew her on, into the perfumery. The owner was in the shop. Jan asked to visit the

laboratory. The man explained how he mixed all kinds of scents of rose petals, jasmine, lavender, many other natural scents and oils. Jana was very interested. She asked many questions, eagerly looking at the various perfumes in the making, sniffing at the long, white paper slips the perfumer tempted her with. When she said she likes this scent but not that one, the perfumer was caught in his own game, and he almost used Jana as a guinea pig for his newest creations. Joy and deception appeared on his face when Jana preferred this and disliked that. Jana particularly liked the man's latest perfume, a sweet, flowery scent. Jan made a sign to the perfumer, behind Jana's back, to prepare a bottle. Even the perfumer was charmed by the attention of a beauty like Jana. Finally, they had to go back to the hotel, but Jana was reluctant to go. She looked around in the smart boutique. Jan had to insist twice. They said goodbye, and the perfumer remained in his door opening, waving at them.

'What a charming man,' Jana remarked. 'He has a fine sensitivity to what women like to smell. This was interesting!'

Jan handed over his little paper bag to Jana.

He said, 'allow me to give you this as a small memory of a nice afternoon.'

Jan wondered whether Jana would accept the gift. He half expected she would refuse.

Jana had thought in the shop he had bought a present for a girl friend of his, so now she looked at him quite surprised, but she had already opened the bag and held the perfume bottle in her hand. She was amazed. Few people had offered her gifts, and a perfume like this, a large bottle too, made not by industrial means but by an artisan, was worth a fortune in Prague. She stopped walking, looked at Jan, then at the bottle, then back to Jan. Should she accept this? Was she accepting more than a bottle? Was Jan offering a little sugar to catch a beetle? So what? If this gentle man liked her, why should she refuse? She liked Jan, too. Jana had caught herself watching how Jan and Lauren seemed engaged in some sort of empathy during the teambuilding, so she was also surprised Jan tried to please her now. Was he a gentleman, a nice little lap dog or an eager shark? Sharks, nice sharks, could be exciting too, she thought; of real sharks she had been taught a lesson.

She replied, 'thank you. You shouldn't have done that, but I appreciate, and accept. From you, I accept.'

Jana brought the bag to her eyes while she said that.

Jan decided to be bolder yet. He said, 'look, Jana, I am very tired and tense and wary of these so-called teambuilding sessions. I didn't at all like the atmosphere these days. I felt a bit despondent. I know quite well the town down there, Namur. I walked a lot in the old streets of the centre. And I know something of the history of the buildings. Namur is a fine, sympathetic city with a charm quite of its own. There are also quite some nice shops and small restaurants there. This is my kind of town. Can you allow me showing Namur to you? Before returning to Brussels, I could show you the confluence of the two rivers, to just the two of us, and invite you to supper in a small restaurant this evening, not late. I will drive you back to Uccle afterwards; my apartment is in Brussels too.'

Jana hesitated this time for only a second. She answered, 'I would be delighted! Yes, I don't know Namur. Fine, show me! Let's have a walk there afterwards!'

Jan looked at his watch. 'We're over time! We are going to be late for the next session. We must run.'

Jana stopped him, however. She said, 'I am married.'

'Yes. I know, of course. I read your CV, and you said so the first day here, too.'

'I left my husband.'

'Which explains why you do not wear a ring, doesn't it?'

Jana looked at her fingers. 'You remarked that, then.'

‘I did. I still would like to show you Namur.’

‘Will Lauren O’Sheridan like that?’

‘Lauren is a colleague of mine. I guess we are friends, but I wonder about being friends with an American expat.’

‘Could you be friends with a Czech expat?’

‘I think I could, yes. Depending on the expat.’

Jana smiled. Jan was too blunt sometimes. ‘All right, let’s hurry, then.’

They did not run, but walked briskly. Jana took his arm, causing a thousand feelings to whirl around in Jan’s mind. When they came in reach of the hotel, however, Jana released Jan’s arm and she walked less rapidly.

They panted anyway when they stepped through the reception hall, overcome by the excitement of the new, fond feelings created, and by what these might ever lead them into. Jan still marvelled at the glimpse of the girl Jana he had seen when she accepted the perfume, the warmth in the eyes of the otherwise possibly also extremely formal, closed person.

The rest of the afternoon was spent defining actions for the five attention points of the IT Division. Everybody wrote down five actions; then these were glued on the board and assigned to the five strategic directions, then similar ideas re-worded. More than twenty suggestions for projects were thus defined.

‘All right now,’ Sandström concluded. ‘Now we must assign project managers for all these actions, managers we want to take ownership of these actions. Write your names behind the projects you are interested in.’

Jan was interested in three projects. Each project soon had at least one name behind it.

Akerlund put his name on no project, but Kyle and Sandström did, and Kyle clearly had interest for the most important actions. Jan thus wryly remarked Kyle would not leave the most visible, crucial projects to any other manager. Sandström asked to wipe names from the board until only one name or two at the most was left. When two names remained for one project, he asked to vote by the assembly for who would lead the contested projects. Jan Stevens ended with no project, but he had enough on his hands with the projects of the expats and he was soon called to coordinate the entire program of the projects. Dorian’s name came in twice with the name of Kyle. The votes went to Kyle. Dorian was disappointed, with not one project left for him to work upon.

Jan took pity, ‘why not allocate one of those projects to Dorian? I am sure he too can bring them to good conclusion!’

Kyle shot a venomous look at Jan, but did not answer him. Nobody responded to the request. Kyle had all the power.

Akerlund spoke for Kyle, ‘the projects stay with Rachel.’

Jan saw Dorian’s head sink deeper. Jan did not fight Akerlund, Kyle and Sandström, and Sandström rapidly called to coffee.

Coffee, tea, juice, breads, cakes and fruit were laid out on a buffet table. Jan poured himself a cup of coffee. He remained standing aloof, quite alone. Then, first Jana and then Lauren O’Sheridan came to him. They stayed silent, but sipped their coffee next to him. Zhaò Fai came to them, too. Dorian talked with Sara Jansen. Then, Sandström seemed to want to say something to Jan. before he could, Andrew Raga suddenly stood with them, and Sandström said nothing.

Raga said to Jana, ‘I hear you did not come with your own car. After the sessions you can ride back to Brussels with me.’

‘Thank you,’ Jana replied, ‘I will go back to Brussels with Jan Stevens.’ Her tone was cool, dry and definite.

Raga coiled as if he had been stung, turned on his heels and left the group to talk to Akerlund and Kyle.

Jana said to Jan, in front of a truly astonished Sandström, ‘shall we leave in half an hour?’ ‘Sure, all right,’ Jan replied. ‘Will you tell Lauren O’Sheridan you come with me? You will have to transfer your bags from her car to mine.’

‘I already got my bag out. I left it in the lobby,’ whispered Jana, and she stepped out of the group.

‘Are you driving Kovar back?’ Sandström began.

‘Yes,’ Jan replied. ‘I promised to show Namur to her.’

Sara Jansen drew Sandström away. Jan walked around to say goodbye to everybody, finished his coffee, and went to his car. He waited. The other managers also went to their cars and rode away, one by one, wondering what Jan was still doing there. Then, Jan saw Jana and O’Sheridan coming. Jana carried her bag. She walked up to Jan. Many surprised faces, among them Akerlund and Kyle, looked at Jana and Jan as he helped her in his car. He drove off. Jan drove down to Namur.

Jan eased his car into an underground parking lot in the centre of Namur. He took Jana to the old market place, to the little streets around the square. He showed her the Cathedral of Saint Aubin, and the magnificent Baroque style Church of Saint Loup. He talked her about the poet Arthur Rimbaud sleeping on the stairs of that church. He would have liked to show her the paintings of Henri Blès in the Museum of Ancient Arts, but the building was closed at this hour.

Jana wanted to look at the shops in the main street, so Jan brought her there, and they walked the two sides of the street. Jana entered two shops and bought pants and shirts. Jan showed her also the little shops of antiques and the jewelleries, and old clock shop, a shop of Venetian, Murano glass jewels.

They strolled to the Sambre River, from which quays one had splendid views of the citadel. They looked at the Sambre from over an ancient bridge, which must have dated from at least five hundred years ago. From there, Jan took her to the Rue des Brasseurs, and to a very small but very typical restaurant. He had phoned for a table from the hotel, a few hours ago. They sat across each other at a corner table near the window. The food was excellent, the atmosphere cosy and happy, and the service between courses extremely slow, which suited them quite well because they had a lot still to tell. A singer entered the restaurant and sang a few tunes in the dialect of Namur. The guests who knew the dialect joined in with the singer. Glasses were brought high, cheers filled the restaurant. The people of Namur were quite gregarious; they blithely invited Jan and Jana to join them. Jan smiled for the first time in three days, and Jana caught him at that.

They left quite late. The streets of Namur were deserted. It rained. Luckily, they had both taken their coats. Jana took Jan’s arm again. Jan curved his arm, and just for a moment brushed over her hand. Jana looked at him but did not mind. This one can be a shark too, she thought, but he is a nice shark; I feel at ease with him. They walked to the parking lot, and Jan drove out and back to Brussels. He dropped Jana off at her apartment. He opened his car for her, not once suggesting accompanying her farther, but waited there until she disappeared through her door. She did not look back, and he drove on.

2

Not long after the IT Division teambuilding session, Bernard de Voncques, Travtelio's HR President, announced the Employee Skill Category system or ESC to be introduced in the company. The managers of Travtelio had to define their job content, describe their responsibilities in terms of budgets and people managed, and provide an estimate of how important their job might be by influencing other budgets. They had to answer for that a list of questions. A grid of fifteen categories was presented, each category defined in growing importance of budgets, skills and studies required, so that the managers might already have an idea in which category they might be situated.

Thousands of pages were filled in and handed over to the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the divisions, and to the HR groups. The managers prepared similar definitions for their employees.

The aim of the ESC was to define the salary, the salary growth and the bonuses of personnel once and for all on an objective basis and to Block the endless discussions on higher salaries and on comparisons of salaries. The criteria to place a person in a certain ESC category were accepted in many large companies. The system was of course of American origin, and therefore as impersonal as possible, but also market directed for salaries at a certain ESC code could be determined unequivocally according to what was paid in other companies using the same system. The ESC system was ideal for an HR Division, because it saved a lot of work in the long term, and it was as immovable as the icecap on Antarctica for who dared to contest his or her salary.

Every employee received a job description and an ESC category after three months of deliberations. One could of course protest when one thought one's category had been assigned too low, but it was strictly forbidden to share category information. That was of course the first thing the Belgian managers and employees did, with about fifty percent of complaints as a result.

After two more months, the complaints usually refused and only rarely accepted, but the allocated ESC anyhow not altered, many Travtelio employees walked around with grim faces. Later still, when everyone had had the occasion to contest his or her category, and after the categories were soundly established, scales of salary were fixed to the categories. The scales consisted of a minimum salary, a yearly growth based on the annual employee evaluation, and a maximum beyond which whatever the result of the annual evaluation one could not obtain a higher salary. Your current salary could be higher than that maximum of your ESC scale. You would not be lowered in salary then, but your salary would also not move upwards for many, many years.

Jan Stevens found his contribution to IT much underestimated, his ESC so low he would probably have to work at Travtelio with the same salary of today for his entire future, without any prospect of growth in salary, his current salary way over the maximum of his category. The nice thing about this was that he should not have to strain himself anymore in his job, for however hard he worked he could never grow. He could of course win higher bonuses and enter the contest for promotion in other, higher category jobs, but the ESC's of his colleagues Directors were not higher than his own. There was simply no promotion possible except that of Vice-President in IT, a job given to an expat, to Rachel Kyle. He could of course seek a job in other parts of the business, in jobs of disciplines he didn't like and had not studied for. Travtelio would never grant Jan Stevens such a job, not to a civil servant. Jan felt the company prepared to recruit from the outside, rather than to promote civil servants. Thomas Denis proposed the best conclusion: you, youngsters, can either now rust in peace, or seek your fortune elsewhere, outside Travtelio.

A few Directors indeed took this conclusion as theirs, and left after a few months. Head-hunter firms began to phone Jan Stevens, asking whether he might be looking for a better paid, more interesting job elsewhere. Those recruitment firms smelled they had in Travtelio a large reserve of highly educated, motivated and experienced people to seduce into other jobs.

Gerald Godelin's announcement of having people change jobs every three years also began to be put in place. The issue with that was of course that nobody wanted to accept a place with a lower ESC for the same salary. You might find such a job suite interesting, a nice add of knowledge and experience, but accept a lower ESC meant loss of face and loss of possible growth of salary, since your current salary was close to the new maximum if not already over the maximum of the lower ESC, and lower end-of-year bonuses. Many started to worry, for they liked what they did, and hated to be placed in a job they had not chosen themselves. People might accept change if induced by themselves; they hated imposed change, and Travtelio increasingly put pressure on managers to accept such job moves. Because of the introduction of the ESC, which made almost impossible negotiations on salaries and function content, the resistance to job changes ran fiercely in Travtelio.

It was also not long before all sideways job moves stopped completely. All mutations of jobs were ardently objected to, unless they meant higher ESC categories and hence salaries. Every change was welcomed with resentment and bitterness. People began to leave, and those that left were the ones least vulnerable, the highly skilled, the most intelligent, the hard-headed but most creative ones, and the men and women who could only be replaced by expensive consultants.

Jan Stevens wondered whether he would be pushed into a job in IT Operations or IT Development. He regarded not one person in the Division to have the clout or interests to perform well the kind of work he excelled in.

Michel Doriant had the same feelings, and Michel feared moreover the backlash from Sandström's profiling. Michel Doriant had received a higher category than Jan Stevens, Mark Stephenson probably a category still higher.

Jan Stevens, not really a direct manager of many employees, was a leader to many. He had not even been able to mention explicitly the expats he coordinated and led in his virtual teams. His contribution to the company was therefore underestimated, and that was the case for all persons in similar positions in the other divisions. Jan considered himself oddly lucky. He had been hesitating to leave Travtelio because he did not like change. He had liked too much his neat little life in Brussels and his cosy job. He grinned now, for the decision to leave Travtelio had been made for him. He started preparing for a new career. He still had an issue with leaving, though, and the more he thought about that, the more the image of Jana Kovar came to his mind.

The emphasis and the issues with the ESC categories were with the management of people, despite so many affirmations as to the contrary. If you were a manager of many, you had more luck to a higher category. If you worked in account management or marketing you would probably have yet higher scores than in operations and production. Administrative functions had low categories. People working in research or in planning and strategy had low categories, for they had responsibility over low budgets and few people. Contribution to the company was a factor, but that factor was much denigrated by the people that assigned the categories. Contribution to the company did not matter as much as heads, whatever was in the heads.

A silent war over the ESC was on in Travtelio. Everybody talked about the categories. The war petered down only slowly and then its disappeared underground, like a termite that ate

wooden beams invisibly, from the inside. The Travtelio employees had more their ESC in mind than customer care. HR seemed to fuel the issues with the ESC categories. Resentments rose to peaks when HR announced the categories would be adjusted to market realities every three years. With market was understood, of course, the HR market, prices at which personnel could be recruited. To all employees that meant only one thing: lower ESC's for everyone, lower salaries per ESC and lower bonuses on evaluation. The atmosphere in Travtelio soured. People shouted at each other, refused to help each other. They waved with their job descriptions to their managers when the managers asked them to do something that was not written black on white in those papers. The ones who were really smart did as ordered a few times, and then filed a claim for a higher category to the HR department.

Global Services President Eric Terhulsen of course also remarked the souring of spirits in the company, and the arrival of many new faces, of many consultants. He reacted at an Executive Board meeting by proposing to tighten security in the building. CEO Godelin agreed. In the future, security agents would accompany to the exit each employee who resigned from the company. People who got fired received their papers from security agents, and were immediately accompanied out of the building, a security agent walking at either side. Handbag controls were held at irregular dates in the evenings for employees leaving the building. Employees were allowed leaving the Skyscraper with a portable PC in their bag only when they could show a paper signed by their manager. The papers they took with them were examined. The security agents sought for CD's with confidential Travtelio files. They forgot of course the USB memory sticks in the form of pens, or such sticks held in pockets of trousers or jackets. A new USB memory stick could hold as much data as an old CD. One had to have a paper to prove a Travtelio mobile company phone could be taken home. It was considered a theft of company property when a person left with more than about ten white pages in his or her hand case. Inspectors walked through the building and took away portable personal computers that were not secured to the desks with chains and locks. Password security was tightened. Badges had to be worn visibly at all times. HR managers had to call to them employees that did not wear badges ostensibly in the company restaurants and elevators.

The announcement that astonished most was the designation of replacements for all managers. Each manager had to provide the name of someone who would replace him or her during long absences or in times of crisis. Nothing seemed more innocent, but managers were more often than not hard pressed to provide a name among their employees. A manager had to choose the most capable, or the one he or she liked most. The assigned employees were rapidly called crown prince or crown princess. Jealousies flared up in teams where before there had been none. The crown prince became the target of harassments and teasing from colleagues. A difficult task was sent to the crown prince.

Mark Stephenson named Petr Tuma as his crown prince, but Tuma worked under a consultancy contract, and hence could not order Belgian employees around. The detail was conveniently overlooked.

3

During a meeting of Labour Union members of Travtelio in Brussels, the union representatives had to shout above the crowd. Three Labour Unions were represented at Travtelio. This Union was always the loudest and most aggressive of the Unions of Travtelio. The meeting had been called together to discuss the latest announcements of the Executive Board over the Employee Skill Categories and their accompanying annual evaluations, the salaries, the evaluation procedures and the bonus schemes. Everybody hated the schemes and

the changes, and everybody was pessimistic and negative over the modifications introduced. The men who were representatives of the employees also feared the reorganisations in the divisions, the changes that would have detrimental effects on the categories and hence on salaries. They denounced the lack of trust of Travtelio management in their workers. Denounced also were the new software applications that limited customer repair times to a mere fifteen minutes, and the accompanying statistics that proved unequivocally at the end of the year which repair workers had not reached their goals of ninety-five percent of repairs finished within that time. The representatives of the Union called for strike.

Hugo Martin cried with two hands to his mouth, ‘we are being clobbered at Travtelio! We get treated shabbily! We must teach management a lesson, now, immediately! If we do not hit hard, strike now, new measures will bring us under stress worse than in any other capitalist country. The bosses must suffer so that they think twice before they try to subjugate us with additional rules. We must react now, and show the world what is happening at this company!’ Another called out, ‘how long are we going to let management get away with this? All what we have fought for in the past is being put on the table for reconsideration, and then wiped away. We enter a new era of slavery. We are considered as thieves and dumbheads! Production quotas are up every month and bring us under greater stress. Service times go down. Our categories get lowered and our salaries are capped. Enough! Enough! Strike!’ The word of strike was yelled by three hundred mouths. Fists were raised; a few tones of the Socialist International song began to be heard.

On the podium, the General Secretary of the Union of Travtelio’s industry sector stood up from her chair, walked to the rostrum, and opened her arms wide, trying to silence the crowd. She had to stand there for several minutes before the mood eased and the shouting subsided, so that she could speak out.

‘Comrades,’ she cried, ‘I must ask for your patience! We cannot just cut the branch we are sitting on. You know as well as I what happens in our world. We cannot endanger our company, for many other private enterprises, Belgian as well as foreign ones, stand ready to take away our work from us.’

‘Offshore outsourcing from Asia and Eastern Europe is already doing that!’ a lonely voice cried, but the man was hushed down.

The Union Secretary continued, ‘we and you must recognise Travtelio guaranteed employment. Generous pre-pension plans have been proposed to us and are in the making. The previous plans have been executed to our satisfaction. Travtelio has been generous. The rises in productivity Travtelio asks are not unreasonable, and quite comparable to what exists in other industries. They are not higher than what we can deliver. Are we not the best workers of this country?’

‘Yes, we are the best!’ many shouted.

‘Strikes without very serious reasons just make no sense at this moment,’ the Secretary cried, and she slew her fist on the table. ‘Strike is a magnificent weapon, to be used only in times of utmost necessity. We can still negotiate with Travtelio! Travtelio management assigned a permanent representative of the Executive Board to us, a Director Labour Union Relations, and we meet each week for at least one entire day with him and his team to discuss all the points you have mentioned. We will go on discussing the measures in your name. We will discuss the modalities of execution, defend you against excesses. However, we cannot kill our company by forcing it to perform less than comparable enterprises, by refusing contemporary management techniques. Therefore, I urge you to remain calm and continue to work, and to let us do our job to represent and defend you in the committees we set up with Travtelio!’

‘That woman and her guys are sold out!’ Hugo Martin cried, remaining stubbornly adamant in his rancour. ‘They discuss in the finest hotel suites of Brussels, get paid luxury dinners, holidays, are offered company mobile phones and company cars. They get invited to the Cosmos first class restaurant of Travtelio. Sold out! Sold out!’

The entire hall sounded, ‘sold out! Sold out!’ but actually, few workers really believed their representatives were agents of Travtelio’s Executive Board. The Secretary of the Union opened her arms once more and she waited until the hall calmed.

Then she spoke again, ‘comrades! I must remind you of our first objectives. We want full employment for all workers. We want decent, better than decent pre-pension schemes during reorganisations. Reorganisations must be discussed first with us before being implemented, so that we can control the effects. We cannot hold back reorganisations, however, because the world is changing around us continuously. The European Community moves towards more liberalisation and more capitalist tendencies. We must fight that advance on the global, European stage, and that is where we work primarily together with our German, Italian and French comrades. We cannot win this fight in our country alone, for we would just kill enterprises like Travtelio and have foreign companies bury Travtelio with products and services of lower prices, in companies that offer still lower wages and more stringent working conditions. So, let us do our job! If strikes are necessary, we will call you to strike, all the Unions together! In the meantime, I repeat, let us do our job! We do our utmost!’

Hugo Martin said nothing anymore, for whatever he might have opposed was now drowned by the general droning of ‘let them do their job! Let them do their job!’

‘Those guys are sold out, sold out, I tell you,’ he continued nevertheless to yell when the hall silenced a little. ‘They are too soft on Travtelio while we suffer! Travtelio should suffer, not we!’

Nobody listened to Hugo Martin. The comrades knew him as an unreliable, over-excited man, an uncontrollable and often unreasonable Unionist. Martin seethed with anger when his comrades held their faces away from him and looked only at the Secretary on the rostrum. He left the meeting to drink his frustration away in the bar of the Union hall. The hard core of the Union men hung already at the bar. Here, Martin found ears and sympathy of men who thought like him. They excited each other by slogans and cries of war and destruction to Travtelio.

4

At the same time as the shouts of the Travtelio Workers’ Assembly shook the building of the second largest Union, Andrew Raga and Jean-Gauthier Buisseyre, dressed in conservative grey, pin-striped suits, sat in a quiet corner of the bar of Brussels’ finest hotel, sipping at a glass of Pommery Champagne. Buisseyre had just been appointed crown prince of Travtelio’s Finance President, René Bastin. Bastin was fifty-seven, bound to have a rapid career ending, and Buisseyre was the first in line now to replace the elderly head accountant of the company. ‘Congratulations with your appointment, no doubt forced upon Bastin by the CEO. Gerald Godelin does not like René Bastin,’ Andrew Raga started. ‘I bet you a hundred Bastin will be out in less than six months.’

‘I will not take you on that bet,’ Buisseyre replied, ‘for Bastin will indeed be out in two months from today. I have seen the letter of resignation. Negotiations to that affect are already taking place. That doesn’t mean however I will replace Bastin automatically. I think I will, though!’

The two men drank.

‘Did you find anything interesting in the records lately?’ Buisseyre asked.

‘Not in the records. I would say we already gathered enough on Godelin to have the man dance to our pipes by now. Something else, quite interesting has come up, but I am not convinced we can use it.’

‘What is that?’

‘Godelin’s portable personal computer blocked. The people of the VIP office automation team who normally repair the equipment of the Presidents could not find the fault, so they brought the PC in to the main office automation group of Stephenson. That group has real experts. They found what was wrong with the PC, a triviality really, but they found something else!’

‘What then?’ Buisseyre asked, absent-mindedly, eyeing a wonderful tall and lean black woman entering.

‘They found a whole series of hidden files on the PC, files that did not come up in the normal sweep of folders and files by the most common commands. The hidden files contained pornographic photographs. Most of the photos were quite useless to us. They held only naked men and women in obscene postures. The guys of the PC team ran to Stephenson and showed him the stuff. Stephenson sent them away, threatening to fire and pursue them if they leaked anything of this. Stephenson continued to scan and look at all the photographs, all of them. He found five photos of Godelin naked in the arms of two nude girls, quite young girls, too!’ Buisseyre sat very rigidly in his chair, now. ‘Where are the photos kept now, where is that PC,’ he asked.

‘The portable PC has been given back to Godelin. Stephenson gave the PC back to the VIP team, telling them the error was minor and solved immediately. Godelin already has his PC back. The VIP team returned the computer two hours after he mentioned the issue. I don’t think Godelin suspects the hidden files to have been discovered and he may interrogate the VIP team, but Stephenson threatened the two experts of the office automation team. The VIP woman does not know anything about the rather special contents. Nobody but Stephenson has seen the images of Godelin.’

‘Are you totally sure of that?’

‘Yes I am. Stephenson said so, and I believe his story.’

‘Do you have the photos?’

‘I do. They are on the USB stick here. I made Stephenson swear he did not have a second copy, but I most surely think he has a double of the files. I have too, by the way. This means we can do with Godelin whatever we want,’ Raga continued.

‘But we cannot do anymore what we want with Stephenson, and if we use them Stephenson will know where they came from,’ Buisseyre remarked dryly. ‘Things are never as easy as that. We cannot come under suspicion of blackmailing. We cannot become associated with those photos.’

Raga was surprised. He felt cocky and feared Buisseyre balked on his proposal. ‘Are you telling me we cannot use them?’

‘I haven’t said that,’ Buisseyre replied. ‘We have to be smart. We have quite some material gathered on Godelin and on Bastin already. There is an easy way out for Bastin. We have to take no action on Bastin. We must wait for his resignation. We must stall a while. I must ensure I have that function of Finance President. Then, a few months later, we take on Gerald Godelin, smooth and easy as well. It is time for you to state what you actually want out of our association, Andrew.’

‘I realise all too well I cannot be something like CEO in European companies like Travtelio. When you become CEO, Finance President will be fine by me,’ Raga replied. ‘My salary will be much higher of course than Bastin’s current salary.’

‘Of course,’ Buisseyre grinned.

‘And I shall have a contract with a few bonuses.’

‘I would not have expected less.’

‘Not the kind of bonuses you think of today, Jean-Gauthier, a lot more lucrative bonuses!’

‘Meaning?’

‘I have some more information for you. I happen to have learned from my contacts in the States the American and Swedish shareholders shall withdraw from Travtelio a year from now.’

‘That has been foreseen,’ was the reaction of Buisseyre. ‘So what?’

‘So you, as new CEO, can propose to bring Travtelio to the Stock Exchange, and offer shares to the larger public.’

Buisseyre spilled his Champagne. ‘That is an interesting and logical thought!’

Raga continued. ‘Our contracts, my friend, should stipulate the amount of shares we should receive in such an event, in the case Travtelio was taken successfully to the Stock Market!’

‘Yes,’ Buisseyre mused slowly, sipping at his long, bubbling drink. ‘That would be nice, wouldn’t it? Thank you for mentioning this. Of course we should take care with our contracts. We are going to be very rich, my friend!’

‘Indeed. We do have to be careful, however. You see, Stephenson gave us dummy user identifications and passwords to access the electronic mail archives and to access the financial data of Travtelio. First, the financial data have to be seeped out before you become President Finance, for otherwise suspicions may backlash onto you. The identifications are hard to track to us. Our names are not in the ids and the IP addresses used cannot be traced to physical connection addresses, which means to our PCs, not unless a probe is put on the connection dialogues during the time we make the accesses. I happened to hear only very recently that an audit of the Data Warehousing equipment is under way in the IT Division.’

‘What has that audit got to do with us?’

‘The archives and mails we accessed are in the Data Warehouse. I wondered whether you have enough material by now. If yes, we should stop accessing the Data Warehouse, and close the ids we use. That would make it impossible to track us down.’

Buisseyre thought for a moment. He said, ‘we have enough. We have evidence of a few dirty items. We have enough mud to throw at Godelin. Now that I know what is happening, I can get more evidence elsewhere. Close down the ids as quickly as you can.’

‘Good. Consider it done. That leaves us with only one other person who knows about what we have been doing.’

‘Mark Stephenson!’ Buisseyre exclaimed. ‘What do we do about him? I want him out of the way by the time we make our moves.’

‘He has to go, yes. We should be able to ship him back to the Sates, to a place where he cannot and will not bother us.’

‘Can you arrange for that?’

‘I think I should tempt him with a nice position over the ocean, a new house paid by our company, and so on. But I will need your help on that subject, with Godelin and Akerlund.’

‘You got it!’ Buisseyre agreed immediately. ‘We have to agree on how to proceed. Tell me, however, who heads the Data Warehouse audit?’

5

Sara Jansen sat in Michel Dorian's office, slumped in a chair at the other side of Dorian's small, round table. Dorian also hung more than he was seated in his chair, opposite Sara. He was crestfallen, down to a foul mood. They had been discussing the teambuilding session at Namur. In fact, Sandström had sent Sara, wanting to know how Dorian had reacted, but he had not brought up the courage to confront the former IT Operations Director. Sara had sprung on the occasion.

Dorian said, 'I wonder what will come next. Two years ago, my wife left me and eloped with one of my former friends. We wanted to divorce amiably, but that procedure is dragging on and kills me! My wife wants always more money from me. She has already turned me into a very poor man, although her lover is wealthy and has a quite higher salary than mine. I have two children, a boy and a girl, adults now and out of the house, on their own. I am left alone. I will be lucky, by the way, if I can keep on living in my home, for my wife wants me to sell it or buy her half from her. I have to find somewhere half the value of my own house, and hand that money over to my wife, though she never contributed a dime for it. My children blame me and my wife for the divorce, but they pick particularly on me. My son is angry at me, refuses to see me for the moment; my girl seems to blame me somewhat less. After that I lost my job as Director of IT Operations. I am stuck in a miserable nonsense position at Travtelio, wondering what I am still doing here. My lifetime work dissolved into nothingness. My former employees are tactful, but some despise me, and I cannot but remark the smirks and smiles and pity out of the corners of my eyes. I am nobody here. Then, during that damn session in Namur, that stupid list of questions crucified me as something else than a manager. In other words, my private life is a failure and my professional life is a shambles. And you ask me how I feel?'

Sara Jansen tried to console Dorian. She scowled at his dismal reflections. 'Akerlund still keeps you around for mainly two reasons. He needs a decent advice to Stephenson's proposals, and he still has in mind to put you back in the saddle after the Stephenson era. That is not all so negative! Akerlund and Sandström are very suspicious about Stephenson, even though they will not say that aloud and in public. I am sure Akerlund likes you and would want you back in command in Operations, but he cannot do that for the moment, because of Godelin who over-reacted on the computer crashes. Have patience with Akerlund! He waits for the right moment to bring you back.

About Sandström's profiling, which was also bad for me, I wouldn't worry too much either. Sandström told me the profiles were only useful for him to know how to handle people, without regard to what they have achieved. How one performs in a job is the most important thing, he told me, but with the profile he knows better how to talk to people and how to direct them. You have proven to be a fine Director of IT Operations, but for those last crashes, and Sandström realises that. Jan Stevens may not have told you, but he too has been telling Akerlund the crashes could not have been avoided with the current technology and the current procedures. Stevens supported you fully!'

'I don't care anymore about what Sandström says and does. He can do whatever he wants, now. I don't want this to hurt me any longer.'

The words stung Sara like a slap.

'People like Sandström only act and give advice in times of crisis, Michel. Sandström reminds me of an army platoon. Platoons are used only very rarely in war, for very short periods, yet they have years of training behind them. Sandström gathers information on people and uses everything he has at most once or twice a year. Of course he talks to Akerlund, but then to discuss Akerlund's own, personal decisions, not just items of HR.'

‘This leaves me still in a very awkward situation, Sara,’ Dorian shook his head.

‘And so am I left in an awkward position, and so are Jan Stevens, as well as every other Belgian manager without exception. We should each of us watch out. We have been supplanted to a degree by expats,’ Sara Jansen replied. ‘The strange fact is that we have all been supplanted by expats who expect not to stay longer at Travtelio for more than two or three years. People like Akerlund and Sandström know that if they replace the current managers by expats, then after two years Travtelio will be a graveyard. There simply is no good succession here beyond the former Belgian managers. If the Belgian managers are all ousted out, then when the expats leave, there will be no managers of the right level, knowledge, experience and daring left to continue the business.’

‘Travtelio can hire new people!’

‘Yes, they can. At what cost? Much higher salaries will have to be paid. Do you believe in pure managers leading IT without having any knowledge of IT technology and of the business of Travtelio? How long would it take before they have reached your experience levels?’

‘I know that, Sara, but Godelin and the other Executives don’t care a shit! Pure managers without IT knowledge can be managers indeed, but not leaders. Who cares? Business departments, as well as our Division, must be led by people who know what they are doing, have experience in similar jobs, and be men or women who can rapidly develop a vision for the organisation. How would they be able to do that without any knowledge of technology or of the business? They will have to rely on lower managers, and those will make fools of the new Directors and exploit the situation shamelessly. Also, those employees will rather side up with the account managers of our suppliers, with people they have known for many years, share their interest in IT, people they have befriended, rather than with their Director. Contracts for millions of Euro will be skewed in favour of the large suppliers. Poor Travtelio, then! Again: who cares? The Presidents will profit personally from that situation too!’

‘You know,’ Sara continued, ‘your problem is that you are too loyal to Travtelio. You and I, we arrived here, expecting to have a lifetime career in this company, a civil servant company, and serve the community. Travtelio is a private company, a shareholder company now! You do your job, but you will get no thank you from nobody, you know.’

‘I realise that very well,’ Michel Dorian said, sighing, counting the fingers on his hand.

‘What a life is this? There is truly nothing that interests me in life anymore.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Sara cried, but she could hardly disagree with Dorian. ‘Don’t just sit there like a canary, soon food for a cat! Pull yourself together! Matters will evolve for the better. Be patient and weather it all out, like I do, and like Jan Stevens does!’

Sara’s heart went out in empathy to Dorian. She would have placed her hand on his shoulders or even embraced him, but HR Officers just didn’t do that. She would have liked to share all or parts of Dorian’s life with him, but she was stuck in her old demons, so she dared not reach out for him. Sara had always very much realised she was not pretty, too rough to be a pleasant companion to a man. She did not know how to give tenderness. She was too much used to affirming her independence and toughness. Even if she would have liked to live another life, she was unable to change her ways and being. She might get closer to Michel Dorian, get to know him better, but how long would she keep up living with a man? Would she be able to put her own habits and preferences aside, enter a man’s world, do as he was used to and preferred and not as she wanted? Sara Jansen realised clearly Michel Dorian was her last chance to ever live with a companion. Living with a man might be possible for her, after all, but then not with a depressive man, with a wreck. If she was to get close to Dorian, then Dorian would first have to overcome his current depression. Moreover, she felt she was not in a much better state. Dorian, she sighed, could only get over his demotion by being

placed back in his old function, and that was very wishful thinking. He could leave Travtelio for another job in another company. At his age and at Sara's age, go through such a change and especially in a similar job, was sheer impossible, and that was the issue that could ruin their lives.

Maybe some hope was in the making.

'I believe Akerlund and Sandström have their belly full of Stephenson,' Sara said. She hesitated, and then continued, 'Stephenson keeps blowing off all initiatives to better quality in Operations. He doesn't know how to organise for quality, and he is not keen on defining strict processes. He doesn't even know his glory might be in installing well defined processes. The statistics of errors in all domains are up, spectacularly up, as you know, and enough for Akerlund to take serious notice. Look, have some more patience. In a few months from now, this entire situation here may change dramatically. In any case, you are not the only person who is having a difficult time. I am riding in the same tram as you, and you would be amazed to know how many have the same issues as you.'

'Think about these words a little,' Sara wanted to say, 'maybe also have a good look at me. Why don't you try to charm me? I am not beautiful, but I have much to offer. Do I have to invite you to dinner? Do I have to propose to go to a concert or an art exhibition? Do you want me to take you to a soccer match? Do you want me to sleep with you? Why don't you notice I warm up to you?'

Sara Jansen said nothing of the sort aloud to Michel Doriant, and Doriant sat with his head in his two hands now, utterly miserable and wallowing too much in self-pity to be attentive to the wishes and cravings of a woman like Sara Jansen.

6

Jana Kovar was to report on her project to Jan Stevens. Her office was on the thirty-fifth floor of the Skyscraper, the floor of the expats. She walked through the cloister and stepped in the elevator of the Villa. The elevator that arrived was empty, but while she turned to face the doors, ready to push the button for Stevens' floor, she saw Andrew Raga jump in after her.

Raga said, 'hello, Miss Kovar. I'm going to the same floor!'

Raga stood next to her, but he continued to watch her. Jana remarked Raga looked her up and down. She found that annoying. She pretended not to notice, as she was used to this kind of probing. When Raga continued to look at her while the elevator shook, she threw him a scowl. Raga, caught, suddenly watched the ceiling. He scraped his throat.

He asked, smiling, 'how is your project going?'

'Fine,' she replied, even more annoyed at hearing Raga wanting to start a banal conversation and probably trying to smooth her up and flirt with her. The elevator stopped. Jana stepped out, still uncomfortably feeling Raga's eyes on her back.

She heard Raga say behind her, 'we should have a talk, you know. I work with the Executive Board and for our home country I need to keep tabs on how the expat projects are advancing, have a feel on just how much the shareholder companies contribute to this business. Maybe we should have dinner one of these days, here in the Clouds restaurant, or maybe on an evening down town. Would you like that?'

Jana felt Andrew Raga's hand on her shoulder. She shrugged off that hand by stepping aside, as if she wanted to watch something that happened below in the Cloister, looking down the open balcony of the Villa. Then she stepped quickly on.

She replied, 'we write reports, Mister Raga, of how our projects advance. We also hold meetings every month, all the project managers together, during which we report progress. I never saw you at those meetings, yet they are open. You will find all the statistics in the

reports. As to the projects of IT, our coordinator is Jan Stevens. He can bring you up to date by the hour on what we are doing. Please excuse me now.'

Jana did not respond to Raga's invitation to dinner. She arrived at Jan's office, and quickly moved behind Raga, stepping behind the screen that hid Jan's desk from the corridor. She had an appointment with Jan right now. She did not look behind her at Raga, who walked on. She imagined his surprise, but she didn't care. She had nothing to do with this Raga; his home company was not hers. She doubted even Raga really had to be on this floor. Had he been stalking on her? Jana had seen Andrew Raga flirting with Lauren O'Sheridan. What disgusting game was Raga playing?

Jan Stevens looked up from his desk as he saw Jana Kovar darting into his office space with crisp steps. Still, he smiled innocently, so that Jana was immediately charmed. He does smile nicely, warmly, harmlessly, she thought. This one does not stalk on me.

Jana sat at Jan's desk and presented the progress of the Data Warehousing audit. The project was proceeding according to plans. The consultants would finish the audit within budget and within time. The useless files that had been identified would liberate so many hard disks the cost of the study would be recuperated even before the end of the project. Software applications that were never used could be dropped, their maintenance personnel allocated to the development of new business programs. Enough processors could be recuperated in the computers to support growth for the next three years. More benefits were being identified, a slate full of proposals should lower costs by more than thirty percent. A few other domains of the use of Data Warehousing to customer care could be proposed, to great promise of gains for Travtelio.

Jan Stevens relaxed. He had suspected this project might bring considerable savings, but not nearly as much as he heard Jana tell now in his office. He told her this project would be very successful. She had done well. The project ran smoothly, consultants and Travtelio developers had not complained but cooperated nicely. He asked Jana whether she still felt fine with this work.

'This was very challenging but also very interesting for me,' Jana replied. 'We had a few issues, but those have been solved. Our team works well. Cooperation is better than I would have expected. I already knew something about Data Warehousing, but I learned a lot more with the consultants. We have actually been able to go way beyond our original targets. We could have stopped two weeks ago, but I agreed to use the remaining budget and time to follow up on an odd idea that came up. I hope you don't mind.'

'What was that?'

'One of the consultants brought to our attention a new kind of machine that has appeared on the market out of nowhere. It is not a massive computer with specialised, expensive processors, but a machine composed of hundreds of cheap, multiple processors, used in off-the-shelf servers. Such a machine costs a lot less than the one Travtelio uses currently. Some applications may not give instant second response times anymore, but response times counted in minutes or hours. Still, we do not see that as a detriment for the kind of questions asked of a Data Warehousing application. The current applications have to be migrated and adapted, and a few completely rewritten. That means some investment, but if the machine really works, Travtelio may win not millions of Euro over a five-year period, but tens of millions of Euro!'

Jan Stevens gasped. 'That looks to be too good to be true!'

'Well, we think the potential is such! We have invited experts of that company for an entire study day with us, to discuss the migration of programs, and to calculate costs and savings. We would like to have you at that meeting. The consultants asked for you and also for Michel Dorian to be present. They seem to know you two, and trust you. Could we invite the

complete team at that meeting, plus the experts of that supplier, about a dozen in all, and offer them a nice lunch at the Clouds? That might ease the talks.'

'Lady, when you propose a carrot of tens of millions of Euro, how could Travtelio refuse a free dinner? Good work! I am astonished! This is fantastic news!'

Jana was pleased. She laughed. Then she drew a sterner face.

'There is something else, though. We also did a security check on the accesses to the Data Warehouse applications. As you know, that database contains the archives of many business applications, of the mailing system, and so on. That makes of it probably the most interesting place to snoop at of Travtelio. We found a mess! We discovered tens of user identifiers, userids providing access to all or to parts of the files, userids of people who should not have been allowed access. We also found identifiers that were not in use anymore but still open, ready for use. There is a serious security issue with those.'

'What do you mean?'

'The cleaning procedures for unused userids are not in place. Administrators who left the company just let their userid active, and nobody turned them off. There is no security issue for those in se, because access from outside the Travtelio internal network is impossible, caught by the firewalls, but those userids just hang around and may have been given to people unknown to us and still working inside Travtelio. We had a meeting with Michel Doriant on this point, and we determined to which persons the userids belonged, most of them anyway. We believe no harm was done, access stopped on those userids when the people left. We can prove that from the logs of the accesses. We already purged all those userids.'

'Wait a minute. You said earlier most of the userids, not all?'

'Right, and that is the real issue. We ended up with three userids that we could not account for. Michel Doriant stated as a fact that those userids had never been assigned by him or his people, nor have they been assigned to people who once worked at Travtelio. The Data Warehouse teams do not seem to know where the userids came from.'

'Have you asked Mark Stephenson?'

'We did, of course. He bluntly replied he wanted to have nothing to do with that and didn't know about anything. Yet, he and Michel Doriant had administrator rights to the Data Warehouse. Only four people could assign those userids and passwords: Mark and Michel and two system administrators. They all refused to acknowledge having defined the userids! One of them must be lying! We don't know who.'

'To what kind of users were the identifiers assigned?'

'That is the strangest part! We do not know, absolutely not, who uses these identifiers. We do not know how they were assigned, and we do not know by whom and when. They do not have the structure of normal Travtelio userids, which always contain the employee number of the user. The suspicious ones have random letters in them, no figures! They seemed really insidious to me. The information filled in additionally as to the identity of the users is bogus, nonsensical info. We could find out the identifiers were used very actively until one week ago. All activity in the data searches stopped then abruptly, as if someone discovered we were doing an investigation into Data Warehouse usage.'

Jan Stevens looked up, perplexed, baffled and irked. 'That is worrying. Stealing data from a company is theft of property, as much as any other stealing. Stealing is forbidden! Somebody our teams cannot identify had access to our data stores?'

'So it seems. You have a possible security leak, here. The accesses are only possible from inside Travtelio, though. We checked that out. The leak can be on any data of Travtelio's business, on sales and other finance data, and it can also be on data protected by the privacy laws. Access to confidential personal data may have taken place. Private mail communications may have been read. We discovered all of this yesterday. We have an issue

now; we discussed that issue and proposed to lay it before you for decision. We can let the identifiers be active, and trace usage by them, hoping to detect physical addresses that lead to the user devices from which the access has been taken. That of course keeps the security door open, a potential problem. Or we can close the ids down immediately, at the risk of never finding out who made the accesses. Who decides on this choice?’

Jan Stevens thought for a while. He asked, ‘can the physical addresses not be recuperated from the past access logs?’

‘No, they cannot. We have to put tracing software on while the Data Warehouse is being searched. That is the only way to discover who the users are, and then we will only find a device, a personal computer or a server. When an access is taken, we can of course run immediately to the place and hope the user is still at the machine by the time we arrive.’

‘Damn! Does this also mean we have to put a guy watching out for this issue all the time, waiting for such an access?’

‘Yes and no. The Data Warehousing team can have the traces automatically be activated, from the moment on any such accesses start. An alarm message can then be sent automatically. But to catch the user we have to run to the place; otherwise we will find the device, but not necessarily the user.’

‘Then keep the userids open for now, and start the tracing process. However, this is important enough to alert at least Akerlund. The userids may be totally innocent. They may be serious security leaks. I’ll ask for a short meeting with Akerlund today. Will you be in office?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I will want you to come with me and explain all of this to Akerlund and maybe also to Kyle and Sandström.’

‘Why me? You can tell them this too!’

‘I always give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, Jana. This is one of your findings, and a pretty important one too. Why would the accesses have stopped suddenly and completely? This doesn’t smell good at all.’

‘No, it doesn’t. I’ll be ready when you call me and I’ll gather some documentation, logs and so on, to present to Akerlund.’

‘Put that in a short report, a one-pager.’

Jan Stevens leaned back in his chair. He hesitated, but then he did formulate the question he had already wanted to ask Jana a few times, but had to gather all his courage and daring for.

‘How have you been since we met in Namur?’

‘I am fine,’ Jana smiled, flashing a naughty eye to Jan, and expecting more to come.

Jan gave her more. ‘Would you like us to see each other again in similar places? I quite liked our walks in the old town of Namur, and our supper that evening.’

Jan had given himself a ninety percent chance of being rebuked, Jana refusing outright and running angrily out of his office.

Jana replied, ‘sure! Why not! I quite liked that evening too. What did you have in mind?’

Jan’s mouth must have fallen open for an instant, but he answered as rapidly as he could, sitting straight again on his chair.

‘Do you have specific plans for the weekend?’ he asked.

‘Actually no,’ Jana replied. ‘I was looking forward to a very lonely, dull weekend. I planned nothing. I am free, totally free!’ She sighed.

‘I have been invited to stay at the house of a friend who lives in the countryside. He lives in a manor with many rooms, not far from Namur. He is probably my best friend, but he and his wife are rather eccentric. Would you care to join me? I will phone him, of course, but he will not mind me bringing someone. We could drive to there on Saturday morning, stay the

evening at his house, pass the weekend, and drive home Sunday afternoon. We can have walks in the woods, roam over flat walking country. Do you ride horses? It is quiet and cosy over there. I find it very agreeable strolling around there, even in rainy weather. Care to join me?’

Jana hesitated only a second. She said, ‘Fine! Consider that settled, then!’

‘Great,’ Jan said. ‘I’ll pick you up at ten in the morning, at your apartment.’

Chapter Five. Trioteignes

Jan Stevens and Jana Kovar drove down the highway from Brussels to Namur. Jan had picked up Jana at her apartment of Uccle. When he had rang at her door, she had thrown it open and disappeared back in her rooms immediately, running, leaving Jan the choice of staying in the open doors or enter. He closed the door behind him, but stayed only a step farther.

Jana cried from somewhere inside, 'come in, come in! I'm almost ready!'

When she came back, Jan had gasped once more. In her silk, white, spotless blouse with deep open neck, tight, dark blue jeans, black leather boots, tall and slender, full hips and breasts, she was so little he was used to in the company.

Jan blew out his breath and brimmed with excitement and awe over Jana, he thought, 'what am I doing with such a beauty? She must be a true man-eater, this one, a Goethe vixen. Jan, Jan, you are foolishly smitten with someone you will never be able to control. You will have to follow this one, not the other way round! Can you handle her?'

Did he really want to control a woman, would he want this woman to be controlled? Never! Jan Stevens admired women, and he preferred women that had the independence and pride of cats about them. He felt oddly comfortable only with women that had a mind of their own.

Jan tossed her two bags on the back seat of his car with the carelessness and joy of a young boy.

Jana sat down looking at him expectantly, watching Jan, until he said, 'on we go, down to Namur again!'

Jan turned the ignition key. 'The dice are thrown,' he thought. 'You had better do this the right way, boy.'

Jan Stevens was not a young man anymore. He had been very picky with the women he had been involved with. He had fastidiously avoided settling down with a Brussels beauty. No girl friend had ever woken up in his apartment.

They kept rather silent along the road. He drove on fast and tense. After half an hour, Jan left the highway for smaller, local roads. He rode more carefully here, slower, and Jana seemed to relax. Finally, he drove into a wood of very old, majestic oaks and beeches. The road became but a little more than an earthen path on which no two cars could pass each other.

'Where is this Jan driving me to?' Jana thought, a little ill at ease. 'We are in the middle of nowhere. If ever I want to get out of here on my own, how do I go about that?'

Then, Jan drove past an open, large, rusted iron gate. Jana's eyes widened. Jan stopped the car, and Jana stepped out, to remain standing, stunned, one hand on the door of the car.

'Is this where we will stay? Is this the manor?' she asked.

Jana looked at a massive, grey stone building out of another century. The building was enormous, a huge complex of thick walls, squat towers and dark masses of blue-grey shale roofs. She stood before a stone bridge. The bridge was overgrown in places with all kinds of weeds. It was not a long bridge Jana stepped on, forgetting her bags. The bridge must have been built in Roman times! Under the bridge flowed no river. It was thrown over a deep, wide ditch, which at one time would have been flooded with brackish water. The ditch, very green of grass everywhere but overgrown with bushes, some of which were still blooming, ran all around the building. The bridge ended into a cobbled space flanked by two massive round towers topped by pointed roofs covered by the same small, blue shale panes neatly covering one another she saw on the other roofs. She walked amidst the two towers, looking up. Beyond the two towers stood two more, similar ones, and between them ran a short corridor,

at the end of which was a wooden gate. The gate was open, for two very thick oak panels stood fastened to the walls between the four towers. Above her head, Jana saw openings in the stones of the ceiling. She stepped back outside, and remarked a grinning Jan, coming towards her, carrying three heavy bags. She ran to him, but he refused her to take over one of the bags. Jana looked again at the building. On both sides, the entry towers were flanked by high walls, very high walls of thick stones, not bricks, on top of which Jana saw crenellated embattlements. She could only distinguish the towers and the walls on either side, but that was enough to show her she had not arrived at a manor but at a medieval, a very early medieval castle. She stood at a behemoth of a castle, such as she had only seen in picture books of the Crusades, a very ancient fortress.

‘Welcome at the castle of Trioteignes,’ Jan Stevens said. ‘The castle is a fortress of the plains, a swamp fortress, one of the last of its sort in Belgium. The swamps of the twelfth century around the castle have dried up, of course. This is where my friend lives. Care to become a medieval lady of a castle for a while?’

Jana was stunned. The castle looked ominous, threatening in its dark, large, bevelled stones, and so very mysterious. She expected ghosts to fly out of the towers any minute. Jana knew many castles of course, mostly elegant Czech fortresses, none so coarse and fascinating. The charm of ten centuries hung on this one, as well as the menace of more sinister centuries.

While they walked through the gate, Jana still looked around everywhere, unable to say a word. She looked more upwards than before her.

‘It kind of imposes itself on visitors, doesn’t it,’ Jan said. ‘From here it looks terrible, it always make me shiver. It is not the castle of Bluebeard or of Dracula, though. It is quite cosy inside, you’ll see!’

Jana laughed and forced her help on Jan with the bags, now. They stepped through the inside paved yard. The courtyard was closed by walls on all sides, but the wall on the left had been destroyed in part, and then restored to a low parapet inside the courtyard, so that one could have a look on a wide open landscape there, look to the fields and woods beyond the castle. Jana saw a farm huddled among the trees in the far. On the side opposite the gate stood a large rectangular building, which would be the manor Jan had talked about, a structure partly built in stone and partly in bricks, a strange mixture of old medieval, renaissance and late gothic styles, probably dating from the nineteenth century, but with features remaining from the past centuries. At the right corner Jana even detected a chapel with a lean tower and cross.

‘This central part is the house I talked about,’ Jan said. ‘It is an odd assembly and remnants of every possible style of the last six centuries or so, adapted a hundred years ago, not very charming on the outside, but not totally ugly either, I would say. That is where my friend lives. He owns the castle. He has his office in one of the towers. The other towers are restored also. They hold a library, a home cinema and various rooms where Charles has placed what are actually his antique museum pieces, found and collected, memorabilia of the castle. Charles is the owner of the castle!’

Jan pushed open the door in the middle of the manor. They stepped into a wide hall. A broad marble staircase leading upwards faced them. A man came in through a side door. He was not tall, and he smiled charmingly as he came to them. He was impeccably dressed in a light grey suit. He had black hair, neatly combed backwards, dark eyes, a pale complexion, a long face, regular, fine features. He wore a white shirt open at the neck, no tie on his formal jacket. He was quite surprised when he looked at Jana, so that she feared for a moment Jan had not announced her.

Jan went up to the man, shook hands, and said, 'Jana, may I present to you Count Charles de Trioteignes? Charles, this is Jana Kovar I told you about.'

The man spoke with a deep, warm voice. 'I am very pleased to meet a friend of Jan's, Miss Kovar. May I call you Jana? Jan never brings friends to our castle, so this is a very first. Welcome! I'll show you your rooms first. Jan has his usual room; your room is a few steps further on. Call me Charles, please.'

'Thank you, sir. Yes, please call me Jana. I'm grateful and very stunned about your castle. Jan only told me he would show me a house. I didn't expect this! It is wonderful!'

'Thank you for the compliment. No sir to me! Just Charles! I'll go first, up the stairs!'

They went up the staircase, but continued to chat about Jana's surprise at the castle. Charles explained some of the history of his family's domain. Jana looked at the features of the corridors, the plaster decorations in the room, and she wanted Charles to open each of them, to exclaim at one marvel after the other. Each room was decorated differently.

'Here are your rooms,' Charles said, opening a door. 'Jan's room is a bit further. This is yours, Jana. Jan, you know where to find your room.'

Charles looked at this watch. 'Well, it is now eleven. Can we meet at twelve in the dining room for a drink and lunch? That leaves you some time to settle down. Monique is cooking today for us. You may expect a game stew or something! I'm in charge of the wine.'

Jan went to his room, put his bags down on his bed and arranged the clothes he had brought with him in a closet, showered very quickly, changed into a light suit, and twenty minutes later he tapped on Jana's door. She opened immediately.

Jan said, 'why don't we have a quick look around the castle before dinner?'

'Fine,' Jana replied. She threw a jacket over her shoulders and followed Jan through the corridor, down the stairs, back into the courtyard.

'Who is Monique?' she asked.

'Monique Ghysen is quite a story. Monique lives outside the castle domain. In fact, she keeps a large farm that was in the past the farm of the castle, the farm of the Trioteignes family. Her parents bought the farm many years ago and she kind of grew up with Charles. When her parents died, Monique continued the farm business. She sows and harvests, keeps cattle and manages her woods like a man. I usually see her in overalls, smelling of cow dung and of pigs, and muddied boots at her feet. The farm thrives. She is quite a character, hates towns, and loves the countryside. She was an only child, so she inherited the farm and stayed on here, because she loves this life, and also because she was and still is the lover of the Count. They have two children together, a boy and a girl. Charles recognised the children legally. He asks her to marry him each year at her anniversary, and she refuses to marry each time, but she is pissed off when he doesn't propose! She says there is no need to marry, and she doesn't want to become a Countess, but Charles believes she just does not want to submit to anybody, not to Charles, not to anybody, and Charles believes she fears once married she would have to do what Charles says. She cherishes her independence. Why that would be and what happened, I don't know. They are married in mind, though. The children live as well in the castle as on the farm. They have rooms of their own in both places! Monique sleeps more here than at her farm. They are a little eccentric, but they are also the nicest people I know, and they laugh a lot.'

'Who are the Counts of Trioteignes?'

'The Trioteignes are a very old aristocratic family. Their name goes back seven hundred years, older than the Belgian state. They have not always lived in this castle, though. The family inherited it only two hundred years ago. Charles' mother still lives, but she owns an apartment

in Paris and leaves the castle to Charles. Charles is a banker. His family has lots of money. The Trioteignes married into money at each generation, and Charles' mother has been very angry at Charles' choice of his farm-girl. I don't know exactly what Charles does at the bank. I don't know how high up he works, but I suspect he is a Director at the least and a Member of the Board, probably because of the shares his family owns. He is very secretive about what he does, very deep, but he knows more about the banking world and the world of industry than I can imagine. He seems to be very much a member of the old boy circles of Brussels, and that may also be why Monique feels she is in another class than he, a class she despises, and refuses to marry him. Certain is that Monique doesn't care a penny for the circles of Charles.'

'How did you two meet?'

'We met at university. Charles studied law and economics. I studied engineering and mathematics. We met at a ball because we were actually chasing the same girl. We were twenty. The girl went off with another guy, and Charles and I got drunk together. We have been friends since that time. He is the best friend I have. I come here regularly, especially when I need to think and to escape from Brussels. When Charles has to meet very late in Brussels, he stays over in my apartment. He has a key. Here, we go hunting together, in the woods around the castle. We both hate to shoot and kill animals. When we remain outside for an entire day, we rarely come back with more than a very old rabbit or a pheasant. We stalk on the animals, though, to see how they live, and where. Monique likes me too. Once every while I invite them to supper in Brussels, each time in another restaurant, and I do that when they start saying they need to sniff up the atmosphere of boisterous Brussels, of many people cramped together in some place. They seem to want to know the horror of the city, to be able to say over and over again they never would want to live in a city.'

Jan and Jana walked around the castle. Jan explained to her the interesting points, the history of the parts of the old fortress. He showed her the old dovecot, the orangery, the horse stable, the turrets and the pointed roofs of the castle.

'Charles and Monique have four horses of their own. They also rent boxes out for about ten other horses to friends and neighbours in the village. If you ride horses, I am sure they can lend you one. I never learned to ride horses, I'm afraid. I will not accompany you. I am more a man of the water. I'm a sailing man. I'll explain you some time why that is so. We should go back, however; lunch must be ready by now.'

They walked back to their room, but a few minutes later they entered the dining room together. The bedrooms had been decorated in a very modern style with contemporary furniture, the walls painted in light, pastel colours. The dining room was really a very large and long rectangular hall, which was also a living. This part of the castle had remained very much in the style of the previous centuries. Wooden panels and huge paintings of landscapes covered the walls. They entered the area of large couches and seats of all sorts and styles, all covered with soft Sanderson cloth in bright, multicoloured flower patterns. The place looked very fresh and joyful. Logs crackled in an open fireplace. Monique's hand could be felt, here. Beyond the couches, they saw a large table set for dinner with white porcelain dishes, coloured crystal glasses and silver cutlery, but the dishes were placed closely together at one end, not distributed over the entire length of the table.

Charles was nipping at a brandy. When Jan and Jana entered, a stout woman stepped from the other side into the hall. She was tall, taller than Charles, and she had a beautiful, sun-tanned, round face in which shone large, green eyes. Her lips were thick, and she looked like a strong woman. Jana imagined her easily on a tractor in the fields or delivering a newborn calf in a

stable. She could probably squeeze all the bones out of Charles' body with one hand, but she smiled all the time. She wore now a monstrous apron over plain clothes.

Charles stood up from his seat, saying, 'this is my unmarried wife, Monique Ghysen, Jana. She is the mother of my two little monsters Diego and Laura. Where are the children, by the way, Monique?'

'Welcome, welcome! The children will be the day with the Van Mulders, next doors. They wanted to play with Paul, René and Marie. The Van Mulders guard them. They will stay there for lunch, too!'

'The Van Mulders own a farm in the village,' Charles explained. 'Their children are the friends of our Diego and Laura. When the five of them are here, I grow nuts in a minute. Their favourite pastime here is to break down my castle!'

'Oh shut up, you old grumpy,' Monique smiled. 'He doesn't like the noise of the five of them, but he also lets them do whatever they like. There are dangerous places in this castle, and Charles showed all the most exciting places to the children, of course. I am always in terror one of them will fall down some stairs, a wall, or a tower.'

'They are not stupid! They know every corner of the castle better than me. They have explored every room and attic. They are fine children.'

'Hear, hear,' Monique called. 'Who is excusing them now?'

Charles changed subjects diplomatically. 'What's for lunch? I am starved!'

'You know what we'll have for lunch, Charles! You brought it to me yourself. We have a home-made pâté of fowl first and then something Jan likes: wild rabbit stewed in a sauce of Kriek beer, a Brussels stew, with potatoes and mushrooms. Cheese afterwards and a piece of cake, for who can still open his belt without his pants falling down. You prepare the wine, or shall we open a bottle of Champagne?'

'Champagne it will be, on the fabulous surprise of Jan bringing in a female friend. You know Jana, we were beginning to think that man might be gay! I never saw him give a woman a decent look after we graduated from university! Monique thought he was secretly in love with her. Do you know how many nice Walloon girls we presented to him? He drew up his nose to each of them!'

Monique slapped Charles on the hand, 'hey, you, bad friend! Stop that! Leave Jan alone, now! Uncork that Champagne.' She turned to Jana, 'Jana is an uncommon name!'

Jan answered first, 'Jana is Czech, Monique. She is an expat working with me at Travtelio. We are colleagues.'

'Colleagues and friends,' Monique corrected.

The four of them went to the table, and continued to chat while Charles poured the Champagne. Monique took Jana by the arm and drew her into the kitchen.

Charles asked, 'Jan, how much can we trust Jana? Can we talk openly before her?'

'That depends on what you mean by open. I vow for her,' Jan replied a little puzzled. 'We are not lovers, if that is what you ask, but she is a very discreet, very private person. She remains loyal of course to her company.'

'All right, then. I need to talk to you in private about Travtelio. We can do that later, though.'

'Travtelio?' Jan asked, surprised. 'What have you to do with Travtelio?'

Charles did not answer; his attention was drawn to the kitchen door.

Jana and Monique returned, and Monique brought in the first plate.

After lunch, Monique startled Charles by saying, 'Jana and I are going to shop!'

'Shopping?' Charles exclaimed. 'Jana drives to here from Brussels, where she has the best shops of the country, and you want her to go out shopping with you?'

‘Not window shopping, but farm shopping!’ Monique laughed. ‘We need duck liver, snails and strawberries for supper and for tomorrow’s lunch. We go shopping at the other farmers of the village!’

Charles laughed too, then, ‘I see. I bet you are going to show her the cows and the horses and the pigs of the entire village! Please don’t stay away too late.’

While Jana and Monique left, Jan said, ‘I had no idea Monique spoke such fine English.’

‘Monique is an odd woman out,’ Charles replied. ‘She is a Master in Germanic Languages, you know! Besides her French, she speaks Dutch, English and German. She did not want to give up her farm, however. She was forced by her parents to study languages, but she should have studied agriculture or horticulture. She is only happy on her farm. She also has a real talent for management, for her farm is thriving, contrary to many other in the region.’

‘You wanted to talk about Travtelio,’ Jan began.

‘Yes, I did. What is happening at that company of yours? Rumours circulate in Brussels about Travtelio, and more so about Gerald Godelin.’

‘What kind of rumours?’ Jan asked, suddenly very much interested.

‘We hear very hushed-up tales. Travtelio would have changed its status from a Belgian Société Anonyme into a company of Dutch commercial law. Some form of a holding may have been created in Luxemburg to handle financial transactions and obtain cheaper funds for Travtelio. A nasty rumour links Travtelio to a transfer pricing scandal, whereby Travtelio used its international ventures, and these got also linked to a financial scandal involving a start-up company that had many smoky links with politicians and financial swindlers. Godelin’s private life is being exposed with unsavoury stories of mistresses and secret orgies. The rumours started slowly, grew, and now pervade our circles. Compromising photographs are being distributed under the tables of the best restaurants of Brussels.’

‘Does that worry you?’

‘It does! Travtelio is the fifth largest company of this country, and mainly still in the hands of our government. It is one of our most prosperous enterprises, though not listed on the stock exchange. A scandal concerning Travtelio would rock our stock market and maybe even influence the credit rating of the country.’

‘How did you hear the rumours, Charles?’

‘I am a banker, Jan. I dwell in certain circles in Brussels. I do not particularly like some of the people in those circles, but I need to know what happens in them, what alliances are being forged, which new ventures are being arranged, where money flows and disappears. So I attend the conferences and the meetings and the gala suppers of the clubs of Brussels.’

‘You mean you are a distinguished member of the aristocratic clubs?’

‘Not necessarily aristocratic, Jan.’

‘Come on, Charles. Do you think I don’t know more than three quarters of Belgium’s largest companies are led by nobility? I also meant aristocratic not merely in the sense of old nobility, but in the literal sense of the word, the best rulers. Is not aristocracy derived from the Greek word of aristokratia, the rule of the best?’

‘Jan, what are you telling me now? Was that sarcasm? I hear about a new Jan Stevens, now. You, the intelligent and high-strung guy, don’t give me the communist crap,’ Charles replied, slightly irritated and looking at his friend as if he discovered a new streak in Jan’s character. ‘This is not the moment. My bank is directly and indirectly interested in Travtelio. We would like to happen from an inside source what is happening there. I do not want to talk politics or ideology here. I am concerned about the economy of this country.’

‘I am not talking ideology, Charles. Yet, we are talking about the pyramid, aren’t we? We are talking about the pyramid of society at the top of which we find the aristocrats, the best, the elite, the rich and wealthy, the jet set, the people. The ruled always remain at the bottom. A

few years ago a French comedian tried to be a presidential candidate for fun. He said he wanted to stir up the bottom of the pyramid, so that some of the stench would be raised, raised and be smelled at the top too. We are talking about that pyramid, aren't we? You seem to be concerned with a scandal at that top, the smell of which might descend to the bottom, aren't you?

Charles de Trioteignes was very worried, now. He had never heard his friend talk with such bitterness as today. What had happened at Travtelio to bring Jan into such a state?

He sighed. 'Jan, don't start talking to me like Monique. She refused and still refuses to marry me because I am wearing a hereditary title of nobility. Yes, I am an aristocrat by birth. Yes, I try not to lose my family's fortune. Yes, I try to augment the fortune to keep this ancestral castle and the domain. There are, however, two sorts of nobility. One kind feels that one is an aristocrat to serve, to help one's countrymen, poor or rich. That kind of aristocracy really wants to do good all around. Our King and Princes are mostly in that category, and think like that. They do not sit at the top of the pyramid but stand somewhere sideways to it.'

'You mean like in the ancient knight code: defend the poor and the widows and the little orphans? Does that really exist, Charles? Is it the image of Saint Georges defending the poor virgin against the dragon, the Saint George of Donatello, the statue that stands in a niche at a corner of Orsanmichele in Florence? Is that you?'

Charles smiled. He continued. 'Yes, that kind of aristocrat. There are more of them around than you think, and those aristocrats are worried.'

'I bet the other kind is even more worried,' Jan said, 'the nobles who marry, sleep and most importantly do business with the most ferocious money-eaters of the rest of the top of the pyramid. The cynics, the guys who placed their money in the investment funds, which hide behind small, respected façades of the old Brussels, the firms from where the real financial power of Belgium and Europe emanates.'

'Right,' Charles continued. 'That part of the top, and I agree the largest part of the top, has become worried too. They are afraid of unrest on the stock market, and they are afraid of scandals that might stain their reputations. These nobles, enriched by and mixed with the aristocracy of money, of high finance, fear a scandal the rest of the pyramid might perceive and blame on them. Don't think I like those people, but that kind exists in every country, and at all layers of society, whatever the regime, be it Royal or Presidential or any other, whatever the rule of the country. I care for the nobles who truly want to do good and to help, the Royal Family among them.'

'Your part of the top has not been particularly eloquent these last years, Charles, not particularly outspoken in its recognition of the growing poverty in this country, caused by the greed of the other part of the top. I almost concluded that your part of the top did not exist anymore!'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, haven't you remarked how, despite the political solidarity of social security, unemployment support and an insurance system of medical care that is among the best of the world, how the percentage of people living in poverty is growing by the year instead of declining? To put that in financial terms, there is something called a Gini factor, Charles, for a country. It is a graph, actually. You place on the horizontal axis percentages of the population, first the five percent that earns the least, then five percent that earns more, and so on, until at the right end the five percent of the population that earns the most. Then, on the vertical axis you place the cumulated amounts earned by the groups. Normally, in an equal society, one should then obtain a forty-five degrees line, each percentage having the same income, the

accumulation growing evenly. However, when the proportion of the total income of the population, cumulatively earned is plotted for Belgium, the line is not a straight line but a parabola opening to the left, meaning the richest part of the population has an income that far exceeds the income of the poorest group. The Gini factor is the ratio of the area lying between the ideal curve of equality and the real curve. The most equal society is one in which every person receives the same percentage of the total income, hence a Gini factor of zero. The most unequal society, in which a single person would receive all the income and all the other people none at all, would have a Gini factor of one.

Since 1990, the Gini factor is on the rise, Charles, to greater inequality. It is rising in Belgium and in the US. It is dramatically rising in India, in China and in Russia, but it is diminishing in France, for instance, despite right-wing governments there! In other words, Charles, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The distribution curve gets skewed by the year.

If you want other coefficients, I could cite to you the Human Poverty Index, and a few more. We have a formidable European Union, now, Charles. Has that European Union ever taken as its objective to lower the Human Poverty Index in the Union? Maybe it has, but I never heard of such a resolution. The HPI is double in value in Belgium of what it is in Sweden, half as much higher as in the Netherlands, but I have to agree it is a third better than the one in the UK and the US, and it is half the index of Italy. Why is our nice top of the pyramid, the white knights among you, not bettering the Gini and the HPI? Why have I heard nothing from that fine group, speaking out for the poor?

We are on the wrong track, Charles. Thousands of jobs have been lost in Government companies. The Government prefers to pay social security for the jobless! Our national airways company has failed and gone bust. Electricity prices have gone up to pay for increased competition. The quality of our railways has gone down consistently these last years, and accidents have multiplied. The railway company preferred to invest in prestige monuments like the newest fabulous stations, but lacked to invest in security. The former public banking institution in which Belgians placed their savings doesn't care about small customers anymore, and closes its proximity distribution shops. Our postal shops disappear. In the telecommunications industry, thousands of jobs have been lost. Do I have to on? Yes, those old Government agencies cost communal money, but soon the Government will have to cough up a lot more money to keep these businesses going. What will happen to these services at the next, impending financial meltdown? Our common good is being squandered to liberal, capitalist theories.

Let me give you an example. Look at what has happened with the Government agencies since they have been privatised. What do you think happens when a Government Service gets privatised? Suddenly, the stock holders must be served instead of the community! Oh yes, management contracts are then drawn up with the Government to guarantee the public service, but these contracts were written in a few lines by a few people, and Governments come and go! When the private companies have a conflict with those contracts, they can use their Legal Services Departments and they can hire with the money the largest offices of lawyers of Belgium. Do you know how many Masters at Law work at Travtelio? More than twenty! Who was so naïve to think that a private company, when the CEO has to make a decision from behind his table, would chose other than for the interests of the shareholders?

Look at the HPI: welfare has not ameliorated, but degraded slowly instead. Only a few have prospered, and prospered scandalously. Our young people work only to be able to pay for a miserable apartment in town and they barely meet the two ends. Is that what our new ideal society must look like? Shame, Charles! Vanity and greed reign!

The so much hailed Socialism is merely a veneer over a very capitalistic, liberal society in Belgium, Charles. Our country levies no fortune tax. Our Federal Finance Services do not seem to control our largest companies with the least attention or zeal. A high-tech company

recently failed only because a Wall Street Journal reporter of New York denounced frauds with fictitious revenue. No Belgian institution, not the Finance Ministry, not the enterprise auditors and not the banks that lent money to that company, institutions which had full insight into the accounts of the firm, none of those sounded the alarm. There is nothing in Belgium that closely resembles the strict commercial laws of the US!’

Charles de Trioteignes sighed, said nothing, and looked with large eyes at his friend. What had happened to the ever so gentle Jan Stevens for him now to release such a diatribe? ‘Oh, stop staring at me as if I were a Communist,’ Jan cried. ‘I am not a Communist and not an Anarchist. I am not an Intermondialist. I truly believe in free markets of goods, in free trade. Banks are necessary to provide leverage for entrepreneurs. We are talking about simple ethics here. I want some decency in what we do. Inequalities have soared in our country, and the organisation of all of the inequalities sits silently, snugly in the clubs of Brussels and in the meetings of the industrialists and rich aristocrats – who are to be found mostly in finance, by the way, - and of the politicians they control with lucrative honorary seats in the Boards of their companies. A code of conduct for enterprises has been published lately. I have not read once the word of ethics in that code! And that is a very strange thing, because in the reports and journals of leading US management consultant firms I read more and more concerns for ethical enterprise. In the US there is at least something like the Sarbanes-Oxley law, whereas Europe feels it needs nothing of the sort. Yet, SOX is the minimum for financial control in companies. Also, a company should be a place where people can be creative and happy, all people! It should not be a place that alienates most people, puts them constantly under stress, humiliates them and does them injustice, for the larger pleasure of a few. These few are proud, because they feel better, more worthy than normal employees. I abhor such haughtiness! We need a charter of ethics for the enterprise.’

‘I never suspected you to care so much for these issues of society, Jan. Monique hits me with similar arguments nearly each day. I agree with you. I agree! Still, many true aristocrats, true nobles, feel the same way. What made you suddenly so bitter about these subjects? Has Travtelio changed you? What is happening at that company that made you so despondent?’ ‘I need a stiff drink now, Charles. Where is your whisky?’

Charles pointed to a closet, stood up himself, opened the doors and poured Jan a large single malt. On second thoughts, he took a glass for him, too.

Then, Jan said, ‘maybe it is like you said. Maybe what is happening at Travtelio is changing me. It is changing the views of a lot of people, Charles, but of course only within the company, for the outside world knows not what is happening there. Travtelio is changing for the worse, the worse of course being for the employees. Middle management, lower management, and workers get banged, mainly the people that were in place before Godelin arrived. The Executives and Presidents hit them with the term of modern management, and I bet the other members of the top of the pyramid feel Godelin has been a dynamic leader, only a tiny bit the macho leader, the tough and energetic manager. But the term has come to mean moral harassment and injustice for the many working at Travtelio. Travtelio is increasingly led by vanity and greed. Many of our higher managers are foreigners, mercenaries, modern Condottieri, with the same mentality as the Condottieri. It gets worse by the day. The CEO can do what he wants, unchallenged. He is the only and undisputed boss, the tyrant of the place. These guys earn millions of Euros in salaries and foremost in bonuses, yet they have accountants that set up all kinds of smart constructions for them so that they pay fewer taxes than the average employee! Taxes are not for them; taxes are for the little people! Each day I see young uppy guys and dolls arrive at the company, believing they can get rich quickly, get a luxury car from the company and bonuses to have holidays in Guadalupe, Egypt

or Thailand. They are overpaid, arrogant, know nothing of the company, yet they despise the guys in operations. I wouldn't be surprised if these guys, in their will, like my friend Thomas Denis told, if these guys left their brain to science. The pressure on employees is constantly mounting. Employees are not people. They are resources, counted as in spreadsheets as "full-time equivalents" or FTEs. A company like Travtelio should be about creating jobs and products, serving society. It was like that when it was a Government Agency. Now, Travtelio seems only to exist since its privatisation for the accumulation of profits, adoring the god called EBITDA, and for the highest salaries possible of its Presidents. There is no such thing as a separate ethics of business, Charles, but the rules are in need of being written down for companies like Travtelio. There should be an uncompromising emphasis on integrity of character of the newcomers. The first motto should be the ancient oath of Hippocrates: above all, not knowingly to do harm. This simple rule gets violated often at Travtelio! These guys, of course, believe they are the salt of the earth, the corpocrats who are so much more intelligent and workaholics than the common man or woman, whereas they are intelligent purely by chance, by the chance the simple workers have not enjoyed. You should hear with what terrible cynicism they speak about the employees! Yet, they are also congenitally incapable of serious creativity or of intricate knowledge of the techniques and technology we apply. They are the personification of the Peter Principle, in a hierarchy every employee rises to his or her level of incompetence. These guys and dolls have reached that level immediately, and what is worse: they take pride in it! Therefore, they despise the ones who know. They shunt aside the civil servants. They dare to accuse the older managers of having made of Travtelio a scruffy place of tired civil servants and outdated procedures. Yet, they only bring chaos!

You mentioned rumours. I would say the rumours are all true, but the true scandalous behaviour that grips my belly is not talked about in your circles, because people at the top believe that the way the bottom of the pyramid is treated now is no less than what the bottom deserves. If you are at the bottom, is that not because you are lazy and stupid? Is it not your fault that you are lazy and stupid? Nothing much has changed in mentality since the fifteenth century, when one thought that if somebody was King or Queen, he or she was chosen to be thus by God! I came to believe that even Saint George was thinking this way, Charles, for Saint George has remained pretty silent these days!

Jan stopped talking and Charles did not reply anything.

Jan sipped his whisky, thought, then asked, 'where did the rumours about Travtelio originate?' Charles stayed silent for a time. He turned the glass of whisky in his hands. Then he said, rather coming back to the last ideas than answering to Jan, 'well, there are white knights and black knights in the top of the pyramid indeed, Jan. Do the white knights have the right to give lessons to the black knights?'

'They do indeed,' Jan nodded. 'They do, Charles. They do! Who else would do it? You, white knights, you haven't been heard of lately.'

'Anyway, the rumours came from different sources, Jan. I cannot say there was but one source. Something they have in common is that the people who do not contradict at all but rather strengthen the rumours seem to be immediate collaborators of Godelin. René Bastin may be one of them, but Bastin has been ousted out recently as Finance President of Travtelio. He is looking for another job. It seems curious to me that also the new Finance President, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre does not contradict the rumours, although he is generally regarded to be a friend and supporter of Godelin.'

'Do you know Buisseyre?' asked Jan, surprised.

‘I do. I know him very well. He is an aristocrat too, of course, and he moves in my circles, but he is not precisely a good friend of mine. In fact, we detest each other. I avoid him as much as possible.’

‘He is a black knight, then?’

Charles laughed, ‘you might call him like that. His family has always been on the rogue side. Their fortune came from all kinds of unsavoury dealings, mostly in finance. You know the traditional joke, don’t you: when you steal a million today you are a thief, but if you stole a hundred million five hundred years ago you are an aristocrat today.’

‘Travtelio is ill, Charles. It is being eaten by a worm that brings in corruption, deceit, intrigues, and as I already mentioned, greed instead of respect. There is a theory you must have heard off, devised by a university professor, stating a company in the long term will resemble the character of the man leading it. I believe that theory to be true. Godelin is paranoiac, he believes in the law of the strongest, and he only lives by stirring up things. The HR Division of Travtelio must show how well it performs, so it invents new measures regularly to put the pressure on people. The Presidents work hard too, of course, but the bonuses they receive are in no proportion to how much they contribute to the firm. If Godelin goes, however, who then will replace him? Will another black knight step in his shoes? The rumours should come from his potential successor!’

Charles thought about that, poured another drink, then said, ‘de Buisseyre! De Buisseyre stands a good chance. He is young, very ambitious, voracious, positioned with the best connections. He has studied at the best business schools. He hasn’t proven much so far a leader of companies, but there must be a first. He is already Finance President of Travtelio, chosen by Godelin. He seems to be Godelin’s Dauphin. All of that may help.’

‘And he is a knight, isn’t he,’ Jan stated. ‘He is one of you. And would it not be normal a nobleman led the company, like they lead most of the twenty best companies of Belgium?’ ‘So right!’ Charles said. ‘The de Buisseyres have been opponents of the Trioteignes for generations, Jan. They always tried to ruin us, and we always fought the off. The battle is impregnated in our genes!’

Jan Stevens then thought about how often he had seen Buisseyre together with Andrew Raga these last months. He knew about the relations of Raga to Mark Stephenson. He thought about the Data Warehouse security breach. He told Charles about what he would never be able to prove. Buisseyre might have obtained access to confidential information on Godelin and his dealings with the company finances through Raga and Stephenson. Buisseyre might have sat at the source of the rumours, but he could never be certain of that, and Charles and Jan also could prove nothing of the sort. They were talking in conjectures, yet the stories fitted.

Later still, Jan said, ‘you see, Charles, much more is happening at Travtelio than a few rumours circulating in the higher spheres of society. Godelin may lose his job in the end, but then he will soon be recuperated by the old boys for other well-paid functions. At his age, he will probably be placed in the Shareholder Boards of several top-notch companies, and live a comfortable life thereafter. Isn’t he a man of value? To the employees who lost their jobs or their dignity at Travtelio, something happened that is close to being struck by lightning, something from which they will never recover, of which they will suffer nightmares the rest of their lives, something that brings disaster to their families. A worker who loses his job or who gets demoted loses his honour, no less than that, and the honour is often the only thing of value he or she owns. Yet, such an event may happen by the hundreds and still be nothing more than a drop of water falling out of a can in the desert. It evaporates instantly, and nobody among the leaders of our companies could care less. If something happens to Godelin, it looks like Belgium entire is tossed to and fro. Do you really wonder why I couldn’t care less?’

I don't like what de Buisseyre seems to be doing, but frankly, I don't care for those court intrigues. Will Buisseyre be worse at the head of Travtelio than Godelin? I doubt he can be worse!

'Believe me, Jan, he would be worse. I heard Godelin was paternalistic. Buisseyre will be ruthless. I know what I wanted to know, Jan. Buisseyre must indeed be behind the rumours. I am truly sorry you feel so deeply about what happens. Please put a distance between Travtelio and you. I never suspected the stuff that martyrs are made of in you.'

Jan laughed, 'I am no Saint and even less a Martyr, Charles. I am shocked and outraged by the injustice of it all, Charles. I will probably run away from Travtelio soon! There is not much I can do for the people around me there, about as little, I suppose, as you can do in your circles. I do believe however we should act and try to do a few small things that are in our power. Eventually, I will resign from Travtelio.'

'You will resign to become an aristocrat,' Charles concluded. 'We never spoke of this either, but I am aware of approximately how well-to-do you are in England, my friend. You can be a captain of industry, too! And I know how you were born, remember? Honour your father and mother!'

'To the white knights then,' Jan smiled, and he let his glass sing against Charles' whisky.

A little later, Jana and Monique entered the hall to show their bags full of the nicest duck liver, snails, real farm butter, herbs, and strawberries for the evening. Jana had made herself a friend in Monique.

Just before supper, Jan and Jana went for another walk, out of the castle domain, into the village. Jan explained some of the subjects of his conversation with Charles, but not all.

'Buisseyre may be the force behind the security issues of the Data Warehouse, then,' Jana concluded too.

'Yes, he might. But we can prove nothing. Akerlund told us to let the userids active for two more weeks, then to close them down if we found nothing. I suggest we keep quiet about what we suspect, and indeed stop the userids within a few days. You must define strict procedures, with userids and passwords assigned under agreement of Akerlund. Please don't mention anything of this to the other expats, and please also don't leak any of this to your home company in Prague!'

'I won't,' Jana promised. 'Now I also begin to understand why Andrew Raga was asking me out for dinner!'

'Did he?' Jan asked, surprised. He felt a stab in the back.

'Oh, yes, he dared to,' Jana said, amused. She had a naughty look at Jan. 'Are you jealous?'

Jan wanted to reply of course not, he wasn't jealous, why would he be jealous? But he hesitated. Why did Jana speak of jealousy? You had to be involved with somebody to be jealous! This was again one of those moments to roll the dice. Jan could be impulsive, and the conversation with Charles had led him to a gloomy mood, in which he sent to hell all speculations and games and intrigues.

He replied, 'I would indeed be jealous, Jana, and very sad. I am not playing games, here. I think I am falling in love with you. I am ugly, mean, uninteresting, dull, a foolish white knight, a nobody really at Travtelio, whereas you are so strikingly beautiful! You could catch yourself a big fish in the pond at the top of the pyramid, a Raga or a Buisseyre. You can have your pick among the high and mighty! I am seriously involved with you, and tearing me away from you will hurt. I mean business. Please don't play with me!'

Jana remained stunned for a while with wide open mouth, looking straight forward, and then she looked back at Jan and took his arm, hugged close to him, and continued walking body to body, side by side.

Jana spoke only much farther. 'I don't really know whether I too am falling in love with you, Jan. I have grown very suspicious about falling in love with anyone. I must have come very close to that, however. I need honesty! I experienced little honesty in my life. It is really something else to propose so honestly and open to me, as you did! The trust to believe you entirely must still be built up a little. Give me some time, will you? Anyhow, you need have no fear for competition. I am not out to catch a husband among the men like Raga or Buisseyre. Women have a sixth sense, you know. I loathe their kind! You know how you can catch me? Make me laugh! Women like men who can make them laugh! What will you show me next?'

By that time, Jan had a thick knot in his throat and in his stomach, and making Jana laugh was difficult that day.

He showed her the village church though, a stone building that dated from the eleventh century. The door of the church was open, and he showed her also above the altar a huge painting made by Luca Giordano, bought by a forefather of the Trioteignes and given to the church. The picture had almost been forgotten as a masterpiece, and only recently been re-discovered as a true Giordano of Naples by the restorers of the canvas. Jan also drew her to a small, three feet high statue in wood of the Virgin Mary. This was a statue sculpted in the twelfth century, a Sedes Sapientiae, Mary seated and holding the little Jesus on her lap.

'Imagine: this is eight hundred years old, more than that, Jana!'

Jana looked at the statue, then at Jan, and in the solemn silence of the little church, in front of the altar, she drew Jan to her and kissed him long and tenderly on the lips. When Jan withdrew, he supposed Jana's period of doubting had already ended.

Jan and Jana walked back to the castle, arm in arm, and it was thus they stepped, or rather ran, into the dining room. Instantly, a conspiring look of recognition flashed between Charles and Monique. Jan had not brought a friend to the castle. He had brought this girl-friend!

During supper, Jan sat opposite Jana. They could not keep their eyes away from each other, to the great amusement of Monique and Charles.

'Those two are hopelessly in love,' Monique whispered to Charles when he brought the dishes in the kitchen.

Charles grabbed Monique and kissed her on the cheek, 'just like us!' he said.

They ate the duck liver before the snails. Monique had prepared the snails in a Burgundy sauce of garlic, butter and herbs, and they ate only bread with that. Charles offered a white Burgundy wine, a Puligny-Montrachet, one of his very best white wines. He only served such a wine when he was happy and utterly at ease. Then Monique brought in the strawberries, and they had coffee and cake afterwards. At the end of that, they all had a heavy stomach. After the Cognac, Jan and Jana wished goodnight.

While they left the hall, Monique whispered to Charles, 'do you think they will use bed or two beds tonight?'

'One bed for us!' Charles tried.

By then, Jan and Jana ran up the stairs and they embraced behind the corner of the corridor. The kiss this time was hard and deep, passionate and sensual, and when they withdrew they both panted.

'You asked me to do this the slow way,' Jan said. 'I don't want to lose you. You are right. Let's do it the slow way.'

They opened the door of their respective bedroom, threw kisses but went in, each alone. During the night they both tossed and turned under the covers, fighting the longing for the smoothness of each other's bodies. A scalding heat surged already between them.

The next morning, they woke up in a morose mood. When after breakfast they went again for a walk in the woods, however, Jana darted around like a girl of fifteen and Jan ran after her like a young stag. Each time he caught her, but Jana made sure she got caught, and each time they embraced and kissed. Then they walked hand in hand through open pastures, and let the grandeur of the landscape penetrate their minds.

Afterwards, they had lunch again with Monique and Charles. They invited Monique and Charles to a restaurant in Brussels a fortnight from then. A little later, Jana and Monique rode off on horses. Jana was a splendid Amazon.

Meanwhile, Jan and Charles walked from the castle to Monique's farm, where they would have tea when the women returned.

On that road, Jan said, 'Charles, I am sorry about what I told you yesterday, especially if by that I implied you had a part in the story. I know you're a white knight, and I do understand how difficult it is for you too, in the world you have to work in, to preserve your integrity. We must do what we can. I truly am sorry. I hope this does not change anything to our friendship.' 'I thought about what you said all through the night, Jan, and I agree with you in almost all you said. Yes, our times are difficult. Tensions such as these build up in our society. Ultimately the tensions must lead to a crisis of sorts, but I cannot believe that moment is near. I sure hope to protect my children, always!'

'Yes,' Jan said, 'that is what we all try to do.'

'How serious are you about this Jana? How serious is she with you?'

'I am very much in love,' Jan laughed. 'Jana is much involved, too. She is still married in Czechia. She left her husband a while ago, and she is filing for a divorce. Luckily, she has no children. The way her husband treated her, he must be a real nasty and stupid bastard. One cherishes such a beauty! Jana was not married for long. She regards her marriage now the biggest error she ever made. So, I have to grant her time.'

Jana and Monique arrived for tea. Jan and Charles had also picked up the children in the village by then, all five of them, and they had a very noisy rest of the afternoon together. Then, Jan and Jana said goodbye, returned to the castle before Charles, and they drove back to Brussels. They had supper together in a small restaurant of the town. Then, Jan dropped Jana off at her apartment, and he drove on to his own.

2

On Monday, Mark Stephenson was at work, bullying his teams around, and attending IT Operations meetings as usual. On Tuesday morning he came in for work, but at ten o'clock he was seen packing his personal possessions in a cardboard box. He left the company by noon, accompanied by two security guards, never to return. He said goodbye to nobody.

On Wednesday, Sigvard Sandström asked Michel Doriant to keep the department running in the absence of a Director of IT Operations, but Sandström also told Doriant a replacement for Stephenson from the American shareholder company would probably be sent to head Operations in the next few days. Sandström mentioned not a word on why Stephenson had left Travtelio in a hurry.

Two weeks later, a man called Brad Brown arrived. Brown was a hulk of a male, broad-shouldered and wide-chested; he had a square head planted deep on almost no neck, a head

covered with lustrous, red, curly hair. He was a tall man but not taller than Michel Dorian. Brown looked in everything like an American football player.

Thomas Denis gazed at the man, and then ran to Jan Stevens' office to confirm his alter ego and competitor had arrived. 'The man is bulkier than I,' Thomas cried. 'This one can kill!' Brown started to run around also as if he were still dressed in his football armour hidden under a too-tight, grey suit. He looked sympathetic and harmless though, when he took possession of Mark Stephenson's office. He told Michel Dorian in unequivocal terms he, Brad Brown, was now the boss and expected obedience. Brown immediately assisted at as many Operations meetings as he could. Dorian had to hear in almost each of those meetings how badly Operations had been led before Brown and Stephenson arrived.

Views on how IT Operations should be led changed once more. Again, Account Managers of computer manufacturers with whom Travtelio had never done business with before, were called in to perform studies of how the data centres worked and which new technologies and devices could be introduced. These studies were not offered to independent consultancy companies that might have been neutral in their opinions as to suppliers, but by representatives of the supplier companies themselves. The studies were not about what Travtelio might need, but about where the devices of those suppliers might best be used, irrelevant of whether Travtelio IT needed them or not.

Brown had a gentle discourse with the Travtelio employees, however. He did not bully people. He was polite, suave, reconciling, a lamb in a bull's mass. His bark was worse than his bite. He certainly did not address Michel Dorian in such nice terms. Brown accused Dorian plainly of mismanagement, though the examples he gave had all been introduced by Stephenson. Dorian had been careless, neglected discipline, had lacked insight into the use of the newer technologies the suppliers could propose, and Dorian had no idea what modern management could offer. Brown, like Stephenson, snubbed Dorian's proposals, calling them gimmicks that would never work.

After a mere few weeks, Brown asked additional budgets to install new Internet applications and to bring in new servers, in a bold progress of completely new applications that would propel Travtelio into the international scene of worldwide business. The application cost hugely and revenues had not been defined but would surely be realised. Brad Brown won the support of the shareholder companies with a high hand. He had the support from the business divisions in Andrew Raga.

'Brad brown has no idea how to cut costs,' Thomas Denis marvelled, 'but he sure knows how to spend money! That man has a grace and a natural talent for spending! I admire him wholeheartedly! Brad is a man to my heart. We are actually getting out of our closets application files that have gathered a centime of dust, and we present them to him. We blow off the dust, Marguerite types a new first page to modify the dates, and I send my managers to him with the message they just had this most wonderful new idea. I have them add Brad should keep this very confidential because they are handing over cooking secrets without my knowing. Oh, this is fun! Then, we take bets on how fast he brings the applications to the staff meetings as one of his better proposals. This guy is such a delight to us! We haven't had such good laughs in a decade.'

Linus Akerlund protested weakly, but was accused of lack of daring. IT would propel Travtelio forward!

Sandström walked around with a worried face, for he had not been able to find a decent answer to Akerlund's doubts. Akerlund had asked Sandström what power an acting CIO still had in this company. Akerlund was thinking seriously of returning to his home company. He

asked Sandström to find a suitable job for him in the Swedish partner company, or even outside that company. Sandström was to contact the HR Division in Sweden, as well as a Swedish head hunting company. Akerlund spoke also very bitterly to Rachel Kyle, but also Kyle could not or wanted not to oppose Andrew Raga and Brad Brown and the American Presidents in her home company.

Rachel Kyle was even more worried than Akerlund, because she knew what even Sigvard Sandström had not found out about Brown. Brown was not an employee of her American company. He was a consultant, a hired hand, hired in from an obscure company based on the Cayman Islands by her American company. Kyle knew the consultancy company to have been set up by the American CIO, and probably also funded by Andrew Raga. Rachel Kyle had doubts about Brown being able legally in Belgium to head an IT department at Travtelio. She also disliked the construction set up by the American managers to profit from Travtelio, for Brown's salary was the most outrageously high she had seen at Travtelio and even at her home company. Akerlund did not receive Brown's contract. He only remarked how much Brown was paid from the dent in his quarterly budget. He was told to keep Brown and to shut up. Rachel Kyle kept her thoughts to herself.

After three months in Travtelio IT, Brad Brown began to burn money as if Travtelio were as rich as the Emperor of Persia. Linus Akerlund and Sigvard Sandström, helped even by Rachel Kyle, smartly directed Brown's proposals of projects to the Travtelio Funding Committee, outside Akerlund's departmental budget. The trio of IT Directors pointed to the Funding Committee for the projects, so that Brown had to defend his endeavours with statistics and projections of earnings and returns on investment. These of course were readily provided by the consultants of the suppliers of the software and hardware Brown proposed to bring in. The money Brown received was from that moment on managed by Brown alone, without insight or control by Akerlund. The projects were installed, led, managed and executed by consultancy or supplier companies chosen by Brown.

When Brown presented the consultants who would lead and perform the projects, Jan Stevens and Michel Dorian asked to explain the experience these people had with similar projects. The consultants hesitated, evaded the answers, but when pressed by Jan and Michel, explained what their jobs had been in the past, and although, yes, their company had done similar projects, they in person had not been involved in those projects. Jan Stevens asked a break for coffee after that start, drew Brad Brown and Michel Dorian into an open office in front of the meeting room, and he accused in polite words Brown of having brought in novices at very high cost, consultants who had no experience at all of what they would be doing at Travtelio. While Dorian was grinning but saying little, Brown assured the consultancy company he had hired was the best in the world for such projects. Stevens had to admit Brown had a point, but it was clear too this company had sent newcomers without any experience to Travtelio, deceiving Brown. He said Brown had not been aware of what this company was doing to him. Brown shouted for Stevens and Dorian to stay out of this controversy. He, Brad Brown, was in command, and the project would proceed as planned. Issues would be handled in mutual confidence.

Stevens and Dorian henceforth avoided the meetings of Brown's projects. Sigvard Sandström remarked very rapidly that Stevens and Dorian did not bother with what Brown was doing, though Akerlund had asked for the contrary. When challenged by Sandström, Stevens told bluntly he refused to have anything to do with Brown's projects, as Brown had insulted him and Dorian and told them to stay out of the progress meetings. They would not jeopardise the projects, but they made it very clear to Sandström they wanted not to be involved in ventures

on which they could exercise no influence whatsoever, and which had all the ingredients of failure. Dorian proved the projects of Brown to be megalomaniac. They would never be able to produce decent revenue, despite Brown's convictions of the contrary. Sandström nodded and was more worried and unhappy than before.

Sandström ran to Akerlund to tell what he had learned, but he stopped in his track with his hand on the panels around Akerlund's office, and turned on his heels. Akerlund would only be more depressed by what Sandström had heard. Instead, Sandström strolled along, thinking, and went to Sara Jansen's office. He asked her to organise a teambuilding session with the managers of IT Operations, and of course with Brad Brown. That excluded Jan Stevens, but Michel Dorian would be present. Sandström hoped Brown's manners could be changed in a togetherness session. He hoped Brad Brown would involve the IT managers more in his projects and would more work together with the Operations teams. The teambuilding session was to show to Brad Brown what fine fellows and intelligent managers the Travtelio employees were, how ingenious and practical they were, how well a Director like Brown could use them, and how important also daily IT Operations was. The Operations teams were to be reconciled with Brown; some form of trust was to be arrived at between Brad and the teams.

Brad Brown wanted to impress his managers from the first instant. He insisted the sessions of two days to be held at the clubhouse of his golf course, which included also a restaurant and a small hotel. The golf club was a posh organisation, of which almost all the Presidents of Travtelio were members. The Presidents golfed there regularly, and also Brad Brown had negotiated a free membership subscription with his contract. Brown wanted of course to show in which high circles he moved, how powerful he truly was, playing and talking with the Presidents. He was a scratch golfer. The golf course lay not far from Brussels. As a result, only a couple of IT Managers actually volunteered to stay over for the night at the club hotel. The others told Sara Jansen they preferred to drive home for the night. Sandström would not come to the teambuilding. Sara Jansen and her assistants, two lively young ladies of Travtelio HR, would animate the discussions and try to bring the managers closer to Brad Brown and to an understanding of the issues.

The day after the teambuilding, first thing in the morning, Michel Dorian and Sara Jansen walked together into Jan Steven's open office. They also called in Thomas Denis. Jan did not have to ask how things had happened. The teambuilding had been a total failure, Sara Jansen cried, hands in the air.

On the first day, all the managers, also Dorian, had been present at nine o'clock in the morning. A few had had to drive for two hours to arrive that early at the hotel. Brad Brown arrived after eleven o'clock, pretending he had taken a wrong turn in the road and lost his way. A Manager had then whispered Brown didn't even know how to use his GPS system.

By noon, Brown had shown proudly to the marvelling Managers the list of golf scores played by the Travtelio Presidents, Brad's name and Andrew Raga's name featuring in the first ten. Brad was not a bad golfer at all. Was he also a good IT Operations Director? Surely one who golfed so well in such a distinguished company of golfers was also an excellent manager! The IT Managers wondered how Brown could make an error of directions in driving to here when he obviously was such a good client of the clubhouse. The atmosphere iced.

In the ensuing discussions, Michel Dorian remained as silent as a tomb, answering in syllables and only when somebody asked him something, directly addressing him and only him, which was seldom the case. The others remarked how taciturn Dorian remained. They imitated him from sympathy.

Sara Jansen said, half laughing, half weeping over her catastrophe, Dorian and the IT managers conspired to let Brad Brown not come an inch closer to any understanding with them. Brad boasted of his past feats; the Managers smiled politely and made ever more openly sneering remarks on that. They refused to laugh or even to smile with Brad's jokes. They ignored Sara Jansen's efforts of softening them towards Brad. To them, Brad was an outsider, a foreigner, the boss of course, but they refused to become friends, and to open their minds towards the man. Everybody would do exactly as the boss ordered; however stupid that might be. At each physical exercise in which dexterity and teamwork was necessary, everybody waited for Brad to tell how the exercise could be solved, and then all did as Brad told, even when they all saw, grinning, the exercise would be a disaster the Brown way. Then, they let Brad feel the hard way why the exercise had failed.

'It was icy cold. I stood with an army of stubborn, deaf zombies. They just did what Brown proposed, never suggested anything else for the better. I was so ashamed! We played a game of chess, a live game of chess, in which the pieces were played by the employees. One group took Brown as King and promptly the other group pointed to Dorian for King. The chess game was a battle to the death! Brown was floored in checkmate!' Sara said to Jan and Thomas.

Around four o'clock in the afternoon, Brad announced he would now play some golf and the IT managers strolled on the court behind and aside Brad Brown, complimenting his better strokes and grinning at every bad stroke. There was no teambuilding session anymore. Later, after supper, Sara proposed beers for all in the clubhouse. She called the late-evening sessions off, for Brown declared he was tired. The IT Managers drove home early; the ones that stayed over drove to the nearest village and drank a beer in the local café, not in the bar of the clubhouse.

'This has been the first time ever I sat drinking whisky alone in the bar after a teambuilding, drinking with my two handsome assistants. Nobody joined us, not even Michel Dorian!' Sara complained.

Sara Jansen had reserved a lot more rooms for the night than got occupied. She had to pay for the reserved rooms.

The next morning, all the managers were present, once more strictly at nine o'clock. Brad, who had slept in the hotel, came in at ten. This second day went not better than the first. Sara stopped the teambuilding at three in the afternoon, the sessions a total failure as to the aims defined.

Jan Stevens, Thomas Denis and Michel Dorian plied in two from laughing, when Sara explained and mimicked how the IT managers sat around Brad Brown, rolling their eyes and refusing to speak.

Jan could have predicted this kind of behaviour of people now entirely dedicated to Michel Dorian, hating another Director. Michel Dorian had of course not helped in the least bit. When Sara Jansen had asked Michel to help, he had given a polite "I am sorry for you, Sara, but no, thank you", and continued to remain dumb and deaf as before.

Sara was furious, but she told she was also glad and did not hold a grudge against Michel Dorian, and in the end she laughed as well.

'It was a teambuilding of the un-dead, of zombies,' she repeated. 'I have never in my life experienced something like this! No jokes, no laughter, all of them working at the exercises with flat faces, saying the least possible, only answering when they were directly addressed. They all looked at Michel Dorian when they were solicited for suggestions or solutions, and

Michel then acted as if he was profoundly thinking about the issue, but never providing a solution. It was awful, just awful!

‘What would you have wanted me to do?’ Dorian explained. ‘I was not going to help that bastard getting away with usurping my place! I asked him to lead daily operations at least, but he refused. So, let him find the solutions, then! I do nothing else but turn my fingers in my office, walk around to ask how Peter and Paul feel today and how their kids are, but nothing more. I attend meetings and give my opinion. That is all! Jan wanted me to make friends with that guy, but the first thing Brown did was telling over and over in public how bad I had done the preceding years. Luckily, most of the bad things he pointed out had actually been proposed by the IT Operations managers themselves, so he has them all on his back now.’

A month later, the failure of the new projects to bring in contribution to Travtelio became more clearly apparent. Brown might have become a danger for Andrew Raga, so Raga withdrew Brown from IT and offered him a job in the business divisions. Still a month later, Brad Brown disappeared as rapidly from Travtelio as he had come. He had been shipped back to the US.

Michel Dorian’s hopes soared, for surely after two missed chances he would be called to duty again. Had it not been proven sufficiently that alternatives did not work out? But from the US arrived yet another Director, a manager of Indian descent, a man called Sanjiv Gupta. Gupta was equally a consultant from the same company as Brad Brown, and again only Rachel Kyle knew where he came from. Gupta was an independent consultant, hired in by the mysterious consultancy firm of the Cayman Islands, used by the American company that owned stakes in Travtelio.

Gupta was far smarter than his two predecessors. He wanted a month of observation before accepting the job. He talked openly with the managers of IT Operations, looked at the budget, and then talked candidly with Michel Dorian, with Jan Stevens, and with many other people in the IT Division. In those weeks he did not try once to manage the department. He sniffed in the atmosphere at Travtelio IT, and what his nostrils smelled reeked badly of rot and aggression. After twenty working days, he drew his conclusion, said thank you to Linus Akerlund and Rachel Kyle, and returned to the US.

Akerlund, Kyle and Sandström convened then to discuss the appointment of yet another Director for IT Operations. Andrew Raga did not intervene anymore. Akerlund called Gerald Godelin and asked whether the CEO still objected to re-appointing Michel Dorian. He got a curse for answer, accompanying a definite and final no. While the discussion went on, Dorian sat two offices farther down the corridor, waiting in Sara Jansen’s office, waiting for Sandström’s announcement. Sandström meanwhile had to propose the only Belgian manager who was more or less capable to step into Dorian’s shoes, an erstwhile assistant of Dorian, Karl Geerts. Geerts had been spotted as a young potential by the HR Division. He had followed a crash course in management and had done reasonably well. Akerlund was very disappointed with this, last choice. Geerts was intelligent and he had limited experience with IT Operations, but he was only thirty-two, very young for the function. Akerlund would have preferred Jan Stevens, but Stevens was still very much necessary to handle the expats, and would surely refuse to take the place of his friend. Jan Stevens was still a civil servant, which was an obstacle for Godelin, whereas Geerts had been recruited as a contractual manager. Geerts did not have the charisma of a leader, said Sandström. Geerts was a good statistics manager, a fine administration man. Geerts would manage, but not lead. The man had no experience with purchasing and also not with handling suppliers. Sandström had no idea of

how Karl Geerts would fare and act when under stress. Sandström also feared the guy had rather extreme convictions for management. Geerts ordered people around in black and white; he showed little appreciation for the shades of grey. There was no other alternative, however.

Sigvard Sandström tried with hanging head to avoid Sara Jansen's office when he walked by, but she had been standing up in her office so that she could look over the panels around her desk. She spotted Sandström and blocked his path. Sandström gave her the name. He said he was sorry. He dared not announce the news himself to Dorian. Sara went back to her office, to Dorian who was now also standing there and looking at the two HR Directors, already certain of his fate. He saw his demise in Sandström's eyes.

When Sara Jansen mentioned the name of Karl Geerts, Dorian broke down. He slumped in a seat. His face reddened, he had suddenly very cold, and said so to Sara. Sara feared Dorian was going to have a heart attack in her office. She told Dorian to stay seated, and went to fetch some water. When she entered her office, Dorian sat still in the same chair. He felt better already.

Dorian said, 'Sara, this is not possible! Karl Geerts has been at Travtelio only for three years. He is so young! He was my assistant for a year. He is still very edgy, very impulsive, very believing in constant change, but in change for no reason, just for the merit of change. Most of the other managers are older than him. Geerts will never be able to assert himself in that role! He might be ready for such a job in another three years, not now! He also does not know anything about the technology of computers and networks. He is an applications man, a software man. He knows nothing of the processes in IT Operations.'

'I know, I know, Michel,' Sara replied. 'I know all that! Godelin still does not want you as Head of Operations. I'm afraid that path is definitely closed for you. Maybe we can secure a fine job for you in the IT Applications department, maybe somewhere in the business divisions, maybe in Global Services. Travtelio has many openings for Directors, Michel. Do you want me to look for such a job? I am sure Sandström will help, too. Would you like that? As things stand now, your salary will not change. Another job looks like the best solution for you.'

'Godelin does not want me as a Director, Sara, nowhere in Travtelio. I'm finished, here. I liked Travtelio. I have given my life to Travtelio. Travtelio throws me out!'

Dorian remained seated still, and then he continued, 'anyway, I will not be an assistant to Karl Geerts. I am too old to leave Travtelio on my own initiative and start a new career. If I resign I will not even have unemployment payment, because I am still a civil servant. But I have enough, my belly full, of working here. For the time being, I will not come out of my office and attend meetings of IT Operations, unless I am forced to. Tell that to Sandström. Have these people really no respect left for people like me?'

He paused, supported his head in his hands, did not look at Sara, and then asked, 'do you know how I wake up each morning? I'll tell you. I have this nightmare, always the same nightmare, day after day. I run to a meeting, and when I enter the room, a vast room, I see almost all of my colleagues sitting around a long, oval table, discussing something. One man stands. I thought I was early, but obviously I received the wrong appointment, or I have made a mistake in the time of the meeting, for the meeting is already being held. I walk into the room, panting, and I look for a place around the table, but all the chairs are occupied. I step to the left and I step to the right, and everybody begins to laugh at me, for there is no chair empty around the table, and though many younger men and women are sitting there, nobody offers me a seat. I have a feeling of panic then, of being excluded, of being a supernumerary, of being a non-entity nobody needs nor wants to be in this meeting. And then I wake up, with that feeling of not belonging anymore among the people of the company I worked in, among

the people who once respected me. I wake up, Sara, with this sour feeling of being rejected, and with that feeling in my mind, I have to start my day!’

Sara then proposed Michel Doriant to use a head hunter to find him a fitting job. Travtelio had a contract with such a company. She told Doriant many solutions were still possible for him. He had unique capabilities, skills of management and the charisma of a leader. She would find a fine job for him. She would work with Sandström, with the head hunters, and come up with a decent solution, so that Doriant could make another start. She proposed to help him personally in that, with advice and coaching.

Michel Doriant said, hating the pity on Jansen’s face, ‘all right, Sara, thank you. You can do all you want.’

Doriant stood up from his chair. He walked unsteadily but managed to get out of Sara Jansen’s office. Sara had to hold him at the shoulder for his first steps. Doriant waved her off, irritated, saying, ‘I’m fine, Sara, thank you. Sorry. You mean well, I know.’

He left, slowly, walked down the corridor, past Akerlund’s office, and turned at the corner.

3

Jana Kovar finished a meeting that had thread along laboriously without really arriving at concrete actions. She sat, mired in the indecisiveness over insufficiently thought out issues. She had stopped the discussion at one o’clock and had sent everybody to their offices with the message to come to her within two days with real proposals.

‘Don’t come back to me with questions and conjectures,’ she had paraphrased her former mentor and teacher in management at her Czech company. ‘Give me firm proposals with figures and facts in which I can answer by yes or no!’

The men and two women had trudged sullenly out of the meeting room, and Jana followed them through the corridor. She passed by the Clouds restaurant and watched absent-mindedly through the large glass windows of the restaurant of the Directors and Account Managers. She was not really looking, but her attention was caught anyhow by a man and a woman sitting across each other at a corner table. Jana recognised Jan Stevens and Emma Wauters, Gerald Godelin’s secretary. Emma was dressed up, as if she had an important rendezvous.

Jana Kovar’s first reaction was to blush and divert her eyes immediately, as if she had seen something not at all intended for her to watch, as if she had been eavesdropping on an intimate secret. Her curiosity was piqued, however, and she looked discreetly back, walking more slowly past the window panes. Jan Stevens sat sideways, with his back somewhat to the windows, but Emma Wauters had a view of the dining-room and on the windows. She had noticed Jana passing by. Emma placed her hand on Jan Stevens’ arm and let it linger there. Emma leaned forward, exposing her deep and ample décolleté, and glanced up and down on Jan with overtly flirting eyes. Emma looked now at Jan, then at Jana. Jana reddened more, strolled on rapidly, and saw only Jan withdrawing his hand from under Emma’s to take his napkin and wipe at his mouth. Jana chuckled, and then she disappeared behind the wall.

Jana heard somebody clearing his throat right behind her. She looked over her shoulder, therefore having one more glance at the scene of Jan Stevens and the flirting Emma Wauters, to discover the bulky figure of Thomas Denis coming up to her.

‘Hi, Miss Kovar,’ Thomas Denis began, ‘nice to see you! I should have been in the Clouds, here, with Jan Stevens, but I was late. Jan is trying to sell to Gerald Godelin a new encrypted mailing system for the Presidents, a form of mailing with higher security provisions. I should have been at the lunch meeting with Jan and Emma, Godelin’s secretary, trying with Jan to

sell the system to the secretary. You know how it is: when you want to have a man in your pocket, try his secretary first and you have won three-fourths of the battle. Jan will sell the system, install it and have Godelin's passwords, too!

Denis stopped at the windows, looking and Jan and Emma inside, and Jana came a little back too.

'Yes, he looks quite a seducer, our Jan,' Denis continued. 'I don't know what he has that I haven't. The girls seem to like him. I have never seen somebody who has that much success with the ladies and yet is as serious as that one! He never flirts, and he is giving Emma a hard time, don't you think?' he grinned, watching more Jana than the interior of the Clouds.

'Yes,' was all Jana managed to say, and she smiled a thin line of her lips.

Thomas Denis had enough presence of mind to know quite well what was going on in Jana. He wondered how he could explain the situation. He was not very good at playing the matchmakers, and also not at smoothening things out with words. He might be worsening matters by talking to Jana. He would have to tell Jan how Jana had spotted the lunch of Jan and Emma.

He said, 'I wanted to talk to you about the Data Warehouse applications, the two of us only. Could we do that tomorrow before noon? Can I schedule an hour in my office?'

'Sure,' Jana replied, 'please do.'

She kept watching beyond Thomas Denis at the scene, where Emma made ever bigger, tempting cow's eyes with fluttering brows and elegant hand gestures at Jan.

Thomas Denis smiled, 'Jan is so damn dependable and loyal he will never fool around with more than one woman at the time. That boy loses a lot of the action. He seems infatuated these last times, but not at all with that Emma. Emma is just a convenient nuisance for our Jan. He has to get to the CEO to have his idea accepted of a new mailing system, the application of which we will provide, and to get to the passwords of Godelin.'

Thomas Denis chortled and went along down the corridor, leaving Jana Kovar standing. Jana abruptly turned away also from the windows, to avoid any longer the hideous scene with Jan and Emma.

Jana was angry. She was angry with Jan. She was angry with Emma Wauters. She was angry with herself, for she realised she was jealous. She refused to be jealous. She began to wonder why Jan needed the passwords of Godelin's mailing system. What if Jan was equally hidden behind the untraceable user identifiers that had unlimited access to the Data Warehouse? Was Jan connected in some way to the people who had used the illicit accesses? What was Jan up to? Doubts racked Jana's mind.

4

Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre and Andrew Raga arrived at the same moment in the parking lot of the Skyscraper. They parked their cars the one next to the other, a black Mercedes and a black BMW, and went together to the elevator. Buisseyre occupied now René Bastin's former office on the Executive floor, the fortieth floor, and Andrew Raga had received on Buisseyre's orders a large office on the Macchiavelli floor, the thirty-eighth. Buisseyre had been Finance President since a few months; Raga remained in the same function as before. 'Come with me to my office,' Buisseyre said, 'we have to talk.'

Buisseyre had been out of Travtelio for the last two weeks, having attended a conference in Paris first and then remained for another week at Travtelio's daughter company in Luxemburg. Before that, Andrew Raga had been a week in the US at his parent company, so the two men hadn't met for over a month.

While Buisseyre took off the jacket of his suit, opened his briefcase, took out a few folders and placed them meticulously on his desk, Raga sat lazily in a chair opposite Buisseyre.

Buisseyre flipped through his files.

‘How was your trip?’ Raga asked.

‘Fine, fine,’ Buisseyre answered absent-mindedly. ‘In fact, I wanted to know how matters had been here, and what you have learned in the US.’

‘I have little news from here, in Brussels. Things go smoothly. I am getting bored with what I do here. Progress for me has been very slow. I would like matters at Travtelio to move more rapidly. My job as Member of the Board in the other company is very satisfying, but that company may get into trouble soon.

As to the US, things definitely get stirred up, there. I had a talk with several finance people, and also with business managers. Two new Presidents have been appointed lately, among them also a new Finance President, and these seem to have discovered their parent holding may lack funds in the future six months or so. Business has not been as good in the US as EBITDA indicators and profits may indicate. Sales have slumped the last six months too; ventures have not brought the massive returns on capital expected. The returns on Travtelio are fine, however. The rumours I heard before have been confirmed. My home company desires to withdraw its investments from Travtelio. The question that is debated upon is only when and how. One way would be to sell the shares, another way to bring Travtelio to the stock market and then offer its shares at a fine premium to financial investment institutions. The latter solution is preferred, because that would be the more elegant way, would please Wall Street, would be a more discreet means of getting out of Travtelio, make the least waves in the industry, and promise higher returns still. My guess is that within three months, my company will propose to Gerald Godelin to offer Travtelio to the stock market. They have solid arguments, and the time is ripe for such a change.’

‘It is. I read a few articles on the state of the world economy and spoke with a few guys in Paris. I heard disquieting news on the US economy. Debt in the US, particularly in the real estate sector, is staggering. One little crash somewhere can bring the whole finance structure of Wall Street toppling, the entire system of junk bonds debt and of their derivatives failing, and that would draw bank loans with it, heightening interests to be paid on loans, and so on. I read of that possibility before. The US has been living on a bubble for many years now. It is strange the system hasn’t crashed yet, leading even financial experts to believe it will never crash, leading to more spending and more borrowing, a spiral of debt. The US Federal Reserve Chairman warned a couple of times against the growth of debt, but he doesn’t look too certain the US is on the verge of a crash. After all, the entire financial system is based on confidence and make-believe. A crash is already several years overdue and may well never come. Investors seem to be worried, but nobody takes action. Your company may well be the first bound to lower its debt. The crash will be like an earthquake, I was told, and the longer a quake is overdue, the more devastating it usually is. For our American partner it may now be the right time to cash in without disturbing the market. As for Travtelio going to the market, I would leave out Wall Street. There is enough money readily available in Belgium and in Europe. Many European institutional investors have been taking up shares only recently. By using European stocks only, we would avoid the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and all its associated stringent financial controls. The operation of bringing Travtelio to the stock market should be started rapidly, however. If Travtelio is in the middle of that operation when the stock market crashes, then your US company risks losing a lot of its investment.’

‘There is that,’ Raga agreed, ‘but not only that. Godelin will never want the shares to go to financial institutions. He always preferred industrial partners, which can add substantial contributions to his company beyond funds. He is opposed to leading Travtelio to the stock market, because that will diminish his influence on the Shareholders Board. The Belgian Government would almost certainly sell more of its shares, opening positions in the Board, and Godelin holds the current Members of the Board in his right hand. He might have less influence on professionals from the finance industry in his new Board. Godelin will oppose the movement. Moreover, with Godelin in place, what will there be in it for us? Nothing! We have an issue: the US partner wants to go to the market very soon, which is too early for us, and with Godelin still in place there will be nada in the operation for us and a golden opportunity will be lost.’

‘That means only I will have to be quicker then,’ Buisseyre concluded. ‘Godelin has to be sacrificed rapidly now, within the next two or three weeks. I will put the pressure on, but it will not be easy. I would have liked more time. Then, I must be appointed as the new CEO, and bring Travtelio to the stock market successfully and to the satisfaction of our American partner. I will appoint you Finance President, of course. That may ease and please our US partner, and you can work discreetly with them to have a fine starting quote for Travtelio. Our contracts must stipulate a fair amount of shares and options on shares. We will have to cash in on our stock later, but still rapidly enough to avoid a stock market crash. I can lean on your connexions with the US partner to push through your appointment as Finance President, and get the old boys of the Brussels establishment to oust out Godelin. You have no experience, however, with bringing a company to the stock market!’

‘That should not really be a problem,’ Raga was quick to say. ‘I have fine relations with guys high up in my home company. I know the right people in Wall Street. I will propose to avoid American investors because otherwise, indeed, we would have to comply with the SOX regulations, and that is a major overhaul of our financial controls. I too suggest we stay out of Wall Street, but the right American consultancy firms can accompany us to the stock market. I have set up contacts already with a consultancy firm that specialises in bringing enterprises such as Travtelio to the market. They are already discreetly studying the situation, and already writing reports on what we should do and how to do it. I can handle the operation! For instance, I thought of how you should control the Board of Shareholders. We must make sure the shares are very much diluted, so that you can seek and appoint the Members of the Board, the Captains of Industry and the like. When they are chosen and proposed by you, they will know they owe their well paid appointments to you. That way, these men and women will be devoted to you, not be sent and named by the largest investors.’

Buisseyre relaxed. He stretched his legs. ‘Good! I must reactivate the Brussels clubs, then. Godelin will need a carrot and a stick. Both are in place. Practically all the rumours have been launched. I arranged for them to be circulated while I was out of the country, even though I had to confirm them a bit, of course. The old boys must have been checking on the rumours and no doubt have discovered them to be true. I must yet stir things up a little bit more, and of course propose a solution to avoid a scandal. That will be the carrot for Godelin. Not everything is so easy, however! I have a few guys on my back, guys who suspect me of being at the source of the rumour. They are powerful people too, who can become quite a nuisance and drag me down. I must never, never, be drawn out for being at the source of the information that was leaked out.’

‘We had some fears our accesses to the Travtelio archives might be discovered. The issue was with the audit of the Data Warehouse. I heard nothing about that these last weeks. To learn

more, definite things, I must have a talk with the Project Leader of that audit, a Czech expat. It is a she, a real stunner that one, called Jana Kovar.'

'If she is a real stunner we must surely have a talk with her,' Buisseyre grinned.

'She is also a very cool dame, a loner. She is married, but we did not see her husband yet. She hasn't reacted at all to my advances.'

'If we can't seduce her, we may bribe her,' Buisseyre laughed. 'Does she know anything about finances?'

'I don't think so. I should have a look at her CV. Why do you ask?'

'I need an assistant, a well paid assistant. Any manager would do, actually, not necessarily somebody who had intricate knowledge of finance. Would a promotion please her? We could propose a highly paid job to her if it is necessary to draw her away from that audit and bring her in our team.'

'It may not be necessary to do just that,' Raga protested. 'She most probably knows nothing of our accesses, and even if she has doubts about anonymous user identifiers, she may have no idea who used the identifiers. Had she known something definite on that subject, I would have heard of it already. Do not wake sleeping dogs. Do not draw attention to us by interrogating her on that subject of accesses!'

'I will do nothing of the sort. This is your game, Raga!'

'All right. I am seeing each and every expat anyhow to learn about the shareholders' projects. It is my view our companies can cut down on projects to lower costs for Travtelio, but the consultancy fees Travtelio pays come in handy in our parent companies. I will invite her to have a chat with me.'

'Not just with you. You have piqued my interest, dear friend. Invite her to a talk with both of us.'

Andrew Raga sent Jana Kovar an electronic mail, inviting her for a talk with himself and the Finance President the following day, on the subject of her project.

5

Jana also had issues on her mind beyond having seen Jan Stevens together with Emma Wauters in a flirting conversation. Her Data Warehouse audit project was finished a week ago. She still had work for a few weeks more to write reports and give her own appreciation and recommendations on the work, but she wondered what would happen afterwards. She had signed a contract for two years at Travtelio. The contract mentioned she would be involved in a project. The project had ended. Could she work on another project or would she have to return to Prague now? She was also not certain of what she wanted. In Prague, she would run into her husband, and she still wanted to avoid that. Her relationship with Jan Stevens was disturbing. It was a very slow-burning involvement. Jan was polite, courteous, tender, sweet, loving, very agreeable, very much the gentleman, and his sudden looks and nice words grinded her determination to jelly. They had been out for supper together at least once every week since their evening walk at Namur. She had driven with him to the Belgian coast, To Bruges, to the Ardennes, and even to Amsterdam and a few other charming Dutch places, to Leiden and Haarlem, to the tulips of Noordwijk, and they had much fun together. She had hardly travelled alone these last weeks. Yes, they kissed and hugged, and each week they clung more to each other when they strolled in the cities or in the beech forest of Brussels. Sometimes she felt Jan's hands moving over her body, her hips, her legs, her back, but he rarely brushed over her breast and avoided her buttocks. He never pressed her too hard to him. This kind of loving was very different from what she had experienced with Radek Navratil. Radek had wanted sex with her almost immediately, and she had yielded. Later, she had been disgusted by Radek's grunting and violence. Why was Jan Stevens so different? Was Jan a

silent lover, an introvert type, a hesitator, or was he holding back not to hurt her and arouse painful memories, or did he not really love her? He had never talked of love, too! Then, she had seen him with that loathsome Wauters woman.

Jana stewed in hope and despair. She had to admit this time, she desired for more with Jan. Was Jan one of those guys who let women make the first step? Jana yearned for true love, a love that was sweet but also sensual, gripping, aching, overwhelming. Jan seemed not to aspire to that kind of love. How could she talk to him about that? Why did he flirt with Emma? Was he waiting for her, Jana, for when she was ready and entirely done with Radek, or was he already stepping sideways? Radek was definitely out of her life! She had filed for the divorce in Czechia.

Jana read the e-mail sent by Andrew Raga with apprehension. Raga had been overtly seeking her company. She could tell from the small signs in Raga's behaviour that he wanted to flirt and arouse her interest. In Jan's eyes she saw admiration but no lust; Raga's body language denounced the wish to possess, and that was what she now detested most. She refused to give in to his baiting. She pretended not to notice. She could not refuse a meeting of a Director much higher in grade than she, however, and the presence of the Finance President would surely limit the conversation to a professional report of what her project had realised. Jana had never been at the Cosmos restaurant. Jan, though a Director, had not yet been invited to that place. She was flattered and somewhat excited. This was an occasion to show off, to leave a good impression of her and one more chance to stay longer in Belgium. She could pay back Jan Stevens some of his own money!

Jana was not late for the lunch, but she was held up at the doors to the thirty-ninth floor of the Skyscraper, right after the elevators. Her badge gave her no entry to that floor, so she was stuck until she parlophoned to a secretary she had been asked to meet Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre and Andrew Raga at the Cosmos. The secretary had to check, and only then let Jana onto the privileged floor. The secretary opened the door for her, and steered her to the restaurant where the two men waited at a table of four.

They stood when Jana came up to them. She did not know Buisseyre, had seen him before without knowing who he was, and she had not taken any particular notice of him then. She remarked the furtive surprise on the man's face. Jana struck a fine figure indeed, wearing a two-piece Chanel-like almost masculine black jacket and trousers, which contrasted totally with her very blonde hair and long pale face, and in which she seemed even taller than she already was. Under the jacket she wore a delicate, beige, silk shirt, very open at the neck, leading subtly to her generous forms of chest and very slim waist. She had always been a flashy dresser. When she had studied herself in this outfit in front of the mirror in the corridor of her apartment, she had cursed for looking like a graduate schoolgirl, or like a prim Parisian, dressed up female account manager. Still, she had kept on this formal attire instead of the loose, eastern European dresses she was used to wear at Travtelio.

'Beware, Jana,' she thought. 'You are here in this posh restaurant because you are a tall blonde who is supposed to be dumb and easy, and not because you are an important manager. These guys will look at you as if you were a juicy T-bone steak lying on their plates. Don't let them cut into you! Don't let them draw blood!'

Had she dressed up for these men or for Jan Stevens? In the morning she had been to Jan's office anyway. She had nothing in particular to do there, except wanting to show off. She laughed at herself, but she had savoured the satisfaction of having also seen the surprise and almost feral appreciation in his eyes when she swung around his corner of panels. He had complimented her immediately on her dress, and then asked why she was so pretty today. She

had reddened a little, confessed having been invited to lunch with Buisseyre and Raga. Jan had hesitated some time, then told her to sit, and he had explained her his suspicions about the Data Warehouse leaks and the strange user identifiers. He told her again what Trioteignes knew, and how he thought the two she was to meet might be involved. Jana was troubled by what she heard. She felt a lot relieved, for Jan might after all not be involved with seeking out userids and passwords of the Presidents. She had not actually seen Jan flirt with Emma, only Emma flirt with Jan. She also understood the scope and the importance of the meeting with Buisseyre and Raga. She said to Jan she would take care. She had hurried back to her desk, called in the main administrator of the Data Warehouse, interrogated him and checked out something that had remained on her mind but she had not pursued so far. She had done with that check before she came to lunch.

Jana was less impressed by the restaurant that she had imagined. The space was huge of course, very much in contrast with the cramped places Travtelio's employees now occupied. The restaurant had only a few tables, one table spread a long way from the other, and the tables separated by low panels, so that discretion was guaranteed. The waiters and waitresses scurried around in spotless black tuxedos for the men and in smart, black two-piece suits for the women. The light was a harsh white, the walls painted in dark grey all, decorated only with a few contemporary art pictures. The paintings were reproductions, though good ones, for she saw the inevitable Mondrian, the unavoidable Rothko, a timeless Dufy, a dubious O'Keeffe, a two-coloured light tubes assembly that had to be of Dan Flavin, and a strange sleeping girl of Balthus. The tabletops were hidden under very flat, ironed white linen, and on these the dishes of coloured blue and gilded porcelain, and the cutlery Christofle silverware made a fresh, festive impression. A bowl with low, natural flowers neatly arranged stood on each table, and the logo of Travtelio on that bowl was all that reminded of the company. The atmosphere was austere and aseptic, as fitted a dignified first-class business restaurant. The only thing the place lacked was life and creativity, Jana thought. She also noticed then there were only tables along the huge windows, from which the view over Brussels was breathtaking. The leaders of the company not just dominated over Travtelio, but over Brussels. Buisseyre and Raga sat with their backs to the windows, so that she had the widest, deepest, most impressive look beyond the men always.

Buisseyre and Raga welcomed her effusely. They shook hands with her, invited her to sit, and sat only in their padded chairs when she was well installed. The welcome was polite, a little too formal to Jana's taste. A waitress immediately brought her a glass of Champagne, as well as the huge card of the menu. Jana could chose from three courses for hors d'oeuvre, main dish and desert. The choice of wine was left to the sommelier of the Cosmos. Jana ordered a light meal. The men followed her.

The conversation started slowly, haltingly, but then flew rapidly on in an easy-going way. The men remained courteous and helpful. At first, Buisseyre and Raga talked about innocent subjects, about the weather, the economy, and they also discussed for a few moments Belgian politics, always an easy subject. This lasted all through the first dish, a slice of delicious duck liver with a light salad.

When the main dish, the Saint James's scallops boiled slightly in a white wine sauce and served with light ravioli of shrimps was finished, the men asked her for a brief report of her project. Jana then explained the goals, the phases of the project, and she named the people that had participated, the roles of Travtelio's employees in the project and the role of the consultants. She gave the men a few smart statistics, the savings, the costs of the study, the most important qualitative findings. She saw them listening intently, Andrew Raga remained attentive, formulating a question here and there, showing his interest. Buisseyre was modestly

bored though that could be a calculated, deliberate attitude. Buisseyre rarely asked her to elaborate on a detail. Raga did the questioning. When Buisseyre finally asked her whether she had experienced any issues with which they might provide help, she slung her eyes suddenly from Raga to his, on which he blinked, and then she embarked on the most controversial finds of the project, on the proposal to change the hardware and software entirely, a somewhat risky endeavour promising however huge savings. When she talked of the budget involved in such a move, she caught more interest, also from Buisseyre. Buisseyre obviously had no idea how much money was sunk in the Data Warehouse each year; the amounts now impressed him.

The two men before her drank wine. They had drunk three glasses each, she counted. Jana drank only her Champagne and water afterwards. The conversation continued on the issues she had encountered. One of the problems she mentioned off-handedly were the rogue accesses from anonymous user identifiers.

‘What happened with that?’ Raga asked, without looking at her, patting his mouth with a white linen napkin.

Jana remarked from a corner of her eyes how Buisseyre was suddenly staring at her, waiting in expectation.

‘We checked on the user identifiers and studied the logs to reconstruct the physical addresses of the personal computers from which the accesses had been taken,’ Jana said. She saw Buisseyre throw a quick glance at Raga, and Raga’s worried response.

‘What did you discover?’ Raga insisted.

Jana hesitated. ‘Not much! The accesses to the Data Warehouse stopped a week or so before we placed our scanning software active on the userids.’

Both men hung to her lips now. They craned their necks.

‘Got you,’ Jana thought, but she said only, ‘we had not enough information to locate the personal computers from which the accesses were made. We closed the user identifiers then. They do not exist anymore and are no threat anymore, if they ever have been. We put a procedure in place to assign user identifiers only to the right people in the future, to delete unused identifiers, and to regularly audit the state of that subject every month at least once.’ The men obviously relaxed.

‘How are the user identifiers assigned then in the future,’ Raga continued to ask. ‘We want to avoid industrial espionage, which though improbable may not be impossible at our company!’ ‘There is a tight procedure now,’ Jana explained. ‘User identifiers can only be assigned by the Data Warehouse Administrator, a lady, and for every identifier created she has to have a paper signed by Linus Akerlund, the CIO, or by Rachel Kyle, the Vice-CIO or a Director of the IT Division. Two such signatures are needed always. The Administrator holds a copy of the paper, the CIO holds a double. These are kept in a file, and each month the Data Warehouse Administrator must check whether only the identifiers of that file are active, not one more!’ Jana paused.

‘Of course, sir,’ Jana addressed Buisseyre directly, ‘your secretary and selected people in your Finance teams have such accesses.’

‘That looks like a sound security procedure,’ Raga said, ostentatiously impressed, and he changed subjects.

‘You hypocrites, your little scheme is riddled with loopholes. You are in this up to your eyeballs!’ Jana thought, ‘I did find out the physical addresses in the end, though only a range of addresses and not one or two in particular, so that I can prove nothing of your illicit accesses. The addresses of your personal computers are well and both within the range. I will never be able to prove beyond a doubt you two got into the Data warehouse secretly, but you are my prime candidates, especially after what Jan told me in confidence, and the more so

because I saw how scared you were before I started to explain, and how relieved afterwards. If one of you two either ever touches me or Jan Stevens, my full report on this will go to Gerald Godelin and Linus Akerlund at the same second. Tell them that, Jana!’ Jana hesitated however, then sipped from her glass of water too, somewhat ebullient, not from her Champagne, but from the knowledge and power she had gained over the men.

Buisseyre and Raga talked about what they did, now. The conversation became light-hearted over desert, exuberant during the coffee, the men trying to impress her with their contacts in high places and with their erudition in the arts, economy and industry. Jana’s speech never wavered, nor did the way she looked at the men.

‘How crass you are,’ she thought. ‘Only you are impressed with your own wealth and acquaintances. What do I care you rub shoulders with the corporate elite, what do I care you hobnob with aristocrats?’ Her ice did not thaw. She did, however, chime in with praise. Buisseyre was then so encouraged he dared to lay his hand over hers, saying she had done very well at the company. She withdrew her hand as if a snake had bitten her, and her eyes must have said as much. The conversation halted for a moment, Buisseyre scraped his throat. There were no more questions over her project, so Jana said goodbye and stood up from her chair. The two men also stood, but remained in the Cosmos. Jana left the restaurant. By that time all other guests had left too, but she saw Raga and Buisseyre ordering a brandy while she stepped through the door.

‘They must be celebrating their escape,’ Jana surmised.

Buisseyre and Raga followed Jana with their looks until she disappeared behind the doors.

‘She found nothing. We dodged that bullet. We are off that hook,’ Raga jubilated.

‘Yes. I did need a drink after that. We were close to being discovered, but we have done well in this talk.’

The two men drank their Cognac slowly, letting the drink burn in their throats until it softened flowing down to their stomach. They were content, pleased with themselves.

‘She is indeed a stunner,’ Buisseyre remarked, ‘but of the very cool type. I have not the patience of the hunter with such women. In fact, I have not much patience on any game or fowl hunt, too. So, I leave her to you, Andrew. I prefer the ones that react more eagerly, blonde or brown or black ones are all the same to me.’

Andrew Raga chuckled, and sunk his feet deep under the table.

It was almost four o’clock when Jana Kovar went back to her office. She had a headache.

‘The headache comes from the stress or from the Chardonnay grapes in the Champagne, though I had but little,’ she thought. She had done well today. She packed her briefcase, took her coat, considered telling Jan how things had gone, but decided to let him stew a little in expectation, and went out of the building to the car parking. She drove home and went up the stairs to her apartment. While she picked out the keys to her door, she heard music inside. Jana was surprised. Had she forgotten to turn off the radio? Jana opened her door cautiously and looked into her living-room with only her head, her body still in the door opening. She was ready to run out again. There was a man in her living-room! He sat on her sofa. He had a white shirt on, with rolled-up sleeves. His long legs rested on the low table before her television set. The man looked at the screen and played with the remote control. He had a glass of red wine in his other hand, and hummed to the music.

The man looked up when Jana entered, exclaiming, ‘incredible, Jana, dear, how many TV stations you have on this set. How have you been?’

Radek Navratil, Jana’s husband, showed her his very white teeth in a smile that was might as well have been a malicious grin, teeth bared to bite.

****6****

Travtelio embarked on a massive program of outsourcing throughout the company. Many smaller companies were created, affecting each time only a part of personnel. The Unions hated these unending changes, reorganisations, restructurings, affecting only part of the employees, but they preferred to negotiate the contracts of their members in the smaller entities rather than accepting hundreds of workers to be laid off. The number of daughter companies of Travtelio reached about thirty.

The employees working in restaurants were housed in a separate company, and that company had been set up in partnership with a large catering firm that served in many employee restaurants of Brussels. The new company was in fact just a daughter company of this firm, let by its managers who were professionals of catering, but the former Travtelio employees received a five-year contract at special conditions, which were seductive enough for them to forfeit their civil servant statute. They could refuse, but what other job would they then be given at Travtelio? The prices of food in the Terra Nova restaurant rose steadily, but more choice in dishes was offered in compensation. The quality of the main dish degraded, more fast food dishes were presented, and speciality dishes became more expensive.

The mechanics in Travtelio's garages were also brought together in a separate daughter company. The same happened to maintenance personnel, to the fleet manager's services, and to parts of security.

A cell that received and handled complaints of sexual harassment had been installed many years ago on demand of a female Minister who had been particularly concerned by Union reactions on discriminating acts. Travtelio HR issued a special brochure denouncing all sexual harassment in the enterprise. The paper stated henceforth the HR Division would handle such complaints immediately. The cell responsible for receiving the complaints was quietly stopped, its five employees absorbed into various HR services.

Medical controls were reinforced. Travtelio did no longer just let the house doctor of a sick employee establish unchallenged a medical certificate defining the number of sickness days. Travtelio first asked its listed enterprise doctors to control more and better the certificates. Later, Travtelio HR hired in a medical secretariat that had a reputation for chasing after sickness days and controls by its own doctors. Controls were almost automatic. As a result, the number of sickness days diminished spectacularly.

Travtelio also continued its program of cutting of overhead costs. The services provided by the Global Services Division were as much as possible outsourced to lower costs. Also researchers, planners and designers were fired in small numbers, but steadily from the company. The previous CEO had organised a small research department, staffed with smart, young university graduates. The group had to work out new products and services. This department was ended, its Director fired with a golden handshake, the engineers and economists dispersed over the Travtelio business divisions. Many of these young, very intelligent, bright future stars, but very creative young men and women, left the company. Those who remained had a hard time adapting from pure research to business management positions. Rumours of further, impending purges among the thinkers racked the company constantly. The thumpers were on the winning and commanding side now!

When something went seriously wrong at Travtelio, be it in management or with products and services, the standard reaction now was to start an audit. Audits were executed by consultancy firms. The men in black suits of these firms could be seen at work in all Divisions. Their business soared. Bitter remarks were made by Travtelio employees concerning the consultants of audits. These people were increasingly looked at as management's detectives and investigators, sniffing constantly around to find any wrongdoing. Employees and lower managers of Travtelio learned rapidly that the consultants did hardly more than write in reports what they, the employees, said during interviews, including the proposals for ameliorations in services. An audit consultant was a man or woman who did nothing else but note what Travtelio employees said. The bad things were blamed on the people that got interviewed; the proposals the same people suggested were presented as findings of consultants. Of course, consultants asked the right questions! When employees told consultants what went wrong, the reports blamed them for negligence. Audits of course concentrated on what went wrong, on what had not yet been tackled but should have been, regardless of limited past budgets and refused investments. Management was after what went wrong, not after the fine things that had been realised. The proposals of audits often were on reorganisations of work. As a result, new restructurings of departments were constantly going on at Travtelio. People got moved around and placed in new groups. Sanctions on people were then realised by demoting the supposed laggards to lower-paid positions, with Employee Skill Category scales lowered.

With time, audits came to be exceedingly loathed and avoided. The employees came to understand that the audits were not so much a sign of their own inadequacies as of the inability of their higher managers to lead the company. Their respects for their bosses crested. The employees despised the consultants more and more, tongues tightened. Bad tidings were avoided and hidden, because audits always led to sanctions, humiliations and reorganisations. Employees began to keep their teeth tight together at new audits. They answered reluctantly, in single syllables. They never proffered opinions on the state of affairs, kept solutions for themselves, and provided only bare figures.

The first time the ESC, the Employee Skill Category quotes had been installed, the quotes of evaluation had been defined based on still vague objectives and vaguely established results. The system got more systematic by the month. It was heavily supported by the HR Division. After eight months, the next major evaluation was prepared. Long lists of questions were drawn up by HR, practically defined for each ESC scale. Grids of evaluations were drawn up. Once again, evaluations were to be held by cascading objectives and evaluations down from Directors to managers and employees. The objectives now had to be measurable in figures to provide an aggregate quote between one and five. No place was foreseen for excuses on objectives not reached, whatever the obstacles had been. The final quote was not just delivered on objectives reached. Part of the quote was also defined on general behaviour, which was in fact just an appreciation by the manager on how docilely an employee followed orders. Travtelio preferred slaves rather than people who made remarks to further the better progress of the company. The lists and grids and objectives, which made good sense for Directors and managers, were hated by the employees. Complaint procedures were filed regularly and in great numbers.

****7****

There was always some degree of what might be called illegal use of company resources going on at Travtelio. That included sending mail messages to friends and family, searching on the Internet for suitable vacation sites, accessing games on the Internet, and so on.

Travtelio had of course published policies for mail and Internet use, but it remained generally lenient towards such squandering of company time, and IT resources would not have been lesser to install without such possible misuse. By some sort of taciturn and common agreement also, abuse remained limited.

Travtelio HR surprised its employees therefore by proposing a computer game, downloading that automatically on everybody's PC and urging people in mails to spend at least some time each week at gaming. Travtelio HR even promised a prize to employees who played regularly and accumulated points. In the game, a boy and a girl called Hans and Greta were released into a dense forest where all kinds of dangers awaited them. Had Travtelio wanted to direct the insatiable hunger for gaming to something useful of its own devise?

The game had two purposes.

Hans and Greta had to learn to survive in a very hostile and competitive environment. They had to ward off all sorts of animals and predators like tigers and dragons. They had to draw paths in the forest and build some form of shelter. They had to search for a hidden treasure. They had to work hard for a living and they were to organise to put their time and meagre resources to the best use for their survival. The game allowed for choices, so that the player could decide on one of several outcomes on how Hans and Greta fared in the forest. A player who made real bad decisions would let the children starve. A good player made Hans and Greta become as wealthy as Croesus, hack down large trees to build a gentleman's farm and live like King and Queen. Obvious messages were sent to the players, and the game had some merit in teaching to chose among possible decisions using limited resources, as the economy dictated in real life. One learned to save and to invest, to act rapidly or to stall.

The game had a second goal, however. Since an employee who played could act by decisions on how the game advanced, data on the choices of each player were stored in server computers. Unknown to the players, the behaviour of judgement and decisions could be kept in memory too. That left Travtelio HR with a wealth of precious information, gathered automatically by the software of the game on the kind of decision making of the player. Was the player docile in following Travtelio's demands to play or was he or she something of a rebel who dismissed what HR asked? An employee who played could make decisions in consistent patterns or in an erratic way. He or she could make the right decisions or rather bad ones, and the degree to which he or she made the bad ones rather than the right ones could be expressed in statistics and graphs that could be called by the game administrators at the fingertips. HR stored data on how an employee might behave in a demanding job, on how he or she reacted to stress, on when he or she abandoned, and even on how integer he or she reacted for Hans and Greta were also tempted to use once in a while every dirty trick in the book on the environment and on their neighbours to grow rich. The data were stored and could be used, unknown to the innocent players.

The game was very popular and it raged in the company for months.

8

On one of those evenings, quite late, almost night, a woman sped on high heels through a lane of a suburb of Uccle to a square where taxis waited until late in the night. The woman's clothes hung dishevelled and even in shreds at her, and while she ran she drew them tighter on her, hiding her state as much as she could under a long raincoat. Her hair was tousled, her lipstick smeared, her upper lip broken so that a trickle of blood hung on her face. The woman sprang in a taxi before the driver had even seen her coming, and gave an address in a few words of very bad French. The taxi driver caught the English accent, but did not comment. He had heard and seen worse. He suspected the woman was an English or an American call girl

working in Brussels, and who had endured a bad time from a rich client. He expected no trouble from a woman at this late time, hoping she would not dirty his car and give him a nice tip, so he drove off immediately with some speed to the street indicated, which was not really very far from where he had been waiting, and to which he could add a few streets to the shortest track. He dropped the woman at a fine apartment building, and she paid him handsomely indeed.

The woman was Lauren O'Sheridan, and the house she fled from was Andrew Raga's. Raga had steadily been inviting Lauren to dinners and drinks in the last weeks. The invitations to bars and restaurants had become more insistent and more frequent lately. Polite conversations evolved to intimate themes. Andrew Raga wanted to know everything about Lauren, about her parents, about where she lived, how she had fared in her studies, what kind of friends she met. He rarely opened himself to such information of his own, and Lauren wondered after a while just how much of what he told her of him was true. Lauren could answer and tell without shame, for her parents and family were of decent Boston stock, well off, and Lauren prided in a PhD and an MBA of a fine university.

Andrew Raga remained nice and civilised, courteous even, throughout. During the last meetings he placed his hand on hers at the table of the restaurants, and his hand lingered more and more. He came to touch her shoulders and then her neck when he helped her in her coat. Later still, their bodies touched and pressed more insistently. Andrew always remained the gentleman, however. Sometimes he would give her a rendezvous at a bar or a restaurant, and she would drive her car to there, then he came to fetch her and drove her back. At one time he had accompanied her to her apartment and said goodbye the Belgian way, with a furtive kiss on one cheek. Later he kissed her on both cheeks, and the last time he had her on the mouth, a long kiss, though not a pressing, passionate one.

The evening she had fled to a taxi, Andrew proposed to show his apartment to her. That had been the outcome of an innocent conversation started earlier on the different categories of apartments allocated to American expats by Travtelio. Raga lived in a luxurious apartment, he claimed, a large one with three bedrooms, a study, and a magnificent view over a park, onto the Forêt de Soignes, in which the grand beech trees formed the glory of Brussels. Raga invited Lauren in to have a look and a last drink.

Lauren was not an innocent, naïve adolescent girl. She had had enough experience with men and sex during her university years. She wondered how far Andrew Raga would dare to take her that evening, so she had accepted with grace and a smile, with exclamations of joy and delight. An hour later she fled from Raga's apartment with Olympic speed, leaving Raga lying naked on a bed, with spread out legs and arms, hand on a chin where she had definitely and neatly fistcuffed him. Raga was still dozed when she sped out of the door, drawing her clothes hastily around her.

Lauren had expected sweet words, light trembling touches, first romantic and later feverish embraces, the slow and awkward but delicate peeling off of clothes, and then the soft movement of loving fingers over a skin that would cringe to expectation of more. She would then have liked to be enfolded in loving and protective arms. She had not at all expected what was to come.

Raga had drawn her into his apartment and then into his bedroom. He rapidly wanted sex, hard sex, and depraved sex. When Lauren refused, Raga became importunate and a little later openly violent. Lauren had not told Raga her Boston university had also taught young women how to defend themselves in such situations. The martial arts courses Lauren had followed came in handy, so she left Raga sprawled on the bed with a sore jaw and a drowsy head,

though this last might have resulted as much of the wine he had gulped down at the restaurant, as from her hard, precise punches on his temples. She floored Raga expertly.

Lauren O'Sheridan shed off her clothes immediately in her apartment, as if they were soiled. She would throw them away in the morning. She felt giddy. Her heart ached. She ran to the bathroom and showered long with warm and cold water to rinse the dirt that was on her mind more than on her flesh. Then, she wept.

****9****

One worker who was certainly not overtly docile in his relations with managers was Hugo Martin. Martin's rancour against managers had grown the last months. He hated orders from people who knew less about his job than he. He lived not only under stress at home, where his wife was threatening with a divorce if he did not stop drinking. He felt increasingly uncomfortable at Travtelio. This day, he came to work for the afternoon shift after having drunk quite a number of glasses of strong beer at the pub a street farther from the Villa. He was drunk, and that was not the first time. He did not stagger while he walked, but the strong drink was on his breath and he acted strangely, haltingly, and started pushing on buttons of computer servers that had better be left alone. He pushed on the wrong keys of his keyboard and missed commands.

A colleague of his told him to go and have a coffee in the Cloister before he started to work, another urged him to go home and take a nap. Hugo waved the suggestions away, assuring all was well. One of his colleagues got angry then, fearing to be blamed for malfunctioning to come. He feared Hugo Martin would damage the equipment and wreck applications. He left the data centre, but went first to Michel Doriant's office to warn Doriant of what was going on.

Michel Doriant sighed, fought off a temptation to wish the man who entered his office to hell, or to tell him to go and complain to Karl Geerts. He, Michel Doriant, had been warned however, and Michel did not want to be blamed later for not having reacted. He had been called into the fray; he would have to go. He stood up, and said he would have a talk with Martin.

Michel Doriant went to the data centre in the basement of the Villa. He found Hugo Martin behind his screen, apparently installing software on servers, but doing that very, very slowly, typing on his keyboard with one finger at the time. Michel stood in the back of Martin for some time, watching what Hugo did, and seeing how often he missed the right keys. He then told Martin suddenly to look at him. Martin was very startled, for he had not heard Doriant coming up to him. Michel Doriant remarked immediately the evasive, large look from the bloodshot eyes of a drunk.

Doriant said, 'Hugo, man, you are drunk! I cannot let you work like that! You'll have to return home.'

'What?' Martin cried, 'I am not drunk! Sure, I had a few drinks after lunch, yes, but I am far from drunk. You know what I can take! What is this? Can a man not have a beer at lunch? Is Travtelio now also regulating what we do in our own houses?'

'Hugo, you can do whatever you want in your house, but you cannot come in drunk for work.'

'I am not drunk, I tell you!'

'Hugo, you'll have to return home. I cannot let you work in your current state. You have a choice now. Go back home, and I'll write you in with a day's sick leave, one day without a doctor's certification, and you never, never start something like this once again. Or we go now to the doctor in the Skyscraper and have a blood test, the result of which will be noted

officially by the medical service, and you will receive a blame of Travtelio and possibly be fired. What do you chose?’

‘I refuse to let my blood be taken!’

‘You can do that too, yes, but then I will call two witnesses in, one of them a doctor and the other a security agent, and these will testify with me of your behaviour, as well as to the refusal of the blood test. Believe me; what I and they will see is enough to bring you to big trouble. Do you think you will be able to find another job easily after having been sent away from Travtelio in disgrace for being drunk at work?’

Doriant paused, saw the anger growing in Martin, and now backed a little off, trying to soothe the man.

‘Look, Hugo, you will not be the first of having arrived with a glass too much at work. Times have changed. Things are looked at more strictly, now. So, do as I say and stay out of trouble. Take a day off! Have another glass at home, one, or in a pub near your home, to sober up, and take it easy. Have you driven by car to work, in that state?’

‘I came by bus!’

‘Well then, take a bus home again. Nobody will know what happened today. I will not grind my axe over you. I will report you as unwell and returned to home. Just don’t start this all over again! Now go off, and don’t make a fuss!’

‘All right,’ Hugo Martin replied. ‘I’ll do as you say, have another beer on my own in my pub. I’ll do it for you, because I respect you. You, Michel, I still respect. I respect nobody else here. All those other managers, they just bully people around. They don’t know anything about our work, but they bully us. We know a lot better what to do, and how, but they always give us orders that make no sense, according to procedures we don’t even remember. This company is going to hell, I tell you! Still, because you ask me, I’ll leave now. I’ll come back tomorrow. And thank you. You are the only one who cares.’

‘That is fine, Hugo. Yes, come back tomorrow. But do not drink at work or just before work! I know you can handle drinks well, but too much is too much. An error is made quickly here. Now, go!’

Doriant drew Hugo Martin after him, out of the doors of the data centre, into the employee rooms. He waited until Martin came back out, dressed for returning home, and he accompanied Hugo to the doors of Travtelio. Doriant remained looking until Hugo Martin slowly went to the bus stop in front of the building.

‘Why am I doing this?’ Doriant asked himself. ‘Why don’t I just stay in my office and let Geerts handle this? I bet Geerts would have come back with a black eye and have Martin fired instantly!’

But then Doriant thought, ‘no, Geerts would not have gotten a black eye. Geerts would have ordered somebody else to handle Martin. Geerts is afraid of Martin, and of many others too in Operations. Geerts would have sent lower managers or Sara Jansen to bully Hugo Martin, and that would have ended badly. The only victim would have been Hugo Martin! Will Martin stop drinking now? Probably not. We must do something about that. I have no idea what, but I must talk to Sara about Hugo Martin.’

Michel Doriant did not go to Sara Jansen’s office however. He was too ashamed and too humiliated to talk to another manager of the IT Division. He did not want to see the pity on the faces of his former colleagues, especially not on Sara’s face. He avoided the other Directors. He expected to be demoted officially any moment, now. He had to pull himself together, think first about what he ought to do with Michel Doriant. What kind of life did he want? He had come to the end, he reflected despondently.

Chapter Six. Michel Dorian

Gerald Godelin walked with brisk steps from his car to the entrance of the modern hotel in the centre of Brussels. He threw the keys of his BMW to the voiturier who ran up to him, and he received a copper coin with the name of the hotel and the number assigned to his car. He had been invited to a lunch meeting in the hotel restaurant, a two star gastronomy place renowned to be among the five finest eating places of the capital, and therefore one of the most expensive of the country. Had he been invited to a courtesy lunch or summoned to the meeting? Godelin's secretary had taken the call. He had been asked to come at a fixed date and time, fixed not by him but by the two men he knew otherwise well, men who were among the most influential of the Belgian establishment, one a noble and the other a tycoon of finance. The men had not asked whether the appointment suited Godelin. Yes, he had been summoned, all right, and he had not objected to the date! Alexandre Marquess Brioges and Gustave-Robert Trahty would surely announce him he, Gerald Godelin, would receive a title of nobility soon. Gerald felt elated, having at last won his life prize. He wanted no less than a hereditary title, however, not just a title that would leave his son with the meanest title of Knight. He wanted the title of Baron for himself, for his son and his son's sons.

Godelin hurried through the lobby to the restaurant, to the discrete corner separated by low panels from the rest of the large room. He knew where to go, having met the men there previously. This was the place in which some time ago he had expressed his wishes, in covered terms of course, to the same men. The men had eyed each other, then nodded quite willingly and appreciative to Godelin.

The atmosphere would be calm and dignified, now. The food of the best shrimps delicious, the steaks delicate of taste, the wine the best Burgundy could offer, the Champagne served at the end, not at the beginning. Godelin walked confidently in his light, double-breasted suit and smart, silk tie, a steel glint in his eyes, self-assured, tall and proud, physically intimidating, his handsome broad-chested yet lean figure drawing admiring looks from the well-dressed women who already sat at the large tables. He was a little late, as he should. He moved now in slow, heavy steps to the corner.

Trahty and Brioges had arrived before him, no doubt because they had to tune each other's words. They would have discussed beforehand who would say what, who would play on which argument. Or did they both agree on the offer without reserve? Was Godelin not a friend, a pal of these men, a future colleague also of Marquess Brioges? How much had he not given to them and their peers? He was here now, to cash in on his expenditures, to receive his rightful reward.

When Godelin arrived at the table, relaxed, alert and combative as ever, the two men stood, and shook hands with him cordially. Godelin instantly felt some reserve, a slight hesitation, and then smiles less bright, the welcoming less warm, the handshakes less firm than he had expected. Godelin was instantly on his guard, but he showed nothing of his apprehension. Would there have to be some bickering over the title?

The two men were quite older than Godelin. Marquess Brioges was actually in his full name Marquess Alexandre de Brioges d'Exenaerde. He was a small, thin man, a weasel-like figure, eyes darting around constantly to everything that moved in his vicinity. He had a long, pale face, very clean-shaven, a heavy beak nose, dark eyes, a small mouth which opened to feral-long teeth when the man smiled or laughed, his lips opening only little then in his parchment skin drawn over prominent bones. The Marquess, of a title higher than Count but lower than Duke, was impeccably dressed in an Armani suit. Elegance and old family dignity accompanied Brioges' ugliness. He looked all but effete. Brioges also, for other reasons than

Godelin, would draw appreciative looks in any place he entered, not from the women but from the men. The Marquess was one of the most impressive men of Brussels when it came to participation in the Shareholder Boards of the country's largest financial institutions. Gustave-Robert Trahty was of quite another kind. Trahty was a bully of a man, barrel-chested, also well over sixty years of age, like the Marquess, bull-necked, round faced with bulbs of skin hanging deflated down from his cheeks, small pig's eyes, broad nose. Trahty showed all the signs of a man who indulged in the pleasures of the flesh, in alcohol, in the best and ample food, in a life of leisure, and no doubt in elegant women. Marquess Brioges moved in the finance circles of the aristocracy, Trahty did so too, but he was equally a member and President of numerous Boards of industrial enterprises.

Through the aperitif and along the hors d'oeuvre dishes, the men chatted amiably. They drank a port wine first, Meursault white Burgundy next. The dishes in this restaurant were mainly of fish, but also some of the best Châteaubriand pieces of beef had made the reputation of the head cook. Marquess Brioges continued with fish. Trahty and Godelin ordered beef. Over their main dish, both men invited Godelin to a private golf tournament at the golf course they owned together in France, just over the frontier, on the coast. That invitation meant matters were going well for Godelin, so he dropped his apprehensions and relaxed. He drank more wine, following Trahty glass by glass. Brioges refused desert but accepted coffee, and so did Godelin. Trahty hesitated, and then wanted a piece of apple-pie with his coffee. This was the moment at which Godelin expected the men to come to the point. He saw Brioges look with some disgust at the glutton Trahty. Trahty took a large bite in his apple-pie. Trahty nodded to Brioges, the sign of the beginning of a pre-arranged conversation, for which Brioges would have the first words.

Marquess Brioges leaned towards Godelin and said, 'Gerald, I suppose you suspect why we asked you to have lunch with us, quite an excellent lunch, if I may say so. His Royal Highness may do you the honour soon of granting you the title of Baron, and hence accept you in the aristocracy of merit of our country. I am pleased to be the first to congratulate you.'

Godelin was exalted, but he managed to hold a straight face. 'Thank you, Marquess Alexandre. I too am honoured, of course.'

Godelin thought however, 'why the use of the word "may" and not "will", why soon and not now?'

Trahty continued immediately upon Brioges. 'We have to discuss a few items, items on which we and the Royal Court may need some clarification.'

'Which items to you want to discuss?' Godelin asked.

'The title of Baron is granted of course only to men who serve our country. It is a title of nobility, of character and of dignified deeds.'

Godelin thought, 'is that why you were never granted such a title, though without doubt you sought it as eagerly as I? Where are you leading me to?'

He said, 'of course, I know that.'

He waited for more, because he had no idea what remained to be discussed.

'Travtelio is one of the finest complexes of industry,' Trahty began, 'and the enterprise has been splendidly managed. All of the financial indicators of Travtelio are excellent, its conversion obviously a great success.'

'We also heard of issues at Travtelio,' continued Brioges, sipping cautiously from his hot coffee.

'What issues?' Godelin replied in a snobby tone. 'Travtelio is being transformed from a sleeping, half-managed state company to a modern, American-tailored, efficient and

aggressive world-class enterprise. We are readying ourselves to make firm acquisitions of several foreign companies. Travtelio's financial situation is solid. Surely, you would not want Travtelio to return to its former state of dormant giant?'

'No, no,' Trahty laughed. 'We would not want that, dear God, of course not. You manage Travtelio well enough! Some disturbing facts came to our ears however, and we would like to caution you.'

'Travtelio owns and has set up many daughter companies,' Brioges said, continuing from Trahty. 'We heard there might be an issue of transfer pricing between Travtelio and these daughter companies, some of which, if not most of them, have been established in tax havens. Travtelio sells its products and services internationally at lower than production prices to its daughter companies, then sells them from out of its daughter companies with very high margins. Travtelio subtracts the losses from its Belgian taxes and cashes in the profits in its daughter companies.'

'The results of the daughter companies are consolidated into Travtelio,' Godelin remarked. 'Right,' Trahty said rapidly, 'in the holding company. And that holding company has been set up also in a tax-friendly country, isn't it, not in Belgium!'

'As is good practice for most of our enterprises, also many banks,' Godelin retorted, shifting uneasily on his chair.

'For some, yes, not really for most,' Brioges replied coolly. 'There is not only the matter of the holding company established in another country and other tax-avoiding schemes set in place with it. So far, our Minister of Finance is not investigating this in depth, but his civil servants are getting nervous about the amounts recuperated by Travtelio as notional interests, and yet making losses on quite a lot of accounts. It seems also deliveries on paper only were made to the foreign daughter companies, so that the turnover in Belgium was fictitiously driven up.'

Godelin slumped in his seat. Surely these men were not criticising his financial astuteness, were they not? This was ridiculous! These men had worked around every article in the finance law in their companies. What was wrong with being smart? Why would they reproach him of doing the same?

'Other rumours have come to us. Money from the daughter companies flow back to you, personally, not to Travtelio.'

'That is a lie! I only let me be paid for my services. All was done very legally.' Godelin cried. 'You have no proof of any wrongdoing by me.'

Brioges brought a hand under his jacket and drew out a paper. 'This is a name of a foundation in the Princedom of Liechtenstein, not of a Travtelio company, an account number and an amount. Do you recognise it?'

Godelin whitened, and then reddened. He sipped from his cup of black, decaffeinated coffee. Trahty saw Godelin's tie hung askew, now. He smiled amiably.

'We also heard of your somewhat, hmmm, let us say unusual private life.'

Godelin did not respond.

Brioges brought again a hand in his jacket and he gave a paper to Godelin, face down. 'Gerald, rumours, and I am afraid also photographs such as this one, have surfaced. These testify to your tastes for dissolute, young women.'

Godelin looked devastated. He sank in his chair, but then shook his head, and was ready to counter-attack.

Trahty laid a hand on Godelin's hand. 'We have quenched the rumours, intercepted the photographs, of which by the way very few had begun to circulate, and halted everything that might hurt your reputation. We are your friends.'

Godelin remained sitting, stiff and straight now, transfixed though by the revelations. He kept a hand on the photograph, covering it, and then shoved it further aside, looked at it, then tore the paper in four pieces and put the rests in his side pocket. He watched the men, waiting.

He said, 'so, what do you want? Stop the rest of the crap!'

'Many of us still feel you have done a great job, Gerald. You are a figure of importance in our industry, a figurehead of Belgian enterprise, a powerful manager and leader. You are married to a lady of respected standing. We want to avoid a scandal that would embarrass her family. We have no intention at all to bring you down and throw you in a pigsty. Quite the contrary!' Brioges said.

'There are conditions,' Trahty said.

'There are stringent conditions,' Brioges added.

'What conditions?'

Trahty looked at Brioges and continued, 'the Marquess and other aristocrats of our groups are of the opinion you can be a great man still. They will propose to the Court you deserve a hereditary title of Baron in the full sense. Your son and your son's sons will inherit the title. You desired that, didn't you? Does that fulfil your wishes?'

Godelin didn't reply. He had asked for the conditions.

Brioges looked straight at Godelin and said, 'the conditions are that you withdraw as CEO of Travtelio. The new CEO will have to set right some of the financial oddities you installed, the measures that are detrimental to our country and that may lead to a financial scandal when leaked to the press. Your successor will see to it that all will be done quietly, without ever your name being mentioned. That will please the Minister of Finance, and there will be no investigation into the accounts of Travtelio. We also want you to stop visiting certain houses of disputable fame and to live like a good family father and husband. You will have to be more discreet in your private life. Constrain yourself, as we all do. Have a regular mistress, or two, but regular ones. Stay on the bright side! Stay out of the dark! Stay away from the sombre alleys and the weird houses of Brussels. We cannot risk a scandal over a newly appointed Baron. That scandal would involve us and expose the new aristocracy.'

'You damn homosexual tart,' Godelin thought, 'you, who get banged by unknown gay youngsters in the cellars of the dirty, secret homo bars you frequent, you are to teach me decency? Do I throw that in your face? Proof of that I can get easily!'

Trahty continued, 'you will resign from Travtelio honourably. Alexandre and I will do all but drop you. Our friends will not drop you. They have been through similar things, I would say. We have two Presidencies of the Board of financial institutions ready for you, as well as Memberships in the Boards of three industrial conglomerations, all very rewarding. You may not earn quite as much as at Travtelio, but the total of the bonuses that come with the Memberships will be most satisfying, I can assure you. We will be happy, of course, to welcome you as a member of our own club. We are dedicated to discretion, and we defend our own, you know.'

Godelin relaxed. He had not expected this. He had been hit deep in his pride. Brioges and Trahty had humiliated him and established their power over him forever. He appreciated their telling that what had happened was more or less commonplace in their circles, and he knew that was indeed the case. He had heard of scandals quenched. At the same time, he was also extremely pleased with his title. He would finally get a chance to enter the circles he had always wanted to be a part of. In something like five years from now, he would have wanted anyway the positions and the life the Marquess offered him today. He had liked fast horses and fast women; he would have to stick to fast horses from now on. In the circumstances, the offer was generous. To hell with Travtelio, then!

Godelin said, ‘all right. Your offer is generous. When do we start this transformation?’

Brioges and Trahty relaxed visibly. They smiled a conspirator smile. They shook hands with Godelin.

‘We want your letter of resignation at Travtelio in our hands by tomorrow. When we have the paper in our hands, we will propose you to the title of Baron. The Court will announce your reward the day after. We expect you to resign a day later from Travtelio. If you do not resign, we will publish the resignation paper. However, when you do resign, Marquess Brioges will tear up the resignation letter we have, in your presence. You will announce at your resignation, but in the way you want, you have accepted the Presidency of the Boards of the companies we will have prepared. The Boards will have chosen your name. This arrangement will be written down on paper in a contract by Brioges. One copy of the contract will be held by Brioges, and one copy by you. After the resignation and after you have been appointed to the Boards, to your satisfaction, we will meet at the villa of Trahty near Antwerp, and burn all copies.’

‘Fine! I agree to all of that,’ Godelin nodded, knowing he had no choice but to accept.

‘Tell me, then,’ he said, ‘who will be my successor at Travtelio?’

‘One of us,’ Brioges was quick to answer. ‘You will propose Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre to head the Executive Board. He will be instated by the Board of Shareholders with your help and with some pressure from our side.’

The three men laughed. They called for Champagne.

2

‘Don’t you wish me welcome, dear?’ Radek Navratil shouted at Jana Kovar, who remained at the door, unsure of what she would do next.

Radek opened his arms, still seated on the sofa, as if Jana should fling herself in his arms.

‘What are you doing here? This is my apartment, you creep!’ Jana shouted back. ‘I filed for a divorce! You cannot just break in here, into my home. Get out, or I’ll call the police!’

‘Well, about that divorce,’ Radek laughed, ‘surely, that is a joke! We must talk about that! We are still married, you know.’

Radek stood up and he came forward, as if he wanted to embrace Jana.

‘This is my apartment too! I have come to work at Travtelio too, and since you already had a large apartment, large enough for the two of us, Prague and Brussels assigned me to this place, too! Travtelio HR was so nice even to give me a double of the key to the door. Aren’t you happy to see me, and have me living with you again? This divorce thing was all a misunderstanding! Come on now; give me a kiss and a hug for welcome!’

‘Get out!’ Jana cried again, but Radek laughed in her face, sat down again, crossed his legs more comfortably and sunk deeper in the sofa.

‘This is our home now, darling, my apartment too! It was assigned to me because I am the head of the family, the pater familias, you know! You can’t throw me out. Come one love, sit down and let’s talk sensibly!’

‘There is nothing to talk about,’ Jana said, trying to recollect her wits and calm. ‘I want a divorce. The procedure has started and will proceed to the end. Get out of my apartment!’

Radek did not look at Jana anymore. He looked back at the TV set, tapped on the remote control, changed programs, did not seem to want to move from the sofa. Jana hesitated for a moment, unable to decide on what to do next. Then, she combed a hand through her hair and ran to the bedroom. She closed the door behind her with the key. She took a large suitcase from above the closet and slammed it on the bed. This was the case she had used to move to

Brussels. She began to throw clothes in the suitcase, without bothering how her shirts and robes, nightgowns, underwear and trousers landed. When the case was almost filled, she went to the bathroom, saw Radek watching her from out of a corner of his eyes, still ostentatiously watching a soccer game in front of him. She slammed shut also the door of the bathroom behind her. She took her toothbrushes, her cosmetics and perfumes, her salts and a few medicines and then, her two hands filled with bottles and aluminium tubes, she ran back into the bedroom. She threw all in her suitcase. She looked again at her closet, completely calmed, and took out her most needed and favourite jeans, as well as two pairs of boots and put those in a large plastic bag. She had to be quick.

She opened the door of her bedroom and ran out towards the door of the apartment as rapidly as possible. In two steps she was at the doors, which she flung wide open, threw her suitcase and bag and also her briefcase out, and slammed the door shut behind her, quicker than Radek could react. She closed the door with her key, hoping to gain a few seconds before Radek got his own keys, which she hadn't seen on the inside of the door. She ran down the stairs as fast as she could, dangling the suitcase, briefcase and bag in her two hands. She ran out of the building, to her car, which stood parked on the other side of the street. She pushed on her remote control car keys with her thumb to open the car while she still ran. She threw her bags on the seat next to her and pressed the key in the ignition slot. She turned the key and started the car. By then, Radek burst out of the house, so she ducked to hide even while she turned the wheel to drive slowly out of the rows of cars parked along the street. She came up and drove from behind a parked car in front of her. Radek saw her, leaped to the car and managed to slam a fist on the door, but Jana didn't care what happened and drove off at full speed, down the street, out of the street, turning immediately. She caught a glimpse in her rear car mirror of Radek violently gesticulating with his arms in the air, and then she disappeared.

A few minutes later, Jana parked her car in a quiet street of Uccle. She took out her bags and went up to a house. She rang a bell. A man's voice came from the parlophone, saying only, 'yes, who is there?'

'Jana Kovar. Will you let me in?'

The voice hesitated, then said slowly, 'second floor.' A sound clicked and the door opened. Jana took the elevator of the corridor to the second floor. When the elevator doors opened, a man stood in the open door of an apartment in front of the elevator. Jana said nothing, only went out and in, and threw her suitcase and bag inside, pushed her briefcase on top.

'Can I stay with you?' Jana asked.

'I have only one bedroom,' Jan Steven grinned, and that was not true for he had three, although one had been transformed into a library.

'One bedroom and one bed will do,' Jana grinned back.

This time, Jan Stevens did not have to think about whether he would allow a woman to sleep or not in his apartment. The decision had been taken out of his hands. In fact, he had no time at all to think. Jana took her suitcase and went straight to what she thought was the bedroom. The door opened to a large bathroom. Jan pointed a finger to another door. Jana staggered into that room, placed her bags next to the bed, and came back out.

'Big bed' she appreciated.

'Yes, big bed,' Jan said, 'but what is this all about? Have you been overcome by solitude or were you drawn irresistibly to me by the spleen of the century?'

'Do you want me or don't you? Or do you want that flirting cow called Emma?' Jana shouted. Her patience was up, now, and the stress of her flight made an end to the control over the last nerves she had gathered. She stood before Jan with spread legs, defiantly, both her hands firmly on her hips. Jan could not but remark what a fine figure she had, what a splendid woman she was, how beautiful her angry eyes shone.

Jan chuckled. 'Of course I want you. Of course I desire you. Take care, however, Jana, no woman has slept in that bedroom. If you walk in there, you had better think twice. I am not out for a quick lay or for an affair of a few months. If you step through that door, I want you for keeper's sake! Get in that bed and I will want you to remain in that bed for a very, very long time.'

Jana didn't change her poise in the least, but for the first time since she had run into Jan's apartment and broken his tranquillity, a large smile opened her lips.

'Why, Mister Jan Stevens, would you be proposing to me, now?'

'Why, yes, of course, miss Jana Kovar! I am a monogamous hetero, and if there is something I hate in my private life, it is change. Once you get in there, I hope you stay in there forever!' Jana laughed, 'I truly hope so much too, Jan!'

She went up to him, kissed him, long and hard, and she hung with her two arms around his shoulders, and then she started to cry.

'Now, now,' Jan said, 'dry those tears, and what was it you just mentioned about Emma?'

3

Sara Jansen also cried hot tears when she entered into Jan's office the next morning.

Jan had attended two meetings since nine o'clock. He was tired, and remained in his office afterwards, waiting for lunch. He had seen the courier boy Jean Vandoren enter and place two letters in the 'IN' basket on his desk. Jan made a joke to the boy Vandoren, who told him then he was one of the very last couriers left in the company.

'Soon I will not come here anymore, Mister Stevens. There will be a set of baskets at the elevators, and you will have to pick up your letters there by yourself! What a change! I heard there worked over a hundred couriers like I at Travtelio, not so long ago,' the boy said. 'Now, I am practically the only one left!'

Jan Stevens remembered then Thomas Denis had told him how in the old times messages were written down on a piece of paper, put in a folder with the name of the destination on the flap, the folder placed in the 'OUT' basket on one's desk, and then the OUT basket would be emptied twice a day by young boys and girls and brought to destiny inside and outside the firm. An answer on an inside message would be received the same way. The electronic mailing system had condemned these old ways of communication. All the internal communications were done by mail these days. Only external mail had to be distributed. Most of the courier boys had disappeared. Jan Stevens had then wondered which kind of jobs these young men and women occupied now. Most of them had probably been fired. What jobs remained for people that had not finished any studies? What did society use them for?

It was near noon and Jan saw Sara Jansen had cried a lot before. Her eyes were swollen, her nose was very red. She was still dressed in her Burberry raincoat, which was soaked as if she had walked from Brussels to Travtelio on foot. Sara's briefcase ended on his table. While Sara sat down in a chair in front of Jan's desk, her crying crescendoed into desperate sobs. She wept like a wounded child and remained seated but couldn't get a word out of her mouth. She looked more terrible than ever. Her dark hair hung in peaks down her face.

Jan was far too surprised to react immediately. He still had Jana much on his mind, and handling two weeping women in such a short span of time was a little too much for him. Had Sara also private problems of the heart?

'Sara, in heaven's name, what happened?' he asked, not a little irritated.

Sara continued to sob loudly, almost bent double over his desk. Jan began to understand something terrible had happened.

‘Michel!’ Sara said softly between two almost shrieking sobs. ‘Michel!’
‘What about Michel? Which Michel? Michel Dorian? What has he done?’
‘Yes! Michel. Michel killed himself. He committed suicide!’
Sara was racked with sobs.

Jan was struck dumbfounded. He felt the blood draw away from his face. He sat back, unable to speak. He remained in that position for a long time, Sara sobbing in front of him. Then, he opened a drawer, took out a box of Kleenex and shoved that over the desk to Sara. He didn’t say anything. Sara took out three paper towels at the same time, pushed her wet handkerchief in a pocket of her raincoat, and started to dab at her eyes, blew her nose, and continued to weep.

‘Michel was not at work yesterday,’ Sara started. ‘Nobody knew where he was. I phoned him. He didn’t answer. I had this strange feeling. This morning, he did not come in either at his usual hour. I phoned him again, no answer. I drove to his house. I rang and rang at his doorbell. He had told me his neighbour had a key to the house. She cared for his pets, a dog and a cat, when he was on holidays and out of the country. So I went to the neighbour. His neighbour on the left was not in, but his neighbour on the right had the key. The woman urged her husband to help. Nice people. Pensioners. I asked them whether we could go in and have a quick look together, just to see if he was well. I had that feeling!

We opened the door, went in cautiously, and called out his name. No answer. Then we saw him hanging from a rope in the kitchen. It was awful! Awful! We cried and cried! His neighbour got caught of a knife and a chair and cut Michel down, but we were too late. Much too late. He must have been dead from the day before. He was all dressed up, Jan, in business suit and all; his briefcase was still lying on the table of the kitchen. He must have hung himself just before coming to work, in the morning. He had that black striped suit on that went so well on him, his best tie! He just hanged himself, Jan! It was awful!’

‘Oh God, the poor, poor man,’ was all Jan could get from his lips. ‘Why did he do that? Why did he do that? He could have started anew, even at his age. Being rejected here, at Travtelio, didn’t mean he was stupid or a failure! He was an intelligent man and he knew his job well, he liked his profession. He was a fine manager!’

‘I know. We kept saying that to him, time and time again, Jan, but not everybody else! He was far in a divorce procedure. He thought his children blamed him and hated him. He had a first terrible shock here when the computers failed. He took all the blame on himself. Nobody would give him a second chance, not Godelin, not Akerlund, not Kyle, and certainly not his wife! I saw him slip into an abyss from which he could not emerge. I thought he would get his mind in order, giving time. Sandström talked to him, too. He did not let time heal his wounds, Jan, and his wounds were in his mind! Do you know what he showed me only a few days ago? A birthday card sent by Godelin, signed by the great man himself! Of course, Godelin signs those cards by the dozens for all his directors and then a computer file prints the addresses, but Michel wondered whether Godelin might have changed his mind. He wondered whether the card was a sign of reconciliation, and he nurtured some hope from that. Michel has gone from hope to despair several times, these last months.’

Sara shook her head. ‘The stress of his divorce, of the loss of his children and of his demotion at Travtelio was too much from him, Jan! I should have thought about that, I should have foreseen something like this might happen. I should have sent him to a psychologist or to a psychiatrist. I should have talked more to him. I should have told him to put up a fight, to get his children back. I failed! I did not do enough for him.’

‘I haven’t seen this coming either, Sara. I always thought of Michel as of a tough manager who was pretty sure of what he wanted, a stable guy, sound in mind, who could take a few beats.’

‘He was a deep one, Jan. He could take a setback or two, but the stress and the moral beatings were simply too much for him. His pride and worth was demolished. Oh, he remained the strong manager to the last day, but who can tell how he terrible doubts that circled round and round in his mind, the facts he could not cope with? In what kind of despair did he live alone in that large house of his, abandoned by everybody. I killed him, Jan. I killed him!’

‘Pull yourself together, Sara. This was not of your doing. You could have done nothing for him at Travtelio. Very few people could have done anything for him. We talked to him, remember! How many times did we try to console him? We talked and talked. We also proposed possible ways out, ways he could have found himself easily. He could have embarked on a new life! I sometimes thought he looked at you with tenderness. He certainly had a good friend in you. I would never have imagined he would have ended in such a desperate act!’

Sara started to cry out loud again.

Jan Stevens talked for two more hours to Jansen. He also called Sandström in, who joined them a little later. Sandström was devastated. Then, he too talked to Sara Jansen. Jansen did not want Sandström to come near her. She blamed the Swede too for what had happened to Michel Dorian. Jan managed to calm her down a little, but when Sandström began to talk to her she was driven back into memories of her friend dangling from a rope in the kitchen.

Sandström phoned a psychologist of Travtelio, but later in the afternoon Sara quieted down and did not cry anymore. She told how she had called the police and then the ambulance service, which had refused to take the body. The police called an undertaker.

Sara was desperately looking for someone to blame for the death of Dorian. She blamed herself, and then Godelin, Akerlund, Raga, Kyle, and Sandström. Sandström said that what had happened to Dorian could have happened in every company, industrial or financial, to any employee. Nobody was to be blamed. Competition was harsh and people had to be pushed to the limits of their abilities, or had to go. Sara cried that was just not the truth. She blamed Travtelio’s higher management for having created an atmosphere of tension, paranoia, contempt, arrogance and for having pushed people too far beyond what they could take. She blamed herself for being an HR person, who had to help management in killing people. Management should have been aware, she said, and had been aware how their behaviour of constantly pressing people into change might destroy people. What kind of world was this, when profits and money was more important than people’s lives?

Sandström argued nobody had wanted Michel Dorian’s death. Maybe Travtelio had been too callous, too quick in its desire to transform the company, but in view of tough competition a hard-driving enterprise had to take such measures. Sara Jansen stopped crying and wanted to go back to her office. She had work to do. Sandström wanted her to see the psychologist, and then to take off the rest of the day.

Afterwards, Jan asked Sandström whether he truly believed everything he had said to Sara Jansen. Sandström looked at Jan with quaint, evading eyes, only said, ‘no!’, and left Jan’s office. By then, a lady psychologist had come to take Sara with her. Sara refused to lie down in the infirmary, and she refused being given calming medicines. She refused to go home and take a few days off. She wanted to continue to work the following days, and Jan thought that was probably the best means to have her not think about Michel Dorian so much. Sara

seemed to have absorbed the shock by then. The psychologist continued to talk to Sara while Jan went to the rest of his meetings, as the psychologist wanted him out of sight for a few moments. When he came back, Sara and the lady sat still in his office, but Sara did not cry and she went to her own desk.

One who was about as much in shock as Sara Jansen was Linus Akerlund. He ran to the office of Gerald Godelin and told Godelin what he thought of him. Akerlund blamed Godelin for Dorian's death. Godelin had never liked Akerlund much, so the two men came to a shouting dispute over management of Travtelio.

Andrew Raga was also in Godelin's office when Akerlund burst in, and Raga too shouted at Akerlund. Raga cried higher and louder than Akerlund to stop blaming someone for Dorian's death. Dorian's suicide was Dorian's doing, nobody else's. Dorian had been a weakling, a little man, not strong enough to hold the function of Director. When you couldn't take justified blame, you had no place in any company! Andrew Raga especially wanted the arguing to stop rapidly, for the secretaries in the hall heard Akerlund shout, and that meant everybody in Travtelio would soon hear what Akerlund had flung in Godelin's face.

Akerlund was indeed stopped rapidly, for Gerald Godelin shouted it all didn't matter anymore for he, Godelin, would soon resign as CEO of the company. That news shut up Andrew Raga too. He had not suspected Godelin's departure to come so soon. The secretaries heard it all. Akerlund slammed Godelin's door behind him, after having cried he too would resign from Travtelio.

4

The suicide of Michel Dorian was a sensation in Travtelio. The news spread instantly. Foremost in IT Operations, employees who had known Dorian well, were affected. Two psychologists saw every employee separately for an hour. They tried to avoid a broad trauma in the department.

Karl Geerts commented the death of Dorian was the logical conclusion for somebody who couldn't cope with a setback in his career, a man who had sought power and received it too easily, from political support and not for his capabilities in management. Geerts remembered to everybody how much the crashes of the main computers had cost to the company.

Remorse for his errors had crushed Dorian, Geerts said. Karl Geerts was not very delicate in his words on Dorian's suicide. He had the bad idea to state his opinion in public, in the cellars data centre of the Skyscraper, while Hugo Martin and Jan Stevens stood listening.

'Of course, the computers crashed,' Hugo Martin remarked. 'Those were machines of the older type. Those machines cost so much we had to push up to eighty percent of load of programs on them. Do you know how much load the newer types of machines take? Not even twenty percent! Those computers will never crash because they are overloaded! They are notoriously under-loaded. But what a waste of computing power is this!'

Hugo Martin had understood late how Dorian had helped him avoiding being fired from his job when he had arrived drunk at work. Since then, Dorian had been something of a father figure for Martin, maybe the father he had lacked in his youth. When Karl Geerts stated to tell how weak and stupid Dorian had been in death, Martin flared. He pushed his fist under Karl Geert's nose. He insulted the Director of IT Operations, calling him a liar and a cheat, a man who should be ashamed to slander a dead man.

Geerts would have castigated Hugo Martin on the spot, but before he could shout and retaliate on Hugo Martin, three other colleagues of Hugo told Geerts politely but decidedly one did not speak evil of the dead. They said straight in Geert's face that Dorian had been a great boss, a

manager who knew IT as no other. Jan Stevens supported the men. Geerts drooped off, had to keep his further words inside.

Hugo Martin sensed he had made an enemy for life in Karl Geerts. He had little illusions over the rest of his career at Travtelio, but he continued to boast how he had dared telling the new Director what he thought of him, and that was really not much. Hugo Martin felt he had been the victor of the altercation, and the strange thing was, his colleagues thought the same. Karl Geert's charisma of leadership dropped several degrees, and of course, the story travelled up and down the floors of Travtelio IT. Hugo Martin jubilated. He had been the hero of the day. Deep inside him, however, he feared Karl Geerts' vengeance. One day, Geerts would make Hugo Martin pay for his challenge. This enhanced Martin's anger and resentment against management. He regarded the remaining IT managers more and more as his worst enemies, except maybe Jan Stevens. These people were out to get him, he said, to harass him and to punish him. When that time came, he would be ready. He, Hugo Martin, could punish too!

The funeral of Michel Doriant created an additional row in Travtelio IT. Doriant would be buried on a Friday, with a mass of the Roman Catholic ritual. So many people of IT Operations wanted to attend the burial, that Karl Geerts ordered the people who wanted to participate in the funeral mass to take a half day off on their paid vacation time, and come back in the afternoon. Also, normal service would have to be guaranteed in each team. The Union representatives protested. Until that day, nobody had been obliged at Travtelio to take a day off to attend funerals of colleagues. An arrangement was reached, whereby a maximum of five people could represent the IT Operations department, but those five would not have to take a day off.

Jan Stevens, Jana Kovar and Sara Jansen took their day and they drove together in Jan's car to the little church in a far, peaceful suburb of Brussels. The funeral ceremony was very moving. Doriant's former wife and children followed the coffin when it was brought into the church by the undertakers. The children cried. The church was filled with people, people queued outside and the doors were left open during mass. Many more employees of Travtelio than the five permitted by Karl Geerts were present; also people from other departments and divisions who had known Doriant since ages had come. Sigvard Sandström had come, but Linus Akerlund, Andrew Raga or Karl Geerts did not show up. After the mass, many followed the coffin to the cemetery. When the coffin was lowered into the brown, sandy earth, each man and woman present was invited to make a cross with blessed water over the coffin and throw a handful of earth down. When Sara Jansen came forward, she started to sob once more, and she broke down. Jan Stevens and Jana Kovar had to support her and dragged her away from the cemetery.

Thomas Denis approached Jan and Jana when they walked out of the cemetery. He said to Jan, 'we must now mourn for Michel Doriant. Something suddenly came to my mind when the coffin was lowered into the earth. Do you remember we attended both a short, uppy management presentation a few months ago, a conference organised by Travtelio HR, a presentation we found both hilarious and distressing, and had great fun with to the anger of the HR boys? The HR President showed us a chart then, called the "mourning curve". The chart explained the phases by which personnel coped with change. After the announcement of change forced upon an employee, the person's first reaction was supposed to be one of incredulity and of refusal to understand how such a thing could have happened to him or her. This was followed by a phase of outright resistance. After a period of depression and resignation, the employee would begin once more to accept his new situation and to function more or less normally in his or her new role. We wondered whether we had to become psychologists, now, with our people, instead of Information Technology engineers. What the

HR President didn't tell us, was that people might not come out of their depression phase. Michel Dorian didn't get to the next phase. The guys who showed us the chart probably never have suspected their explanation could come to such tragedy as with Dorian, for which they were damn fools, yet it did, the curve was deadlier true than we expected, and they might have taken care. So we mourn Dorian, not the change. It made me also think of that other phase, the resistance phase. The HR guys told us persons could become violent in that phase. What would have happened had Dorian broken earlier, in that resistance phase, taken a gun and started shooting in the upper floors of the Skyscraper? I bet the HR guys have never given such an eventuality real thought. What will happen, however, to the next guy who doesn't come out of that resistance phase? What would happen at Travtelio?' Jan was only sad. He took the arm of Thomas Denis and the four of them slowly left the cemetery.

5

Jana Kovar was still surprised at herself. What had come into her to escape from one man and throw her in the arms of another? She regretted having acted so impulsively as to have offered her soul and her body to Jan Stevens in the spur of a moment. She should have gone to a hotel and taken a room for a few days to think, and then maybe have a talk first with Jan. Why had she let her emotions guide her instead of her reason? Why has she so precipitously shoved aside the flirtatious eyes of Emma Wauters? Had she wanted to lay her hands on Jan? Jana trusted Jan Stevens with all her being, in mind and in her longings, though she could not explain why she felt that way. Since she had met Stevens, strange emotions had welled up in her. She had begun to think of children. She perceived a new yearning the last weeks in her body, a yearning that scared her but never went. She tried to subdue the feeling, to refuse its demands, but the longing of her body grew stronger. She longed for Stevens and she could not explain why, how much she thought and thought about it. The image of Jan seemed always to be associated with children now. She had always vehemently refused children from Radek. She wanted children from Jan. Her lovemaking with Jan the first few nights had been violent. She had taken Jan. Jan had been surprised, but he had followed and he had not commented on her urges. After a few nights of hard sex, he had asked her to calm down a bit. No doubt he thought she was all nerves by the return of Radek. Afterwards also, however, she made softer sex, but she led the nights, until they were both saturated with love. Then, she and Jan settled into a cosy routine. They still drove separately to work and showed not they lived together to their colleagues. They even avoided each other some at Travtelio. Jana might have acted on an impulse; her life with Jan was pure delight.

The only one who had no doubts about what was going on was Thomas Denis. 'Men are quickly besotted by blonde witches with large boobs,' was Thomas's comment. 'That tall sprig has caught you in her webs, I can tell. Well, I must say she is better suited to you than that heavy-bosomed Flemish colossus called Emma. First time I saw Emma, I named her "die grosse Emma" instead of "Grosse Bertha". She is a pighead, that one. Now, what do you intend to do with this Kovar woman of the steppes?'

'Prague is not in the steppes, Thomas,' Jan tried. 'She is not Hungarian and not Russian. She is a Czech, a city girl. I'll marry her and have children.'

'Hell and damnation,' Thomas cried, 'far worse than I feared! One more goner! Join the growing ranks of the men-servants of womanhood. Do you know why pictures of the Virgin Mary always show her on her feet, standing up, or sitting with a baby on her lap, and why pictures of Venus always show the damned woman horizontal on a bed or a couch? Women first draw you in to lying down, and then when they have a baby, never again lie down and

play the virgin! Have you not learned anything at all from all of us, martyrs of eternal womanhood? You have my blessing, son. She is a fine specimen.'

Life of Jana Kovar with Jan was easy and sometimes comical, as they sought how to find their own place in the apartment and to adapt to a life with two after having remained along for such long time. They had to conform to the other's wishes and habits. They bumped into each other at the bathroom. They opened the same cupboards in the kitchen at the same time. When one wanted to wash his clothes in the washing machine, the machine turned with shirts and underwear of the other. When in the morning Jan stepped into the bathroom with hazy eyes and discovered a nude Jana under the showers, he apologised and closed the door, to hear a pearly laugh behind him. Jana sometimes thought Jan was stupid. Jan fitted her mind and her body. She sensed something deep underneath, something uncommon in Jan, however, something she could not put her finger on. Jan remained reserved, kept her at a distance of his real self. He hid certain aspects of his life, events and feelings she did not know about. He refused to talk about his family, about where he was born, and she knew little about his youth. He also refused to tell anything about former love affairs. She was worried about that, for Jana could only have children by a man she knew completely, in and out. He did open up to her somewhat, very slowly. He talked to her about how he felt, with time.

Jan was a strong man in his profession, a man of strong opinions in politics, in ethics, in morals, in values of living. He was very shy and so very formal usually. He never asked her to do anything he could not do himself. He never imposed anything on her. They usually did what Jana wanted; it was as if he was a follower instead of a leader, yet, at Travtelio, he led hundreds of people towards his visions of the future. Jan was intelligent, and he had a fine erudition in history and art she envied. He spoke four languages fluently. Jan picked up a few Czech words from her in no time at all, among them quite a few curses, for Jana let her emotions flow out instantly and loudly when something went wrong. Was Jan a weak man in private? When she objected harshly to his arguments, he insisted just a little, but gave in more rapidly than she would have wanted. Jana wanted a strong man around, a man who fought her a little, and Jan never fought her. Still, a man who looked up to her was a welcome change from Radek and from her former Czech male friends at the University. These had always tried to diminish her mind. They had wanted to possess and humiliate her. Jan only took what Jana wanted to give. Still, a man like that might not offer the protection a woman needed. Did modern women need protection?

Jana lived with Jan Stevens. Two days after she had imposed her presence to Jan, she had stalked on Radek, seen him in his office at work, on the same floor of all the expats at Travtelio. She had left the Skyscraper in the middle of the day then, driven to her former apartment and taken out her last things. She had stuffed her car as full as possible and she had taken away all her things to the very last, out of the apartment where she had lived before. She took all her clothes, her books, and every electronic device but for the television set. She even took some of the pictures she had bought in Paris, a fine old lamp, a beautiful table in nicely carved, exotic wood that had cost her a fortune in an antiques shop of the Sablon Square of Brussels, and she stuffed everything in her car. She left only the cheaper, common furniture in her apartment.

The day after, Jana went to see Sara Jansen and explained the situation to the HR Director. Sara wanted to throw Radek Navratil out of Jana's apartment. Sara apologised in the name of Travtelio for having allowed Radek to get into Jana's apartment, but Jana had to acknowledge she had not sufficiently drawn attention to the fact she was in the midst of a divorce procedure with Radek, and of course, Radek had told nothing of that to Travtelio. Still, Travtelio HR

should never have allowed Radek in without asking Jana first. Jana immediately said Radek could keep the apartment, but all administration of that subject would have to be modified. Jana wanted her allowance paid out to her in cash. Sara asked in surprise where Jana lived then, and Jana had to admit, blushing very red, her new address was with Jan Stevens. Sara Jansen's mouth made a wide O, without the sound spoken. Jana wanted her new address to be kept secret. Sara assured her the personnel data were protected by law. Sooner or later, Sara warned, Radek Navratil would find out where Jana lived. He could follow her car. He could stalk on her.

Jana preferred Radek to find out about her and Jan the latest possible. For the moment, she refused to think about what Radek might do when he found out. He was also a religious zealot. He would shout she was an adulterous woman. He would shout Jan had coveted his neighbour's wife. Radek would react violently. What might he do to Jan? Sara warned Jana about that, too.

Sara could help. She had a friend who could use some money. Jana could pay for a bed in a child's room at a friend's house, and Sara changed Jana's address to that house. Jana could go once a week to Sara's friend to pick up any letters that might have arrived at Jana's new address. That subterfuge might help Jana for a few months. Jana accepted eagerly.

In those days, Jana was excited and happy. When she walked hand in hand with Jan in the forests of Brussels on weekends, she sometimes watched his face while he stepped, as if she was surprised to accompany this man. Yet, Jan filled her with happiness. She talked about her divorce to Jan. Jan's only comment was to ask her to please get that divorce over as soon as possible. Jana asked him why, were they not fine together like they now lived? They could leave worries aside. The divorce was not something to think about.

'Of course,' Jan said, slightly astonished. 'I thought, however, we were going to get married! I mean really married, with papers and all.'

Jana esteemed these words the most unromantic, pragmatic, stupid proposal for marriage she might have expected, and she said so, angry and happy at the same time.

'But,' tried a very surprised Jan Stevens, 'I proposed to you the first time you set a foot in my house, remember? I told you then I played for keeper's sake, for life, or at least for as long as possible. That was a condition for moving in with me, Jana, and a proposal! I don't renege on my promises!'

'I remember,' Jana replied, thinking men were such rational bastards who had no eye for the feelings a girl craved for. She flung her arms around Jan's neck then and wept, laughing and happy, telling Jan what a dumbass he was.

Three days after, on a Saturday, Jan asked Jana out for dinner to one of Belgium's finest, starred restaurants in the middle of the Ardennes forests. They would stay over for the night in the hotel of the restaurant. In the evening, they both dressed up, and before the main dish, Jan presented her an engagement ring with the biggest and shiniest single ruby stone she had ever seen. He also proposed to her officially, and when she said yes, he stood up from his chair and announced to the surprised audience of total strangers in the restaurant he had just proposed for marriage to the most beautiful woman in the world, and he said she had accepted. Jan really had a knack about how to embarrass Jana and make her turn very crimson in the face. The people in the room clapped in their hands and the atmosphere in the restaurant changed from polite dignity to laughter and intimacy. Men came over to congratulate Jana, and women kissed Jan on the cheek. The chef offered a large cake after that as desert, and everybody in the restaurant got a piece.

6

A slight of official announcements of higher management hit Travtelio like thunder in a sunny afternoon. Gerald Godelin sent an electronic mail to all employees of the company, telling he had decided to leave Travtelio for other horizons. He thanked his employees for the confidence invested in him, reminded of the most important accomplishments during his term at the helm of Travtelio, and wished them all well. At the same time, he announced that in a special meeting of the Board of Shareholders Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre had been appointed as the new Chief Executive Officer, the choice having also been accepted by the representatives of the Belgian Government. The new President of Finance would be Andrew Raga. Godelin would leave within two weeks.

Two days later, another mail announced the departure from Travtelio of Linus Akerlund. Akerlund would return to Sweden, but nothing was stated in the mail as to his future position in his former Swedish company. Akerlund might also not return to that company. Sigvard Sandström told Jan Stevens a function of President of Production would be declared open in the Swedish company within a month. Akerlund would first go on a prolonged holiday and then he would very probably be appointed in that President position a month from now. Sandström was unsure about a job for himself, but he suspected he would follow Akerlund in Sweden within a couple of months. Akerlund's ambitions were to become the CEO of a Swedish company, not necessarily of the company he had worked for in the past. Sigvard was convinced Akerlund would find a job for him and take Sigvard on as his assistant for HR. Sandström began to hand over part after part of his current job to Sara Jansen, and he taught her some of the techniques he used to evaluate and coach personnel.

These developments left the IT Division of Travtelio without a head, for Akerlund disappeared very rapidly. Sandström organised a short farewell drink for the managers of the division. Presents were exchanged, but that was all finished quietly and rapidly. There was not much love lost between Akerlund and the division.

With Akerlund out of the company and Sandström passed into the shadows, the IT Division was left without a President and without a leader. Some people expected Jan Stevens to head the division, but most waited for Rachel Kyle to take over, since she was the current Vice-President and hence the logical choice. The function of CIO, of Chief Information officer, was simply added to the tasks of the new President of Finance, however, to Andrew Raga.

Raga did not occupy the former office of Akerlund, and neither did Rachel Kyle, who remained Vice-President. Everybody referred to Rachel Kyle for the most important decisions, and Rachel headed the staff meetings of IT Directors. The Directors referred to Kyle as the head of IT hierarchy, though no announcements were made concerning her tasks. Rachel started spontaneously to talk about this situation to Jan Stevens. She said she had to speak her mind to at least one person. She raged about how she felt! She loathed the way Andrew Raga had appropriated also the title of CIO for himself, by his connections to the US shareholders and by flattering the new CEO. She said she would do what was necessary to keep IT floating, but not much more. She considered returning to the US. Moreover, she announced to Jan the shareholder companies would soon withdraw from Travtelio. The US company needed its investments in Belgium for other ventures in the US, and the Swedish and other shareholders would follow the US' lead. For this operation, the new CEO would bring Travtelio to the stock market, and the current shareholders would not keep their shares.

The introduction of Travtelio on the European stock exchanges was indeed launched a few weeks later. Almost immediately, the HR Division began to organise courses for all Travtelio

managers and employees on the duties of personnel of a company quoted on the stock market. Employees should behave cautiously with information concerning the state of the company, for such information might have an effect on the value of the shares. Much emphasis was laid on the risk of insider information when buying or selling Travtelio shares.

Gradually, more detailed news was released concerning the operation. A number of shares would be reserved, to be bought by employees at a favourable price, about ten percent lower than the introduction price of the shares. A plan was announced providing an undisclosed number of options on shares given to all Travtelio higher managers at very low price or at no price at all, depending on how high up in the hierarchy the managers worked. Presidents would receive a number of shares for free, as well as a number of options on shares to be exercised or not within two years. These numbers, depending on the function levels of the managers, was kept secret. The numbers were sent by letter to each individually; it was forbidden to divulge one's number of options or shares received. The incentive behind this handing over of shares or options to managers was of course that managers who owned part of the company would work better and harder to advance the stock value of Travtelio. Employees, and also managers, could buy shares at privileged prices up to an amount of fifteen percent of their annual salary.

Life went on at Travtelio and at its IT Division. The new CEO was much more reserved than the former. Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre rarely spoke in public. He appointed a spokeswoman who spoke in his name. It was said Buisseyre avoided speeches to not jeopardise the introduction of Travtelio to the stock market. He worked almost exclusively to see this mission through successfully. Buisseyre worked with Andrew Raga and with financial experts of a world-renown consultancy firm.

Raga, though theoretically also the CIO, did not show up at the IT staff meetings. Rachel Kyle stayed in her office and came only out of it to preside over these weekly staff meetings. Only about five IT Directors participated at those meetings, and they all remarked the contempt with which Kyle directed the discussions. The meetings were kept shorter than ever.

Kyle's anger soared when Jan Stevens showed her an article that appeared in the press a few weeks after Raga's appointment as head of IT. Reporters had interviewed Raga and the article was published in a free magazine for IT professionals. Almost all managers, analysts, developers and technicians of IT read avidly this magazine for its excellent local and international news on the IT industry. Raga stated he would reorganise and revitalise Travtelio's IT departments. He would make of the division a leaner and meaner instrument. Some of the current IT departments would be integrated into other business divisions. Many Travtelio managers read this as the splitting up of the IT Division in parts that would be distributed over the business divisions. IT Directors were then not needed anymore, which was a substantial economy for the company.

'So, that is why no CIO has been appointed,' Sara Jansen commented. 'Andrew Raga shall divide the IT Division in separate parts and give the parts to his colleagues. There shall not ever be a CIO anymore at Travtelio, and no more Directors either. We of the staff meeting will all be dismissed soon. Why the hell do we go on with these discussions?'

Rachel Kyle didn't answer, but it was clear she had not known about Raga's intentions. 'That cannot be,' Jan Stevens said. 'The company left without a CIO would have no IT strategy anymore. The other Presidents cannot care less about IT. IT is not their core business. Budgets of enhancing IT shall be cancelled. Quality management shall suffer or remain neglected. All the other companies in comparable businesses believe IT is essential to their business, a strategic asset to augment productivity and to develop new services. Travtelio

would embark on a course that would be detrimental for the future of the company in its entirety!’

‘Watch my words,’ Sara answered. ‘This will become a bomb in international IT. Andrew Raga will be lauded as the new visionary, and he will be invited to high-brow conferences on the subject. He shall become famous, our Raga, for being able to really shake things up. The industry loves that! He shall be hailed for having shred traditions, broken up divisions with daring, entering untraveled waters, and for having radically changed the playbook. We shall only know in ten years whether this movement is the right one, which it very probably is not, but a lot can happen to him in the meantime. Where will Raga be when it becomes clear his strategy was wrong? For the moment, however, he may well be regarded as the new visionary hero of our era in business. With each publication on the subject he will be quoted, and he will be famous among business leaders.’

The same article held a comment of Raga on how lax the management of IT had been under his predecessor.

‘When I took up my job as head of IT,’ Raga stated, ‘I remarked immediately how at five o’clock all the lights went out on the floors of IT personnel, as if to notify to all developers they could and should stop working and leave the building. I had this measure cancelled!’ Andrew Raga was right. Lights went out at 17:00, but not just on the IT floors. The lights were dimmed in the entire building. Also, the lamps were immediately switched on at almost all floors, manually, from switches on the walls, for another hour, and so on, by the employees that were still at work. Also, not IT had asked for this measure, but Global Services, out for economy in electricity. Raga ordered the lights to be kept on at the IT floors. The matter was nothing more but an insignificant wasp bite to IT pride, but it hurt certain people, especially the managers and the high level specialists who worked much more than the thirty-eight hours a week they were supposed to deliver to Travtelio. Many IT workers started at 08:00 and stayed on until after 18:00, working fifty hours a week or more. The Union representatives protested instantly in a message distributed on papers at Travtelio’s entrance doors, accusing Andrew Raga of installing an illegal system of unpaid overwork hours, and that subject was painful and delicate in a country where unemployment was close to ten percent and rising. The Unions tried everything they could to keep overwork to strict minimums so that the largest companies, such as Travtelio, would be obliged to hire people. Henceforth, Thomas Denis spoke of Andrew Raga only as “our enlightened lamplighter”.

Travtelio was not hiring people, on the contrary. Gerald Godelin had launched a month before his leaving the company yet one more wave of pre-pension plans, urging employees older than fifty to stay at home. They would receive almost their normal last salary, minus bonuses, but with only less than ten percent loss on salary until their age of sixty. At sixty, they would automatically enter the Government pension plan, even though they lost three percent for every year under sixty-five they did not work. The plan was generous, for the employees who entered it would not lose much on their salaries and in Belgium one could find many opportunities to gain a little money more in all kinds of minor undeclared, illegal work circuits that were impossible to check upon by labour inspectors.

Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre continued the plan and most workers older than fifty accepted the arrangement, weary of the atmosphere of stress at Travtelio, weary of hearing younger upwards-moving smart youngsters tell them the older had to make place for the younger. After the plan, it was difficult to find yet a man or woman of over fifty in the company, and that was much an issue for two reasons. With the older managers, knowledge and experience fled from Travtelio. Some of that know-how entered competition, for the former employees of Travtelio delivered short sessions of consultancy to other companies.

‘Our security bosses must tear their hairs out,’ Thomas Denis declared. ‘Imagine: for years they have been trying to keep all information on our processes and methods inside, controlling our briefcases and so on. Now, these pre-pension guys just send thousands of mails loaded with confidential files to their home addresses, and they stuff their pockets full of USB pencils, and all that information is sold at a sweet consultancy price to the competition, courtesy of Travtelio. This is a mad, mad world.’

Travtelio also slid into the risky business environment of daring thrusts into unknown territories of business and finances, unchallenged by the probably wiser advice of the more experienced managers who were all gone.

Around that time, the evaluations of the employees began in earnest for the next round of giving employees a score of very good, good, normal, mediocre, bad or very bad at the annual evaluations. Tension rose because two new measures were introduced for this yearly evaluation round.

One measure was the effective dismissal of people who would obtain for the second time an evaluation of very bad. That measure had been announced earlier, but it had not been acted upon the first time, for an obvious reason: the lack of two evaluations. Nobody had really believed this theoretical possibility would be applied. The HR Directors now received instructions to lay off immediately and with no procedure of appeal people who were in that case.

The other measure gathered few reactions at first, but then protests grew loudly, and again the Labour Unions reacted angrily. Managers would receive a bonus if they succeeded in lowering their budgets necessary to run their departments by a certain percentage, without damaging production or services. The budget included personnel costs, such as salaries. The bonus was an open invitation to managers to state they could provide the same service or products with fewer people. Indeed, employees were practically the only budget item on which managers could work to lower budgets. The controversial measure was announced before the end date of the decision for employees to enter the pre-pension plans or not. The measure contributed to a massive flight of fifty-plus people of all levels into the pre-pension plans.

7

Rachel Kyle led a meeting with the Directors of IT. Several IT managers attended the meeting too. Sigvard Sandström was not present this time; he was on travel to Sweden for a few days. The staff meeting was mostly on how the annual evaluations of personnel would be held this year. It was decided the setting of objectives for the next year and the evaluations of the past year would be cascaded down, starting from the higher levels of management down to the lower ranks. Since the criteria for the individual evaluations had been established in the function descriptions and in the objectives, there should be no hard issue determining the scores. Moreover, IT had done well the previous year on all statistics and had remained well within tough budgets. Rachel Kyle proposed to have the scores gathered and discussed before being handed over officially to the employees and managers. It could not be allowed that managers judged employees very differently. Minor changes would have to be made by the staff meeting. Sara Jansen would organise the proceedings.

At that moment of the discussion, the door opened briskly and Andrew Raga walked in. He had never before attended these meetings. He had not announced his presence. He entered in the middle of the discussions. Everybody wondered what he came for, wondering why Raga had suddenly decided to exercise his prerogatives of leader of IT. Rachel Kyle was visibly

annoyed and the anger showed on her face. Kyle made no remarks, but her displeasure could be read even by an outsider. Raga told Kyle to proceed and lead the rest of the meeting. He would only say a few words at the end. The discussions had been animated until then. Now, the Directors who reported to Kyle remained silent and let Kyle speak. They merely nodded in agreement when Kyle proposed something. It was better not to talk when such an important high-rank President, and hence very dangerous person, sat at the same table. No manager wanted to displease a President and get kicked out of Travtelio, more so because everybody had read the interview of Raga in the IT magazine. Raga sat down and listened. He said hello to nobody, only muttered, 'continue, continue!' He did not enter the discussions. He only stated at the end of the meeting he wanted to say a few words.

Raga said, 'I came to your staff meeting to give you a few announcements of the Executive Board of Directors. The Board asked each President to do this in his Division, for the announcements will remain oral only, and that is therefore the main reason why I am here. You have been discussing the annual evaluation procedure, and that is one of the points that have drawn particularly the attention of the Board.

The Board remarked during the past evaluations that there were discrepancies in the spread of the percentages in each evaluation category of scores assigned. In other words, some divisions gave for instance much more scores of "good" or even of "very good" than other divisions. We cannot have such discrepancies. The percentages of the categories should be the same in all divisions globally. The Board can accept discrepancies from one group to another, but overall, per division, the percentages should be the same for all divisions. The Executive Board has therefore decided that it will provide the percentages for each category, and you will have to conform to these. The current, provisional, spread is five percent for "very good", ten percent for "good", fifty-five percent for "normal", twenty-five percent for "mediocre" and five percent for "bad". This spread is the average of all divisions at the last evaluation. Deviations may be allowed, of course, within certain boundaries the Board will decide upon. The President for HR will present the final percentages to your own HR Director, and she will be held responsible for the conformance with the objectives for the spread. You must each keep this procedure secret, as well as the percentages for each category. This is paramount for the success of the justified spread. Nothing must be written on paper concerning this measure, no report on this kind of deliberation, nothing.

All this means you will have to proceed in two steps. First you must gather the scores as the managers want to give to the individual employees, cascaded down of course, then you must discuss how to adapt the figures to the percentages provided by the Board. Only then may the managers give the final scores to the employees. I heard this was already the way you wanted to do in this Division, and the fact is that many divisions also desired to reach such a consensus over scores before sending them to HR. The only difference will be that you shall have to take into account the spread of scores provided by the Board.'

Raga let this communication sink in. Nobody in the staff meeting commented.

Jan Stevens thought, 'this year, we already have fired the few people who performed badly. We should have waited. We cannot put those people anymore in the "bad" category. We do not really have bad performing people left over. The five percent ordered by the Board is quite higher than what we have for IT. If we give the "bad" score to five percent of our thousand employees, that will mean we condemn within two years about fifty people to be fired additionally from the company. We don't want to do that. Travtelio IT shall have to give "bad" to fifty other names next year compared to this year if it wants to avoid such a bloodbath. This is going to be tricky business! The staff meetings shall be very animated on this subject.'

Raga continued, 'As to my second announcement, well, you may have heard also about the intentions of the Executive Board to reorganise the IT Division. The Board aims to bring IT closer to the business. Therefore, the applications development groups will be incorporated in the divisions that need the new software. For instance, the development groups that develop financial software will be integrated in the Finance Division. The development groups that build software for HR applications will join the HR Division. IT Operations can go to our General Operations Division of Production, and so on. The budgets for IT will be split up accordingly in the next few months. HR will discuss the reorganisation and its implications with the Labour Unions first. As a result of this, positions of Directors will be opened in the Travelio divisions and these people will lead the groups of the new organisation. You will of course be allowed to compete for those jobs. The Presidents of the division, assisted by a committee of people of their groups will choose the Directors. It is not the intention of the Board to dismiss people in this exercise.'

Sara Jansen asked, 'what will happen to the current Directors of IT who are not chosen for a position in the new organisation? What will happen to the current Directors for which no comparable position is opened in the new organisation?'

'I cannot really answer that question,' Raga replied sadly. 'We will handle such cases, of course. Travelio is a large enterprise, in which the current IT Directors can find a place.'

'Would that be with the same function code?' Jan Stevens asked.

Raga shot him an angry look. 'Like I said, I cannot give you a general answer. Each case will be handled individually, I am sure, to mutual satisfaction.'

'How will the exercise proceed?' Sara Jansen asked.

'In a first phase, we will decide on the new groups, and determine where they will best be placed. That means drawing up a new organisation chart. You will of course be asked to participate in this. The work has already been started by the Presidents of the Board, who set up task groups in their divisions and a common task group. The tasks groups will define the job content of the IT groups, how large the groups must be, and where which group will go. When that work is finished, the complete function descriptions of the heads of the groups will be defined. For this too, the Presidents will ask your collaboration. You will write the function content of the managers and of the employees. Then, the HR President will define the function codes, the ESC's, of each manager. We will make no changes in a first phase but at management level. Later still, HR will open the management positions to competition, and you will be invited to send in your candidature to a maximum of two jobs per person. The Presidents will decide on who is the best person for which job.'

'Will only current IT Directors and IT managers be allowed to compete for a position of IT?'

'No, of course not,' Raga replied. 'The open places will be jobs of management. All managers will be allowed to enter their candidature. You seem to have the best qualification, of course. Only the people of the division will be allowed to compete for a manager job within that division, plus all the IT managers.'

Raga dangled the possibility for the IT managers to be saved yet.

The room kept silent.

'Do you have any questions?' Andrew Raga asked. He looked around the table, but nobody challenged his eyes. Everybody looked to the other Directors of IT at that moment, maybe asking what colleague would be their competitor, to which friend they would be a competitor.

'Well then,' Raga continued, 'if there are no questions, I will take my leave now.'

He stood up and went to the door; he closed the door behind him.

‘Did you really have no questions?’ Rachel Kyle asked, smiling. ‘I will be leaving you soon then, she said, ‘for if there will be no CIO anymore in the future, there will also be no Vice-CIO.’

‘Each division has its HR Director already,’ Sara Jansen remarked bitterly. ‘I will be dumped. I will be a small-time manager in one of the divisions, or shown the exit. I guess there is some hope for you, guys!’

‘No, there isn’t!’ Thomas Denis stated. ‘The Division Presidents will appoint people they know and have confidence in and want to reward. Knowledge of IT shall be the last criterion they will be concerned with. The current tendency in Travtelio is to believe firmly that any manager can manage any group; he or she does not need to be burdened with any knowledge of the technology or the processes. The Presidents will not appoint one of us, arrogant IT people! In the past, we all had to refuse some development of applications because of lack of budgets. The divisions have reproached us that, for although they had the funds, higher management wanted to limit IT expenditures. They will hold that now against us. Needless to say, total IT expenditures will rise spectacularly unless a very strict budget control is exercised on that, but any division can transfer money from one budget item to the other if necessary. In the end, that is the only positive point for IT, though not for Travtelio.’

‘We can define the job content of the future IT Directors,’ Roland Devos commented, ‘but that sounds to me like we will be obliged to describe the hatchet under which our heads will soon fall!’

‘I thought a CIO was necessary to define IT strategy,’ Jan Stevens said, ‘but I have checked. In the last ten years the IT Division has had six IT Presidents or CIO’s. The half-life of a CIO seems therefore to be something like one year. That must have ring a bell with the Board of Presidents that the IT Division is almost not manageable, and also that since the CIO’s stay only for such short times strategy is not necessary, anyhow.’

‘We all know you define IT strategy,’ Thomas Denis reacted, ‘but I doubt that position will be recognised. This should not really be an issue for a while, because our managers know now how to consult the computer manufacturers to know what kind of technologies are on the market, but a global plan shall be missed in five years or so. Only after five years. Who cares about a period of five years when the introduction to the stock exchange demands financial results to be published every three months, and quarterly results only being decisive for the value of stocks? Introduction to the stock exchange means short term vision for the enterprise, which is a chronic issue for North American companies, by the way.’

The staff managers of IT agreed with this. Each manager was already thinking about how he would define his function and exaggerate the contribution of his group to Travtelio, for from that description depended the ESC code and hence the salary. The opening of the positions would be a disaster for some Directors, but might also be a boon for others. Each Director also thought about what persons among his proper collaborators might become a potential competitor.

Jan Stevens was sure there would be no open position for what he did today. He thought about Jana Kovar.

Jan asked to Rachel Kyle, ‘what will happen to the projects that are under way of being developed now, and what will happen with the expats who have contracts with Travtelio?’

Rachel Kyle thought about that. She had heard a few things, not in relation to the new organisation for IT, but only because the stock market operation of Travtelio caused also the withdrawal of the current shareholder companies delivering the consultants of the projects.

‘The projects will not be junked. The Board has already decided, in agreement with the shareholders, to continue all the current projects to their end. At the end of each project,

Travtelio alone will decide whether to keep on the expat consultants hired from the shareholders. My guess is most of the expats will return to where they come from in a few months. You know, we expats, we face similar problems as you. We will return to our companies much sooner than we expected, but what will we find there? The jobs we had before have been occupied in our absence. We are as unsure as you about what we will be doing in the future!’

‘Do you have any idea of when you will leave?’ Jan Stevens insisted.

Kyle hated the answer she had to give. She wanted to say, ‘tomorrow if I have a suitable job waiting for me,’ but she answered only, ‘no! You will hear from me in due time.’

That ended the staff meeting, for Rachel Kyle stood and left the room. Jan Stevens followed her; behind him, pandemonium broke loose.

Jan Stevens did not hear Thomas Denis declare coldly, ‘so, guys, now we all know how our high-brow bosses appreciate the fine services you delighted Travtelio with in the past. Our gnarled hands shall not be filled with sweets and honey. The vultures are hovering above us! Have no illusions left, all you who are still in this room; your souls shall wither in hell. The ones who can grab the last of the prepension plans should now jump to the occasion. The others had better wait until they get thrown out of the company and then demand a golden handshake, threatening to raise hell in the newspapers – if those still care, which they shall probably not, anyway. Travtelio shall be smart enough not to throw you out, however. You shall be offered a miserable, humiliating job instead, so that you will run off by your own initiative. That should be much cheaper for the company! The final dice have been thrown. There are winners and losers in this game. You had better realise the losers and the suckers, the goners, are all of us now! The best we can do is to cut our losses!’

8

Around that time, in one of possibly the last status meetings of the project of Jana Kovar, Jana told Jan Stevens of her ultimate findings. They sat alone in a closed doors meeting room. It was late in the afternoon. Jan had to scramble to get a few last things done, then he met Jana. Jan started by telling her current project was extended for another six months. The aim now was to investigate the potential and feasibility of the newest kinds of massive multiprocessor computer hardware for Data Warehouse functions, and the definition of a business case on how much money Travtelio might win in a move from one kind of hardware to the other. Jana Kovar could stay for another six months at least at Travtelio; Jan announced her however that within that time he would very probably have left Travtelio. He broke the news of the reorganisation of IT to Jana. She was dumbstricken at first.

‘What are we going to do after the six months?’ Jana asked.

‘I will have a new job by then,’ Jan answered, ‘though not at Travtelio. I am fed up with this company. I may have something to propose to you, but I still have to think about that. We must discuss this later. Give me a few days and I’ll tell you what it is about.’

Then, Jana started to talk about further investigations she had embarked on concerning the security issue.

‘In fact,’ she said, ‘we found out there has not really been an issue. The consultants and the IT chaps felt pretty relieved!’

‘How is that?’

‘We had a breakthrough when we linked our access data with data from the Office Automation Group and from the Networking Group, something we had not done before. We

found the two strange userids had been used to access from two personal computers only, belonging to Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre and Andrew Raga. We know precisely which data were accessed, large amounts of data. The same userids took access to the archives of the Office Automation Group too. So we finally did get hold of the physical addresses. Since the two persons are now the CEO and the Finance President of Travtelio, we can state with certainty there has been no outside leak or break-in to our systems. The matter can be dropped. These two persons have the right to access any data of Travtelio.’

Jana looked at Jan, expecting him to object. She was his eyebrows go up. She pretended not to notice. She smiled.

‘They have that right today, indeed,’ Jan Stevens replied with a touch of smugness in his voice, ‘though I am not sure they had a right of access to all the mails exchanged by individuals in the past. That point is still hotly debated in the Justice Courts. Do you know anything about what actually they were looking for?’

‘Why, Jan Stevens, would you want to spy upon your CEO and Finance President and CIO?’ Jan Stevens hesitated. ‘I am curious, yes, what they found. They have in one way or the other ousted out Gerald Godelin. I have that information from my friend, Charles de Trioteignes. I wonder whether they found ammunition in the Data Warehouse, and which ammunition. Can you look that up?’

‘Theoretically, I could. But what are you involving me in, Jan? I do not want to do anything illegal. There are privacy laws in this country.’

‘You would still be investigating the security issue. I happen to be the only guy in IT who has the application of the privacy laws in his job description, though I have no people for that function. So, I can ask you officially to continue your investigation. I can send you a mail so that you have something official, black on white.’

‘Fine. I will continue searching.’

Jana was a little worried after that. She wondered what Jan was up to.

Actually, there was more. IT Operations people were pissed off by Karl Geerts. One of the Office Automation Managers had brought a copy of parts of Gerald Godelin’s former portable personal computer to Jan Stevens. The man had said to Jan to have a look at what he had found, and to what he and his colleagues had given to Mark Stephenson. Jan had been appalled at the photographs. Stephenson had ordered the man to destroy the files, but the IT manager kept a copy of the files even though he did not know what to do with them. Charles de Trioteignes had hinted at Jan how Godelin might have been forced to leave Travtelio. Jan started to comprehend the reasons of Godelin’s demise, and the means employed. He told Jana. Jana was even more scared afterwards, and Jan had a hard time convincing her to continue to investigate.

Chapter Seven. Ommegang

The Grand' Place of Brussels displayed a feast of colours in the late afternoon. The orange sun slid behind the ancient guild houses, leaving a flaming sky, but the light hazed only by the impurities of the city still pervaded the square. Jan Stevens and Jana Kovar strolled into the place, emerging from a side street into the square. Jan knew what to expect, but Jana gasped. Out of all the windows of the stately buildings hung a myriad of flags, banners and gonfalons in all possible, intricate patterns of hues. The flags flapped in the warm breeze. The colours were vivid and contrasting. Red and yellow or gold dominated in the ancient market place, which was lined with the magnificent Baroque façades of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In front of the vast Gothic town hall stood a long and high tribune, which was already filling with people, although the spectacle she and Jan had come to watch would not start for more than an hour.

Jana's eyes were drawn upwards to beyond the wooden tribune, towards the high bell tower of the Town Hall that rose to the still bright sky. Swallows swooped over the rooftops, the harbingers of evening. This tower was one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture she had ever seen, and she could not but admire it each time she had walked in this place before. The old grey stones of the Town Hall contrasted with the exuberance of the façades of the Guild Houses of the square. Jana had been at the Grand' Place many times in the past, of course. The spectacle of so many, fine old buildings, which formed a splendidly harmonious, global façade, all around the market place, never failed to impress her. The wealth of ancient power gleamed here, but the glamour was all that remained of the glory that once had been very real. While Jan and Jana advanced, she saw on the other side of the Town Hall, yet another tribune. This one was not so high in gradations as the other tribune, on which naked wooden benches had been prepared. It had a long, straight form, and was much lower. The structure was as long as on the other side, but it was completely covered with red cloth. Red cloth hung on all sides, hiding the wood underneath, and red cloth was laid out also on the floor. This must be the tribune of the King and of the Royal Family, thought Jana. A kind of dais had been erected in the middle of that tribune, a dais to which only a few stairs led, and the decoration here contained more gold. On the dais stood two red throne seats. Jana wondered who would come to sit on the grand throne that had been prepared on these.

'Not the King,' Jan whispered, 'the Emperor will sit there!'

Jana knew what an Emperor was. After all, Prague had once been the capital of Czechia's and Germany's most famous Emperor Charles IV in the fifteenth century, but Emperors had stopped to reign and even to be appointed, about two hundred years ago!

'You'll see,' Jan said smiling, 'let's have a seat, and I'll explain!'

Jan had only proposed to Jana to accompany him to a feast on the Grand' Place, without explaining to her to what kind of festivities he took her to. It was a surprise, he told Jana. Jan now drew her on to yet another tribune, on the right side of the Grand' Place when one stood with one's back to the Town Hall, left from the side street Jan and Jana emerged from.

Jan showed two cards to a young woman who wore a badge, and the girl pointed to a place high up on this tribune. Cards still in hand, Jan drew Jana on, high up the stairs, up to that tribune. Jana passed to the rows of undecorated benches on the lower side, but Jan drew her up to the higher side of the tribune which was also covered with red cloth, and here stood chairs instead of benches. Three times, young people wearing badges checked on Jan and Jana's cards. A few policemen walked here, too. Jan wore a bag, and that bag got searched. Each time, Jan had to show the cards. Each time the girls and boys looked at Jan and Jana with respect and a little awe, even. They showed Jan where the numbered places were, and the

last one brought the pair to their seats. This tribune was almost empty at this hour. Finally, Jan and Jana sat.

‘I’m sorry to have brought you so soon,’ Jan apologised, ‘but it can become very hectic here, later on. The boys and girls lose control and get nervous. Mistakes are always made; people get up here with the wrong cards, even with forged cards, or they arrive with more people than they have cards for, claiming errors in the number of tickets sent. It is usually not a big issue, because many people also reserve a place or receive a free card and do not show up. Still, it can be cumbersome, with shouts and insults and a lot of explaining, so I wanted to spare you that! Anyway, I brought biscuits for you and I have tucked away a flask of whisky under my jacket, so we have something to keep us warm and happy!’

Jana did not need to be kept warm, for this was the first of July. The air was dry. It had not rained for a week. The Grand’ Place had been heated up by a bright sun that shone the entire day into its bowl.

‘It can get chilly in the evening,’ Jan explained. ‘The feast may last beyond midnight. I have brought a woollen plaid for you!’

Jan propped the bag with the plaid between his legs and Jana was curious, so she opened the bag with one hand to see indeed the cloth, a small umbrella, and the biscuits. She was surprised at how Jan always showed such deference to her and cared for her. It slightly annoyed her. She was not used to such attentions from a man.

‘Do you always think of everything?’ Jana smiled, puzzled by Jan’s preparations.

Then she said, ‘you have done this before! You have already been to this festival, here, on this tribune! Tell me about the women you have brought here before me!’

‘Yes and no,’ Jan laughed. ‘Yes, I have been here, often, but no, I have not been here with other women. When I was a young boy, I helped set this up. I helped with the tribunes, with the decoration of the Emperor’s throne, and later I also did exactly like the youths who got us to our places, here on the VIP tribune.’

‘Have you brought me to a concert in the open? Or are we at a festival of folkloric dances?’ Jana asked.

Jan didn’t answer immediately.

Jana looked around. More and more people entered the place from the side streets. They filled the tribune at her left, the tribune placed against the Town Hall. Also the tribune where they sat filled up. When the people looked for their seats, they glanced furtively at her in appreciation, and some nodded to Jan. Jana made a very conspicuous figure on the tribune. She also saw people sitting at almost all the windows of the buildings around the Grand’ Place.

‘There are people sitting at the windows,’ Jana remarked. ‘I would have thought nobody really lived in these houses.’

‘The most important people are at the windows of the Gothic Town Hall,’ Jan replied. ‘The people around have special authorisations. We might have had a place in the Town Hall too, had I asked for a seat there, but the view is a little too high from there to my taste, and there are not so many sitting places there. Also, many people come to the Town Hall, so we would have been pushed around there. I thought you would be more comfortable here and get a better feeling of the feast. I gambled on nice weather.’

‘How do you know all that?’ Jana asked.

‘It is a long story. I brought you here because I must tell you more about me, and what you are about to witness has to do with that,’ Jan explained. ‘In less than an hour will start the world-famous Ommegang of Brussels. In 1549, Emperor Charles V, born in Flanders, was

honoured by the people of Brussels. Charles came to present his son to the Burghers of the town, and the people of Brussels feasted him. Charles V came also to attend a procession that had been held in Brussels since the middle of the fourteenth century. Brussels was then a centre of the cloth industry, a very rich town, the centre of the Duchy of Brabant.’

‘Tell me the whole story,’ Jana asked.

‘The Burghers of Brussels had built a chapel to the honour of the Virgin Mary on the Sablon hill. Voices told the wife of a poor cloth workman the Virgin wanted to reward the city for that. The woman was called Beatrice Soetkens. The voices told Beatrice to row on the river to Antwerp with her husband, to get a miraculous statue from the Cathedral of Antwerp, a statue of the Virgin called Our Lady of the Branch, and bring that to Brussels. That was a theft, of course, but one divinely ordained. A sacristan of Brussels tried to stop Beatrice, but he got petrified on the spot! The couple removed the statue out of the Cathedral, and they rowed back, down the Scheldt River and the Zenne, back to Brussels. Beatrice’s husband and a rower got tired of rowing the boat counter-current, but the boat was pushed on by divine forces to Brussels, to a place where militiamen of the Crossbow Guild were practising. The crossbowmen recognised a miracle when they saw one, so they accompanied Beatrice and her husband in triumph to the chapel on the Sablon Hill. They promised two things. First, they would build a finer church to house the statue. That church was indeed built in 1348, and it still stands as the Sablon Church of Our Lady till this day. We can visit that chapel another time, if you want. It is one of the finest churches of Brussels, and especially the inside is amazing! The second promise of the Guild of Crossbowmen was to hold a yearly procession through the streets of Brussels, a procession in which the statue of the Virgin was carried around the church, hence the word of “Ommegang”, which means in the ancient Flemish dialect then spoken in the town “to walk around”, to walk around the church, and around Brussels, of course.’

‘I know really only little about you, Jan. We speak English together and I know you speak French and Dutch perfectly. What is your mother tongue?’

Jan hesitated. ‘My mother tongue is Dutch, but my mother spoke two languages, one for the servants and one for her invitees, which is why I too speak both languages. The original language spoken in Brussels was a dialect, a tongue between Dutch and German, spoken with variations in sounds from Brussels to the Rhine. The dialects are not quite like the official Dutch of Flanders, which is the language of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. I did my studies in Dutch, however.’

‘I thought your accent was not French, but I wasn’t sure.’

Jan continued. ‘Anyway, since about 1350, the Ommegang has taken place in this town. The statue of the Virgin is still carried around through the streets of Brussels, and it comes also here, today, at the Grand’ Place.’

‘So we have come to witness a religious procession?’ Jana laughed.

‘Yes, but a special one! In fact, we will see the procession honoured by the presence of Emperor Charles V in 1549. Charles V was the most powerful Emperor of the sixteenth century. He ruled over Spain, over parts of France, over Flanders and Brabant, over the Netherlands, and he was Emperor of Germany. Spain owned vast territories in South America, and all over the world, so it was said of Charles V he ruled over lands so vast the sun never set over them! He was also born in Flanders, in the town of Ghent. He got his early education from his aunt, Margaret of Austria, in the town of Mechelen. Charles is much of a hero in Brussels, as famous as the statue of the Virgin you will see being carried in a while. All the people of the procession are dressed in medieval clothing. You will see horse riders in

medieval costumes, drummers and pipers, dancers, flag bearers, and so on, a real medieval spectacle, though, of course, the sixteenth century was a Renaissance period and not really the Middle Ages anymore. The spectacle will be quite grand, I assure you, something that you should not miss while in Brussels.'

'I heard of it,' Jana replied, 'I just did not realise we were going to that procession.'

'The Ommegang is Brussels' main feast!'

'Right, fine! That should be splendid then,' Jana commented, still somewhat sceptic.

Dusk set in slowly. The summer light refused to die. Torches were nevertheless lit around the Place. Some of these let heavy fumes whirl to the sky, and these remained hanging in the Grand' Place to form an eerie atmosphere that inspired in Jana a strange mood of outworldly expectations. The last light of the sunken sun cut through the haze. Searchlights suddenly flooded the Town Hall in red and blue light. The crowd on the tribunes cheered when the soft colours flowed over the people.

The tribunes were practically filled by then. At every window faces appeared, looking down joyfully at the bustle in the Grand' Place. People and guardians ran all over the square.

Jana studied one after the other all the ancient Baroque façades of the former guild houses.

Many of the façades wore gilded decorations. Jana found the style pompous, more Baroque than Renaissance or Gothic. She had been to this Grand' Place before, but she had never seen it at leisure. She had then only strolled aimlessly, only seeking an impression, and continued to walk. Now, she had the time to study the intricate forms of the façades, as if she saw them for the first time. She found the ornaments on top of the buildings proud and a little too overbearing for her taste, but she granted the architecture was consistent and formed a splendid whole. Prague was as old and beautiful, and some places of her town were of course as inspiring and imposing as this Grand' Place, but in the old town of Prague, few buildings were as grand as here. Brussels had been a very rich town, indeed.

Jana sat, and she felt at ease. She relaxed. She felt safe with Jan Stevens. The stress of her work was shed off on this weekend. She looked up again, at the tower of the Town Hall, and she remarked Saint Michael on top, killing the dragon every moment for the last five centuries or so. Did Michael resemble Jan for her? People passed by them on the tribune and so many greeted Jan; she had to ask him why that was. Did Jan know everybody in Brussels?

Suspicion gripped her. She looked at him. The evening breeze tousled his hair.

'Who are the people on this tribune?' Jana asked, 'who are the people in the Town Hall and at the windows? Would that be the Mayor of Brussels and his Assistants? Why are we sitting on the VIP tribune?'

'The Mayor may be there, yes,' Jan replied.

Jana saw him hesitate.

Then, Jan said, 'I might as well tell you now. I would have to tell you this anyhow, sooner or later. Some of the people at the windows, there, are the descendants of the organisers of the procession of 1549. They are members of the families and dynasties called the Seven Lineages of Brussels. In French, they are called the "Sept Lignages".'

The Lineages or Noble Houses of the city were seven families who reigned over Brussels since the Middle Ages to the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the French Revolution, to when the French revolutionary armies conquered Brussels. The seven families were the Roodebeke, Serroelofs, Coudenbergh, Sweerts, Sleeus, Steenweegs and Serhuyghs. The people who ruled over Brussels could not exert a trade. They had to live off their money, which meant they had to trade through middlemen, and marry wealthy ladies. The trades of merchants, lawyers, cloth makers, were thought to be incompatible with the functions to which they were called. The men of the Lineages were the Magistrates or Mayors of the town,

the Échevins or Assistants to the Mayors, the Captains of the Guards, the Deans of the Drapers' Guild, which was as in Florence the main guild of the town, and the Treasurers. Of course, when at the beginning of the Middle Ages there were only seven names, the number of the names grew by marriage, alliances and adoptions. I don't know exactly how many families can claim descentance from the seven original families, but there must be a couple of hundred. Many of those names are now also the names of the finest, aristocratic families of the country. Belgian aristocracy was abolished during the French Republic of the nineteenth century, when Belgium was conquered by the Revolutionary Armies, and so were the Noble Houses of Brussels and their privileges to rule the city. After Napoleon Bonaparte got defeated at Waterloo in 1815, the Kingdom re-installed in Paris, the aristocratic titles of Belgium were also re-installed, but not the Noble Houses of Brussels. Either that was not necessary anymore, for many of the families had become aristocratic, or the King of the Netherlands feared the old city nobility would remain too much linked to the power of the cities and might still challenge the authority of the Kings.

The families of the Noble Houses are not aristocratic in the true sense. But in Brussels, they are still in high consideration. The people behind the windows of the Town Hall are currently dignitaries, plus members of the Seven Lineages that still play a role of importance, or those of them who organise the event. Most of the people who walk in the Ommegang, in the Court of Emperor Charles V, are people of the aristocracy or of the Lineages. If you are not a member of those dynasties, you will not be allowed to walk with the Emperor or with the Virgin Mary. The man who plays Charles V is a member of the highest and most ancient aristocracy of the country.'

'Why do so many people around us here, seem to know you?'

'That is because I am one of the descendants of a very old family of Brussels, a family which was once part of the Seven Lineages!'

Jana gasped. She looked straight at Jan.

Jan nodded. 'Yes, Jana. Here on the VIP tribune of the Ommegang, the city of Brussels places not only the King and other Members of the Royal Family who want to watch the event, the Ministers of the country, but also the members of the Lineages who are not in the Town Hall and who could reserve early enough. I was not early, but I know the men of the Lineages, and I could thus secure tickets for us. I hoped much the weather to be as nice as it is today, for the people in the Town Hall would have made too much fuss about us. Too many people in there know me. I am not an aristocrat in the full sense of the word, but I wear my mother's name, and my mother's family claims descentance from the Seven Lineage families.'

'Why, Jan Stevens,' Jana exclaimed, 'you never told me anything of that! I do am impressed! Look at me, a former Communist sitting with an aristocrat!'

Jana pondered that over, then said, 'is that why you knew your friend, Charles de Trioteignes?'

'Yes,' Jan admitted. 'The Trioteignes are aristocratic, but they also claim descentance from a noble family as ancient and famous as the Seven Lineages. That is not the reason why we became friends, though, but I guess it made our contacts easier in the beginning. Trioteignes will walk today in the procession. He plays one of the courtiers of Charles V!'

'Amazing! You really amaze me,' Jana said. She looked with more interest at the Grand Place and at the guild houses.

At that moment, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre stepped onto the tribune and was helped to a place higher up the same tribune. He noticed Jan Stevens and Jana Kovar, suppressed his surprise, but still nodded at Jana and sat down.

‘Buisseyre, the CEO of Travtelio, has a seat here too,’ Jana commented. ‘Is he a member also of the Noble Houses of Brussels?’

‘No,’ Jan replied, ‘not that I know. His family name is not on the list of the Lineages. He is aristocracy, though, and I suppose he has enough relations to have secured a ticket.’

‘How did you get your tickets?’

‘Knowing the members of the Lineages helps. I got my tickets by Trioteignes, who is also a friend of members of the Committee that organises the Ommegang. I would not have been able to get a ticket so late had I not been connected to the Seven Lineage Families. I also helped the Committee when I was younger. The young people you saw here, who helped us find our seat, they are all youngsters of the Families! I helped the organisation, a long time ago.’

‘So you are not an aristocrat, but half an aristocrat, a frustrated aristocrat!’

Jan’s face reddened, changed to amused surprise, and then he burst out in such hard laughter that the people around him looked to the Grand’ Place to find out what so funny had happened there.

‘You might say that, yes,’ Jan laughed.

‘Are you still involved with the Lineages?’

‘Not really! I am still member of a side committee, but I rarely attend to the meetings. The Seven Lineages are now mainly organised by the aristocratic families, members also, who harbour close and many ties to the groups of people involved in finance and industry, who are members of shareholder boards and who are stock market brokers. I got disillusioned with their greed and arrogance, even though not all were like that. I am not a man who desires class spirit to be perpetuated. I do not agree well in the company of people who seek power and who seek to perpetuate the power that remained with the dynasties. In that sense, I am a very frustrated man. Like Socrates, I thought education, and university courses, brought men and women to be wise, courteous, tolerant and generous. The opposite is true. Socrates would have said those men and women learned nothing from their education, and he would probably have been true. He underestimated grossly the power of the ego, the power of egoism and egocentricity. These people only learned to be meaner and greedier at their university and the women remained mindless snobs, to become only the more so.’

‘Are you not too severe in your judgement now, Jan Stevens?’

‘Of course I am. People like de Trioteignes are very decent.’

‘Oh, look! The procession enters the Place!’

At that moment, the first companies of drummers, of Guards of the Guild of Crossbowmen and of flagbearers entered the Grand’ Place from a side street. Emperor Charles V followed. The Emperor walked under a baldaquin of red cloth worn by valets of his Court. All the men were sumptuously dressed in the style of the sixteenth century. The Grand’ Place filled with a spectacle of men and women clad in clothes of bright hues. Charles V walked with much dignity around the place, under a thundering applause of the people on the tribunes, and a long procession of nobles of his Court, advancing in couples of a man and a woman, hundreds of people, strolled in a long suite along the houses that lined the square. The baldaquin stopped at the medieval tribune and Charles V strode up the stairs, turning to greet the spectators, onto the dais where his throne had been prepared.

‘Charles V walks with his sister, Mary of Austria, Queen of Hungary, and Regent of Flanders and the Netherlands,’ Jan explained. ‘Mary’s husband, the King of Hungary, was defeated and killed in a battle of the 1520’s, the Battle of Mohacs, defeated by the Ottoman Turks. Mary fled by boats from Budapest and Charles appointed her Regent of Flanders. The man walking

behind them is Charles' son, Philip, the Crown Prince and later King of Spain, also Duke of Brabant. Charles V came to Brussels to present his son to the Burghers of the town, but Philip was too much a religious zealot for the Brabanders! Philip would be King of Spain, but the Netherlands revolted against him. Flanders remained in the Spanish Empire and stayed Catholic or rather was forced to remain Catholic, but the Netherlands separated by arms from Spain. The Dutch cities formed a Republic, but they asked the Prince of Orange, once a confidant of Charles V, to lead them. The Prince of Orange is also in the suite, there, and this man would later become Stadhouder of the Protestant Netherlands. All the people who form Charles' Court are members of aristocratic families, or members of the Seven Lineages.'

'It is a grand spectacle indeed. I just love the colours, the magnificence of the dresses and the vivid scenes! Look, they even brought falconers! How is it possible to have assembled so many people, all dressed in such elaborate costumes, which I suppose, are faithful'

'The Committee of the Lineages must currently already be preparing next year's pageant! It is a huge work indeed. About a dozen people work at the staging, benevolently, all through the year. I once worked at this organisation, too.'

The spectacle continued. About fifteen hundred people walked into the Grand' Place and out again. Bands of medieval musicians played all this time merry, very old tunes. The flagbearers swung multi-coloured flags high up in the air, turning and tossing the flagpoles, then diligently catching the flags again to whirl them in the air again. Groups of halberdiers and crossbowmen walked in, and also many dance groups. Jana laughed when a group of stiltwalkers entered, dressed in colourful, striped costumes. These started a mock fight of stilts, trying to push their opponents from the stilts until only one still stood.

When the Court of Charles V had found seats in the medieval tribune, folkloristic groups and bands of musicians performed one after the other old dances. Among these groups also were traditional giants, huge dolls dressed in all sorts of ancient costumes, worn inside by men. The giants danced and paraded. Also symbolic animals were brought in, dragons and rhinoceroses, the mythical unicorn, dragon fish and camels. Tens of folkloristic groups from all over the country flooded in, among which also a group of men wearing high, white feather hats, which Jan told represented the Carnival dancers of the Walloon town of Binche. Then, Our Lady of the Sablon was carried in, a statue placed on a frame worn by eight men. This was the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary, stolen by the people of Brussels eight hundred years ago from Antwerp Cathedral, the act since forgiven. All the search lights concentrated on the statue, and as the Virgin was entirely clad in white lace, a strange aura of mystic and of old spirituality enveloped the statue. The Grand' Place kept great silence when the statue was carried in, and Jana saw many people making a sign of the cross.

'It is indeed a moving moment,' Jana commented. She pinched Jan's hand.

Jana looked, and then she suddenly said, 'you brought me here, to the historical procession, to show me the skeletons of your past, isn't it?'

Jan hesitated, and then answered, 'are they really skeletons of the past? This is a country, Jana, where past and present continue to be interwoven. Whether the interweaving remains of the past is still somewhat of an open question to me. The Lineages organise the Ommegang, Jana, not the people of Brussels, though they participate eagerly. This is a complex country'

'So you wanted to show me you are a complex personality, too? Isn't real life a lot simpler, Jan?'

Jan did not react.

A little later, after three hours of parading and dancing, the spectacle ended, close to midnight, when darkness had fallen in. The people applauded a last time, and then they began very

slowly to leave the tribunes. The brasseries around the Grand' Place filled now, and also the bars of the adjacent streets. Jan and Jana followed the crowd through a side street that led to the Marché-aux-Herbes. Their car was parked not far from there. For a short time, Jan got separated from Jana in the mass of people, but Jana knew where they had parked the car, so Jan was not very worried. Still, he constantly looked around, seeking Jana. He wondered to where she had gone. He considered walking to the end of the street and wait there till Jana emerged. He didn't see her anymore for quite a while. People pushed him on.

Suddenly, Jan heard people shout. Confusion rippled through the mass of heads and shoulders in front of him. He wrung to the spot, curious and also worried about what was happening there. He saw, a few rows further, Jana being roughly drawn by a man. Jan pushed protesting men and women aside to reach Jana. By the time he arrived close to Jana, several men had thrown Radek Navratil on the cobblestones of the street. Two women held Jana. She had received fist blows on her face. Jana stood with a bleeding nose in the midst of the women, who seemed to screen her from Radek.

Radek cried in English, 'leave me alone! That woman is my wife! She was here with her lover. She is a whore! I have the right to teach her a lesson. Her lover coveted what belonged to me. He brought false witness against me and possessed her!'

Radek drew a few grins from the men around, but the ones that kept him pinned to the ground did not relent. Jan went up to Jana, gave her his handkerchief. She held also her own handkerchief to her nose to stop the bleeding.

'I'm so sorry,' Jan cried, 'we got separated and I didn't see you anymore. What happened?' 'It was Radek,' Jana wept. 'He was suddenly on me, drew me aside, against the façades here, and started to hit me. I fell. That was why you didn't see me. He was drunk! He shouted he knew now who my lover was. He would not allow me living with somebody else. He hit me again and again, until these ladies sprang between us, and their friends and husbands jumped on Radek and threw him on the ground. Somebody is calling the police!'

'Are you all right? Can you walk?'

'Yes, yes! I was hit in the face, but otherwise I'm fine. I don't want police on this, Jan!'

Jan stepped to the men who held Radek. One of these held a leg on Radek's back to pin Radek on the ground.

He said, 'Radek, you can leave in peace and leave us alone, or be thrown in jail for a couple of nights. The police are coming. You have no rights anymore on Jana! You can calm down or be beaten down and sleep in jail. What do you prefer?'

'Let me go,' Radek shouted. 'Jana has got what she deserved. I'll go away! Let me go!'

'All right,' Jan decided. He said to the men, 'let him go. No need to get the police into this. He'll behave, now. You can let him loose!'

The men relaxed their grip. Radek stood up and felt his limbs. He too had received a few blows, and he had been thrown rudely on the stones; his right cheek was bruised and bloodied. He felt with his hand to his cheek. He moaned, staggered two steps. He seemed calmed down. Jan repeated, 'go away, Radek. Leave Jana in peace! She is not yours anymore, has not been yours since a long time.'

Radek made a mean face and for a moment, Jan thought Radek would jump on him, but the men around clenched their fists, braced, and that cooled Radek off. He grunted insults between his teeth, and then he pushed through the crowd, staggering away from Jan and Jana. Jan gave his thanks to the men who had mastered Radek, and then he returned to Jana. Jana still bled in her face, not only from her nose, but also from her eyebrows. A freckle-faced woman gave her a bundle of paper kerchiefs, so now Jana daubed the last blood away. Her blood coagulated quickly. Jana said thank you to the women who surrounded her, smiling

compassionately, and then she and Jan walked on. Jana leaned heavily on Jan's arm, drawing astonished looks from the people farther in the streets.

Jan continued to give apologies to Jana. He blamed himself very hard for having lost her in the crowd. Jana repeated she had been drawn down and aside by Radek, so Jan could not have seen what happened in a moment's time behind his back. Radek had just suddenly emerged from a bar.

Jan and Jana walked a little uphill. Jan glanced over his shoulder. In the crowd, in the far, in the light from a lantern hanging in front of a tavern, Jan saw Andrew Raga talking with rapid gestures to Radek Navratil. The two stood leaning against the façade of the bar, and Raga grinned from so far also to Jan Stevens. Jan wondered now what Raga's role had been in the fight.

Jan drew Jana on. They disappeared into another street. Jan dragged Jana forward, to the parking place. He found his car. Jan had Jana seated in the back, so that she could stretch a little. Jana felt dizzy. Jan guessed her blood pressure had dropped from the emotion. He drove in silence to his apartment. He supported Jana when she stepped out of the car and she walked upstairs while Jan held her at the shoulders. Jana showered and Jan put disinfectants and sticking-plasters on her cuts and on where her skin was broken. Jana's flesh was bruised in several places, and those places showed big blue stains of internal bleeding, but Jan did not think her wounds were so serious a doctor would be needed that night. Jana could go to a doctor in the morning. She would have a black eye, of course, and her eyebrow would thicken and might need one or two stitches. She would have a blue cheek resembling a raw steak, and swollen lips, but her nose was not broken.

'You will suffer from an awful face for a couple of days,' Jan smiled, 'but no big harm will come to you. Do you often bleed from your nose?'

'It happens,' Jana complained. 'Yes, I bleed easily from my nose. Nothing serious, the doctors told me. I will not be beautiful for a month. Will you still love me when I'm ugly?'

'You will always be the most beautiful woman in the world for me, my darling, you know that!' Jan soothed, and then Jana broke out in sobs in his arms.

'You will heal quickly, my love,' Jan continued. 'Your nose looks like a punching ball, your eye is as large as a cow's, and your cheeks have the colour of a sky in winter frost, but you'll survive, and you will be modelling for the best fashion photograph of the country soon. You are one tough lady! Now tell me, what happened?'

Jana laughed. 'I was walking behind you, and people pushed in between us. Our hands got separated. I walked on. I suddenly felt a grip on my arm, and turned. Radek stood there, out of the blue, completely drunk. He came out of a bar with Andrew Raga, and he drew me against the wall of the bar. Raga stood behind, but stepped backwards. Radek told me I was a whore, and whores had to be punished. He hit me several times with fists and slaps, on my face and in my belly. He hit me until two, strong tourist boys drew him off me. Two other men tripped him, and then they kept Radek lying on the ground. They hit him a few times, too, calling him a scoundrel and a bastard. It was awful! I thought I would faint. A group of women then surrounded me, so that Radek could not reach me anymore, though the men pushed him with his head to the cobbles. Then you came. I saw Raga just laughing, no doubt drunk too, but he did nothing to stop Radek! He seemed to enjoy what happened. Raga never did anything to hold Radek back. He just stood there, laughing with what happened!'

'Well, that figures,' Jan commented. 'Who knows? Raga may have been exciting Radek, though Radek is enough of a stupid bastard to dare attack you. Who knows, Raga may want you out of Brussels, one way or the other. Now, you can calm down. All the bad things are

over. Only sad memories will remain. You are safe here. Some sleep will do you good. Does it hurt?’

‘It does hurt, very badly,’ Jana lamented. ‘A kiss here and there would do me good,’ she pointed to three places on her face.

Jan laughed, and did as she asked.

‘I swear I will never again take you to the Ommegang,’ Jan promised, ‘and to no other place where Radek Navratil may show up. ‘I guess I wanted to boast to you with what my family belonged to. I am so sorry for all that.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Jana finished. ‘I am developing a searing headache. Let’s go to sleep!’

‘One more thing,’ Jan said. ‘You must go to a doctor tomorrow and have a check up on that nose, eyebrows and cheeks of yours. The doctor must also have a look at your belly. Shall I call the police first thing in the morning?’

‘No police,’ Jana whispered. ‘But I want Radek far from me!’

Jan Stevens called a doctor for Jana Kovar. He stayed with her until the doctor had gone. The doctor confirmed she was not seriously hurt. Jan went to a pharmacy to get the medicines the doctor had prescribed. Jana had to stay a week at home, at Jan’s apartment, and at least two days in bed. Jan moved the television set into Jana’s bedroom. When he went to work, he closed the door meticulously with his key, but Jana had another key. He urged her not to let anybody in. Jan bought her a present for every evening of that week, but Jana sulked most of the day. She brightened only up when Jan arrived, in the early evening. Jan hurried home as quick as he could in that week.

After three days, Jana began to cook for him. Jan was not used to find the table dressed with clean, white linen, his finest dishes with the family crest, and silver cutlery on the table, a single candle lighted in the silver candlesticks he had saved from his mother’s inheritance. Jan was not a great drinker, but he liked to open a bottle on weekends. He did have a small closet kept at wine temperature. Within that he preserved a few tens of the better Burgundy and Médoc wines, the red Volnay and Margaux brands and the white Puligny-Montrachet and Meursault bottles he preferred. One of those bottles stood opened on the table every evening. Jan bought the food, and Jana read in his cookbooks. She prepared the dishes to occupy her day. Jan complimented her for being such a good chef, but he did not want her to wash the dishes. She said he was a fine scullion. Jan was more in love than ever.

2

At Travtelio, Jan had to assist in those days to sessions of evaluations of personnel. These sessions were not for the yearly evaluations of the ESC.

In quite another initiative, special sessions had been organised by Sigvard Sandström quite some months ago already, and Sandström, back in the IT Division and very secretive about his prospective for a new job in Sweden, continued to honour the contracts he had concluded with an HR consultancy company.

The idea was to make the managers of IT aware of what they were good at, and to let them know which qualities of management and leadership they lacked. Beforehand, the IT Directors and Akerlund – when Akerlund was still at Travtelio – had to decide on what qualities they needed as managers of IT. Strangely, these qualities did not include any knowledge of IT, of the technology, of the programming languages, nor of the application packages Travtelio used. They included qualities like being extrovert, know how to lead people at anything, proving good judgement, being arduous and energetic, seeking creativity. Other qualities were being innovative, able to inspire people, tenacious, and so on. The managers were being judged in exercises for such capabilities and attitudes.

The day after the exercises in virtual enterprises, the managers being confronted with theoretical situations of stress, the jury wrote down its remarks. Then they told the candidates what the jury thought of them. These conversations were disappointing for Jan Stevens, who was a member of the jury, specifically asked to by Sigvard Sandström. The managers were men and women with a strong ego. Every one of them thought they could do well in the enterprise and hoped to be promoted rather sooner than later. They were cocky and ambitious. As the targets had been set high, Sandström and Stevens, Sara Jansen and Thomas Denis told the managers directly, without soothing words, straight in the faces of the candidates, where they had failed badly and where they should really work to perform better. Hardly one person showed a perfect manager profile for the jury. Every one of the managers left the conversations disillusioned, bitter, and depressed. Very few of the men and women received good points.

‘This cannot go on,’ Jan Stevens commented after the first wave of exercises. ‘We destroy here the hopes and the illusions of our people. We tell them how bad they are, how far they actually are from the ideal manager type we seek, how far from the ideal manager we have in our heads, but who does not exist. How many of us, Directors, would do well in these exercises? We judge them by theoretical psychological images, and we destroy their ego. Yet, for instance the last guy we met and demolished, of whom we said he had still a long way to go to be a fine manager, this guy worked wonders with his group. His team works well, his men are happy, he obtains fine results. His projects do well. They are far-fetching sometimes, but daring and useful. He finishes in time and within budget, and he and his friends propose new projects that sling the objectives way further than his Director asks and than we expected. Why do we have to demolish the illusions and dreams of these people? Is not what happens in real life the best way to judge? Should we not just offer them some advice with the ways they perform, and are not the annual evaluations the best moment for that? What can we offer these guys with these special exercises? Do we offer them advancement in their careers? Our managers must be masochistic to participate in the next wave!’

Sigvard Sandström answered it was always good for people to know their weaknesses, and also to understand in what domain they should really work to advance in their career. ‘Do they really respond to our recommendations?’ Jan doubted. ‘Their characters are formed, I believe. They might change their attitudes, but will they? They are who they are; their personality is there and changes little in my opinion. Nine out of ten are not seeking a dazzling career! They are not the outrageously ambitious types of men and woman who will trade in jobs every two years and constantly look out for promotions. They seek to do well. They try to do their jobs better, get higher bonuses, and they like to be appreciated by the Directors and higher management, in the job they have. With time they will think they deserve a promotion, of course, in something close to what they do now, but they know we have not much to offer. We cannot offer many career opportunities in a company that is out to diminish personnel, not a company that is growing. So we only destroy their illusions or inspire them with ambitions, but we offer them nothing in return! The best may well leave our company because of that. So, I say, stop these exercises. They lead to nowhere. We should replace the current exercises by simple sessions in which we can explain how smart they are, how well they have done in their work, clap them on their shoulders, congratulate them, offer them our respect and maybe a very light teambuilding session in a nice resort, maybe an extra holiday. Also, we should be listening to them, tell them what we expect of them, but leave them at it in their own way.’

Sara Jansen nodded. Sandström did not answer, bowed his head, and cancelled his contracts. A few weeks later, he too returned to Sweden.

****3****

Congratulations, thanks and extra bonuses were not forthcoming from Travtelio. The President of HR was evaluated on how much he lowered personnel costs. He announced a change in the policy of company cars. Only the Presidents would in the future obtain the car they wanted, whether a big black Mercedes or a grey Porsche. From five categories of management cars, Travtelio reduced to just two, and within these two categories managers received only a limited choice of three brands. The offer was of one model of Mercedes, BMW and Audi in the highest category, and one model of Volkswagen, Renault and Fiat in the lowest.

HR also astonished by closing the last of the resort hotels Travtelio possessed in the forest area of Wallony, and also at the North Sea coast of Flanders, hotels where personnel could stay at low prices. All social programs of organised travels at low cost and holiday advantages with tourist agencies were stopped. Instead, a travel agency opened in the Cloister, and that agency offered a three percent additional discount on travels booked by employees of Travtelio. All social programs of travels abroad for children of Travtelio personnel were gradually cancelled. Travtelio was not a travel agency, claimed HR, and also not a charity organisation.

Travtelio also started saving on cleaning wherever possible. The toilets in the building were cleaned less frequently, and especially the plumbing got less attention and less regular maintenance. The restrooms in the Skyscraper as well as in the Villa, especially in the lower floors, regularly stank so much that Jan Stevens entered them only pinching his nose and with a disgusted face. When he sensed the rancid smell, he ran out and sought other toilets, sometimes taking the elevator ten floors up in the Skyscraper.

Jan still received visitors from IT supplier companies. The companies he dealt with had heard from the oncoming reorganisations, so they sensed real power had moved to elsewhere than with the current IT Directors. The visitors followed the seats of power. Jan received less and less visitors, yet enough to keep him busy. He was more and more embarrassed, however, to receive the account managers in the Travtelio headquarter building. He feared the moment when a Director of a large, well-known computer manufacturer asked where the restrooms were. Jan was ashamed when he was expected to offer a coffee and none was available. He also had to take the men and women to the automatic dispensers, had to tug them each a plastic cup in his or her hand, and had to walk them back with a hot coffee cup in their hands to his office. In doing so, a coffee might drop to the floor. The checkerboard-pattern slim tapestries on the floor showed additional checkerboard patterns of coffee and sugar stains. At the end of such meetings, Jan had to accompany his invitees to the visitors' exit, because he wanted to avoid his visitors being searched for theft at the employee exit of Travtelio, though that exit lay quite closer to the parking lots.

In front of the air intake for the air conditioning of the Skyscraper and the Villa, laid a large bed of plants and bushes. Travtelio management complained the plants looked anaemic and dried out. The plants did not spread to a joyous bed of multi-coloured flowers, as they had done indeed the previous years. The horticultural company that maintained the flower beds had the good idea therefore to spread manure among the plants to reinforce the plants and to invite them to produce more flowers. The company should have spread nice, black compost on the beds and worked that into the soil to enrich it, but that cost too much for the contract it had with Travtelio. Instead, the company spread manure, complete, dense manure, and the

manure was probably imbibed with the urine from pigsties, of which the farmers in the very fertile, intensive production farms of Flanders had already far too much and were not allowed to spread anymore on the pastures for fear of nitrite pollution of the ground waters of the Low Lands.

The manure spread out before the Skyscraper stank abominably. That was not so bad after all on the outside. The Travtelio Skyscraper was a high rise, so strong winds always battered around the building. But the air conditioning ventilators sucked in the foul air hungrily and then blew it inside, all onto the office floors. The Travtelio headquarters soon filled with a nauseating stink of pigs' urine and offal. The stink was most awful in the entry halls and in the lower floors. The smell also propagated to the Cloister and from there to the Terra Nova employees' restaurant. Travtelio Global Services brought in large ventilators, which blew the air back into the Cloister. This helped some to redistribute the smell, but the stink rose higher and higher in the Skyscraper. Many people avoided the restaurant. A few women were allowed to stay at home because they complained of headaches and they claimed they could not work in such a stink.

Jan Stevens simply did not eat in Travtelio's restaurant in those days, and he called off his appointments with visitors. He waited eagerly for his evenings with Jana, and strolled out of the building during lunchtime. The restaurants in the neighbourhood, of which there were few, found their business soaring, and wondered why. The flatulent vapours permeated the air of the Travtelio headquarters for four days. Then they waned, losing the battle with the cheap perfumes Global Services servants blew into the air conditioning. They crept into the cloth of the seats and the floor tapestries, so that months later, when you stuck your nose close to that cloth, you could still smell the nauseating odour of those days. Travtelio stank of decay, and the decay penetrated into every recess of the building.

Jan told Jana the stink in the building matched the tensions in Travtelio. People were being pushed to their limits by the latest measures, by the tough evaluations on objectives, by the unfriendly atmosphere and by the sword of Damocles everybody feared above his or her head, the sword of dismissal at the slightest error. Therefore, Directors heard only good news, and the bad news only when it was catastrophic and could not be mended. Risk taking was considered foolish. At the same time, the bonuses of the wonder boys and wonder girls of the Sales Division continued to rise.

This led to Jan and the rest of the IT Directors bursting out in laughs at a hushed-up but upturning scandal that had happened with an account manager of Travtelio who worked brilliantly with the largest customers of the company. One of these high-brow account managers was a top notch in sales. She drove the largest model of fancy business car, offered for her fine services. It was found she also used the list of the largest accounts of Travtelio to contact customers for her own business. The customers did not complain, for her business was being a very expensive call-girl. One of the more candid IT developers of Travtelio recognised her angel-face on her private Internet website. She worked under the nice, appropriate name of Angelina. Angelina got fired immediately. She walked proudly and defiantly on very high heels, in short white skirts and with a very deep décolleté in her stainless shirt, accompanied by two bodyguards of Travtelio's security. The men had it difficult to hold a straight face until she was out of the doors, at which moment they cheered and waved at her, and she turned and threw them hot kisses. After that scene, hot, young female Account Managers came to be called "Angelinas" at Travtelio.

Travtelio HR must have felt something of the risen tension in the headquarters, for a few smart, young psychologists of the division organised sessions of relaxation and gymnastic exercises in the Cloister. A program was devised and announced of yoga and tai-chi sessions,

spine massage, aerobic dancing for the girls, and a few more of such de-stressing events as karaoke singing in the evenings.

Totally unknown to these bright youngsters, unrelenting admirers of the doctors Freud and Young, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre raged in his office because the course of Travtelio dipped in the stock market. Bringing the company to the European stock markets had been an unqualified success, handled with a masterly hand by Andrew Raga. A few weeks after the brilliant and very satisfying introduction, however, the shares started to tumble. The share prices shivered imperceptibly at first, and then dropped frankly and steadily. The shares fell because Travtelio had to announce less than splendid figures of profits before and after taxes. Buisseyre raged against Directors who had not reached their objectives. He loathed the men and women who had not surpassed their objectives to the greater benefit of the shareholders, among which also the Presidents and the CEO of the company. Buisseyre estimated the old Travtelio was led by far too many managers. Comparable industries prided in lower numbers of people telling others what to do. Real employees of a performing company knew what to do and did not need to be told, he proclaimed. That same day, in a meeting with only his HR President and the lists of all the Travtelio managers on the table of his desk, Buisseyre decided to dismiss no less than fifty Directors. The Directors were fired immediately in one, sole, massive wave. The men and women, who had inscribed for sessions of yoga and aerobic dancing in the Cloister, saw one Director after the other being led out of the building between two security guards. Of course, when Buisseyre heard what was going on in the Cloister, he swore a good deal and called off the entire relaxation program.

Buisseyre could not call off another initiative, this one initiated by the Marketing Division. Marketing had launched a huge promotion campaign under the flashing title “Get rid of your old Stuff!” The idea was to incite customers bringing in their old Travtelio products or contracts, products and services that were more than four years old, even broken products, and have them exchanged for the newest, discounted gadgets and more rewarding service contracts that would link the customers for many more years to the magnificent company that Travtelio had become. The marketing campaign had been launched days before, and posters of the products with the luring slogans hung at every window of the Travtelio shops and buildings, all over the country.

The sacking of so many Directors of Travtelio came to be called the “Day Travtelio got rid of its old Stuff.”

The dismissal of so many Directors proved to be a very visible trauma, the was the more so, because among the Directors who were shown to the doors, were quite a few managers who had refused previous incentives of the generous pre-pension plans, men and women of over fifty. The HR President had failed to add a code for civil servants in the spreadsheet he was ordered to spread out on the table in front of the CEO. Among the fifty Directors, at least twenty men and women were civil servants. These could simply not be fired because of their statute. They had killed nobody, and had the absolute right to continue working. Still, these persons also, despite their protests, were led to the doors. This meant they could now remain at home until their last pension term date, at full salary paid by Travtelio, and justly in the right to claim their bonuses at normal quotes, as well as their company cars and any other advantage they might have gained in the company.

When this became known, a few other Directors, civil servants, went on their knees to the HR President asking to be fired too, which was indignantly refused. Buisseyre didn't care finally, whether he had dismissed civil servants or not. He fired the Directors anyway, and sent out a combative press release in which the world's keenest journalists and financial experts could

read that Travtelio had set resolutely on a course of higher productivity, of leaner and meaner and more aggressive management, so that the company would soon speed up production, services and of course sales. The value of the shares of Travtelio rose slightly again.

‘I do not understand our world anymore,’ commented Thomas Denis. ‘Buisseyre sends fifty Directors out, thereby weakening Travtelio substantially because excellent brains leave the company. Not only did he therefore chase talent away, he also demonstrated his inability to put talent to the task of bettering the company by developing new products and services. The company is weakened, and the true value of the company must therefore diminish, but the stock markets gain and the stock value of Travtelio rises because of a few stupid indicators – I wonder which ones - that go up. That sounds to me as if the general of an army who, right before a decisive battle, sends off a third of his officers, arguing his battalions can now move swifter and meaner. I heard few more stupid things in my life!’

‘Why would Travtelio need intelligence and talent?’ Jan Stevens asked bitterly. ‘Our highest management got to power not by intelligence and talent but by being obsessively ambitious, unscrupulous and ruthless. They are sitting on a heap of old cash money, so they can buy intelligence and talent from external consultants whenever they want and for the few months they really need it, without involving them in the company. Also, true intelligence and talent inside their buildings would be a real danger to them, because it would challenge and criticize them. These guys despise intelligence and talent.’

While this press release was mailed throughout the country, Europe and beyond, heart-tearing scenes took place inside the Skyscraper and the Villa. Some of the Directors, who were being dismissed, had seen their demise really coming out of a blue sky. Some of them, though indeed civil servants, had actually exceeded expectations and received evaluations of “very good”. No decent, common rationale could be defined why this Director got fired and that one not. The hand of the invisible man who had fired the Directors had been indiscriminately blind.

A few Directors enjoyed actually extremely fine relations with their teams. Two Directors got accompanied to the exit not only by the security guards, but also by the employees that worked for them, secretaries crying like a gang of wailing women of ancient Persia. Tens of people went with these Directors, shouting and weeping. They accompanied their bosses until out on the street, where they continued to shout and cry of strike and scandal. The Directors were reasonable men and women. They thanked their people, consoled the weeping secretaries, and urged their men to go back to work.

In the next two days, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre also released to the world the result of the latest pre-pensioning wave. Thousands of employees would leave Travtelio in this plan, a major purge, so that since the beginning of similar waves, Travtelio’s personnel had been lowered by as much as ten thousand people. All these men and women were paid handsomely until they could benefit from their legal pensions, but as many jobs were lost in the company. The Labour Unions looked at the advantages they could offer to their members, and they forgot the numbers of jobs lost. In the Belgian Parliament, honourable Members of Parliament questioned on the rostrum the Minister of Public Companies on the grounds that the previous Government had assured that privatisations of public companies would, due to increased competition, bring more wealth and jobs. The interventions were diligently intercepted and answered with vague arguments, which satisfied nobody, the ruling parties nor the opposition, but which were not taken further. Nobody in Parliament desired a crisis on that issue.

The value of the shares of Travtelio curved upwards, and they would continue to climb for the rest of that year, as analysts judged Travtelio's efficiency and productivity would be in line now with the rest of the industry.

4

Jan Stevens filed a complaint about the behaviour of Radek Navratil to Travtelio's HR Division. Sara Jansen showed much sympathy, but there was little she could do if Jan refused to call in the police. Radek Navratil's assault on Jan Kovar could hardly be stigmatised as a case of sexual harassment within the premises of the company. Sara could forward Jan's complaint in the strongest terms, but Jan knew Andrew Raga would block reprisals, and the powers of the former shareholder concerns were still strong in Travtelio. Jan and Jana obtained that Radek would have to leave Travtelio at the end of his current project, but that would be many months later. Navratil received a warning. That warning, delivered by Sara Jansen, who seemed to have truly spoken like one of the Vengeance Harpies, delivering her diatribes against Radek's figure higher and harder than Radek could shout, proved rather efficient. Radek avoided Jan and Jana.

Radek had his desk on the same floor as Jana, the floor where most of the expats still dwelled. Sara Jansen arranged for Jana's desk to be moved to the far, other side of that floor, to the opposite corner from where Radek worked. Jana still met Radek once every while on the floor, but she ignored him, and Radek diverted his eyes also as if he was ashamed. He seemed genuinely sorry for what he had done. He may have realised he lost Jana in the most definite way. Radek also did not bother Jan Stevens.

Sigvard Sandström sent a mail to announce he had secured a new job in his former company and would work once more together with Linus Akerlund. Akerlund had gotten yet another promotion and Sandström would assist him, as he had done at Travtelio.

The reorganisation of the IT Division was under way, but would take several months. Nobody was in a hurry. None of the Directors of IT had been dismissed. Jan Stevens had to define most of the Director jobs in the new organisation. He ran from President to President with his descriptions and ESCs.

'We speak of a new organisation,' Jan complained to Jana, 'but what we are doing can hardly be called by that term. We are simply re-distributing the IT groups over existing organisations. IT is being absorbed and digested. The reorganisation is smothered in so many other restructurings that shake the Divisions. I do not describe jobs for IT Directors. I merely add IT functions to job descriptions of Business Directors! The irony of the exercise is that I have to define most of the job descriptions, but there is not really one job description for what I do in IT!'

Jana Kovar felt very unsure about the future. She would have to return to Czechia within three months, or be out of a job. She could not stay more than one year in Belgium as a consultant. Jan expected to be out of a job, too. Jan tried to console Jana. He told her not to worry, and urged her to enjoy the last months that remained for both of them. He would find solutions to their problems! Jana was not to be consoled by sweet words and vague promises, however, and she said so to him.

Jan Stevens quietly collected the data de Buisseyre and Andrew Raga had accessed and had probably used to bring about the downfall of Gerald Godelin, a nettlesome and slow task. That was the main reason why he had not yet left Travtelio and explained to Jana what he

might offer her. He was not yet ready to disclose what he was doing to Jana Kovar, nor what he had in view for their future. Jan had no proof the men had actually used that information, but he had definite proof they had possessed knowledge of the facts. He discovered also several embezzlements of Godelin, and unearthed a few new ones of Buisseyre. Jan knew, through Jana, which files and mails Buisseyre and Raga had read, the data they had manipulated and modified, and he had the contents neatly printed out and commented in a report. The elements he found were still explosive. Had they been released to the press, they would have caused a major scandal for Travtelio, for Godelin and for Buisseyre, and brought a nasty stain on Andrew Raga's reputation.

'What could Raga care?' Thomas Denis snorted. 'Raga is a hired mercenary. He was hired at Travtelio because he is and Anglo-Saxon. Anglo-Saxons are notorious individualists. Raga believes only the strong survive. He has read the first chapter of Hitler's "Mein Kampf", the only chapter he seems to know. He couldn't care less about what happens to the employees here, as long as the money streams in on his account! These guys do not feel for any company. They are different from us. They serve the company investors. They do not care about our traditions. They are out only to handsomely serve themselves. We think all people on the earth are like us, conscientious former civil servants, cursed with an overrated feeling for justice. Reality is otherwise! We had better wake up to that reality, for our world is changing.'

Nevertheless, Jan was not in a vindictive mood. He was in love. For the first time in life he experienced what it really meant to be in love, and to unravel sweetly, slowly, and almost every evening, a loved creature to the thrills of willing, abandoning nudity. In the evenings, he would lie in the sofa of his apartment with Jana in his arms, and follow with his fingers every feature of her face, ruffle his fingers through her hair, and hear her purr of pleasure like a blonde cat near a warm fire. He still did not understand how such a wonderful woman, surely the finest Czech beauty Prague could bear, had accepted to confide in him and give her complete self over to him. Jan did not love Jana; he adored her in those days. He wondered what kind of destiny had brought him a Czech woman, from such far and to him unknown lands, to love and cherish.

5

Rachel Kyle and Lauren O'Sheridan returned to the US before the final reorganisation of IT. Zhaò Fai flew to the Philippines, where he would lead the IT Division of one of the daughter companies of his Hong Kong firm. Petr Tuma returned to Prague. At the lunch table of her departure feast, Lauren O'Sheridan whispered to Jan Stevens Andrew Raga disliked him. She told Jan Raga would sack him at the first easy occasion. When Jan asked why that was, Lauren confided to Jan with pain in her voice Raga had probably wanted to begin an affair with Jana. Raga had desired Jana, but he had been hurt in his pride to see Jan beat him to the game. Jan was shocked, but Lauren also whispered Jan had won a gem with Jana. The farewell lunch in the Clouds restaurant for Lauren and Rachel had been organised by Jan. All the IT Directors were present at that lunch, but Andrew Raga, though invited, was not. Thomas Denis delivered a short, humoristic but moving speech, and Sara Jansen presented the gifts of the Division's employees to the expats. The Directors were as morose as the expats at that lunch, for they knew well they feasted the end not just of the collaboration with expert professionals from other countries, but also the end of an era. The expatriate consultants left Travtelio the one after the other in those weeks. The number of large, ambitious projects therefore diminished also. Life at Travtelio became more serene, maybe the heavy serenity that announced the next storm, but no new measures were announced in the HR domain.

After the departure of Rachel Kyle, Jan clashed with Jan Geerts. Jan had been talking to the Presidents of the Business Divisions, and especially with the President of Operations, to which Karl Geerts' groups would move. Jan warned how unsafe a data centre inside the basements of the Skyscraper was. He showed the documents of the Basel II Directives, and other reports, which all urged to install data centres in separate buildings. Jan wanted the computer servers moved out of the Travtelio Headquarters, all equipment moved to the main data centres of Travtelio, of which the company had two, situated between fifty and a hundred kilometres from the capital. Jan proposed to start with the printing shop. He wanted the paper out first. He tried to convince the President of Operations of the soundness of his advice, of the dangers for physical security in IT of the stacks of paper that accumulated in the data centre.

The President called on Karl Geerts, and Geerts assured that Stevens' worries were founded but not really acute. There was always a danger with electronic devices, Karl Geerts argued, but was not the Skyscraper filled to the brim, in every office and in the various laboratories, with personal computers, printers, paper stacks of A4 photocopying and printing sheets, and all sorts of other electronic devices? Then Karl Geerts ran to Jan's office in a rage, where he cried so hard the entire floor could hear him, holding a threatening finger pointed at Jan's nose. Jan was to mind his own business. Jan should not mingle in Geerts' affairs. Karl called Jan a bad colleague, a man who always sought to stir up some shit needlessly, a Nosy Parker, a thoughtless busy-body. Karl Geerts primarily feared Jan was after his job. He blew to the sky. Jan had made one more enemy at Travtelio.

The President of Business Operations had other bugs on his mind, one being his deficit budget and the other the ceaseless bickering of the CEO to increase his productivity. The President wanted not to invest in IT for the moment. He preferred to listen to Karl Geerts. Nothing at all moved out of the basements of the Skyscraper.

In that data centre, Hugo Martin also had talked to Karl Geerts, about the same issues of keeping a data centre in the Headquarters of Travtelio, in the basements of a building where over four thousand people worked. Karl Geerts silenced him immediately and rudely, telling Hugo the Director of IT Operations was not to be given advice by a drunk. Martin advanced menacingly to Karl Geerts with clenched fists, but the colleagues of Martin held him back. Geerts turned on his heels and ran out of the rooms. He placed Hugo Martin in the morning shift, the shift that started at six o'clock, a shift Hugo Martin hated because he found no bus and train at that early time and had to drive by car to the building.

Geerts had also caught a few interesting words of the President of Operations, about the man's budget worries. Karl Geerts obliged. He announced proudly he had cut in operations expenditures. He cut also down on personnel in the basement, so that often Hugo Martin was the only person present in the morning. Hugo Martin had no colleagues anymore with him to restrain him from hitting crazy bosses, but luckily, Geerts avoided the basement hall. Geerts also refused holidays to Hugo Martin, arguing he had not enough people during those months to guarantee correct service in the data centres. Martin got excited when Sara Jansen brought him the refusal, but he could do hardly more than curse and accuse Geerts of pestering him. Hugo Martin did not succumb to depression, but the rage welled from his heart to his mind. He reacted violently at home and drank more than ever. He began to answer rudely to his children and to slap them around. His wife started to cry she would divorce him if he continued to fume all day long.

6

The Directors of IT gathered in the staff meeting room to discuss the results of the annual evaluations. With Rachel Kyle returned to the US, nobody really had been appointed as Vice-CIO, and Andrew Raga never bothered to show up at IT staff meetings. Each Director had presented his evaluation figures to Sara Jansen. Sara combined all the data in a single spreadsheet. She calculated the percentages of people in the various categories. Compared with the figures of the previous years, the results looked good. The Directors had dismissed already during that year the workers that would receive really bad evaluations, the drunkards, the thieves and the underperformers. They had given rather good evaluations to the remaining employees and lower managers. The mood in the meeting was pleasant, for the Directors were generally satisfied with what the Division had accomplished. Many projects had been defined and executed within budget and time. The groups worked well together. They were dynamic and acted with caution and foresight. Quality indicators were up. A few really daring, risky and ambitious programs had been finished. The objectives had been reached and exceeded. IT could send a little money back to Travtelio Business, for it had operated under budget this year. The Finance President would appreciate Travtelio IT's economic mindset.

Sara Jansen had also asked the global percentages for all Travtelio divisions together, the consolidated data of the previous year. These data differed only slightly from the figures provided by Andrew Raga, but Sara wanted to verify twice. The evaluations of IT personnel were only slightly better than the overall figures, and Sara could easily explain the discrepancies, so the IT Division was quite within the boundaries of global data proposed by the Executive Board. The IT Division would present no statistics that deviated significantly from the rest of Travtelio. The Directors might have liked to present better data, but they dared not to be overly generous. They found in block the evaluation quotes had been determined in good faith. The lowest quotes had been put on the table of Sara Jansen by Karl Geerts. Jan Stevens remarked wryly that the people in Operations were not dumber than the rest, but the other Directors shook their heads. If Karl Geerts gave lower quotes, they were better off for their personnel. Had Karl Geerts given better figures, they would have to lower theirs to agree with the global numbers of the company. And Jan Stevens had to concede the quotes for IT Operations were not that bad either. The staff meeting finished to general satisfaction. Sara Jansen would put the figures together. She allowed the figures to be officially handed over to the IT employees, but she asked for three days of delay, to get final agreement from Travtelio's HR President over the data. Sara mailed the figures for IT immediately to the HR President.

Two days later, Andrew Raga called Sara Jansen into a meeting room of the Villa. The meeting was scheduled for ten o'clock. When Sara headed into the small, windowless conference room, she saw Andrew Raga had already arrived, as well as two Directors of HR, one of them Marie Donat. The lists with the quotes of the evaluation were spread out on the table. The men were discussing the data. Sara said hello, and sat in front of Raga. Marie Donat looked at Sara with worried eyes.

Raga started, 'Ms. Jansen, we have looked at the preliminary results of the yearly evaluations of the employees, handed in by IT. We have compared them with the overall statistics of Travtelio, and we also compared them with our targets. Your figures are in agreement with the global results of all divisions together. Nevertheless, in view of Travtelio's results of sales and profits, the Executive Board decided to modify the distribution of the percentages in the various categories.'

Raga showed a paper to Sara Jansen. She recognised the company stationery.

'Here are the target percentages in each category you must use, in relative and absolute figures. Above the score of normal, you cannot hand in higher percentages. Below normal,

you must hold the percentages indicated, or exceed them, certainly not give us lower percentages. The figures for IT have the contrary tendency. We want you, IT Directors, to change your percentages and conform to our targets.'

Sara looked at the figures. She saw in one glance that the percentages for "mediocre" and "bad" were substantially higher than before, the figures for "very good" extremely low and quite lower for "good" and "normal".

'I don't understand this,' Sara argued fitfully. 'We are indeed quite in line with the overall Travtelio figures. The IT Directors eliminated already people who had severe issues. The HR President knows that. We talked to underperforming people and warned them to change their behaviour rapidly, which most did. People have been demoted and others have been placed in less demanding jobs that suited them better. We believe the figures we gave you are honest and tough. What you actually want us to do here is not to encourage people that perform well and to say to people that work to the best of their abilities and of whom we have been satisfied, that they underperform. You ask us to disappoint people who did generally well, and to push into depression people of whom we are satisfied.'

'No, not all. You truly do not understand,' Raga replied, irritated that Sara dared to challenge what the Executive Board, of which he was one of the most powerful Presidents, had decided. He was not used to such challenges. In the US, one did what one was told and respected management. Sara had to do what he told her, and that was all. He grimaced and rolled his eyes.

'You must adapt the figures to the targets of the Executive Board,' Raga continued dryly.

'The Executive Board wants this new distribution, so you have to do what we tell you.'

'Do you realise that the IT Directors would have to manipulate their evaluation scores in such a way that all scores must be lowered against what they believe to be honest and just figures?' Sara protested.

'You are talking nonsense,' Raga insisted, waving his hand dismissively. 'All figures are relative. The target figures on the paper here are the percentages per category the Executive board wishes, in order to have Travtelio progress towards a leaner, meaner, more ambitious and aggressive workforce. A war of competition is on out there, which we have to win. We can only keep and reward the best performing types of personnel. You have to comply with these figures.'

'Do you realise,' Sara cried, 'that we are going to have to tell people who do their work to satisfaction that they are actually not good enough for Travtelio and that they risk being out of a job at the next evaluation? When they receive bad scores, twice, they will get dismissed. Yet, we have already fired the underperformers. Would you have preferred that we keep a few of those people until after the yearly evaluation to help skew our percentages into the lower scores? Is that what you mean by fine management?'

'We want the people who perform less well to pass to competition or elsewhere. We want to hold only on to the best, and for the best the standards must be placed higher each year!'

'The manipulation of evaluation scores you are proposing here, at Travtelio, has been applied at a very large corporation in the US, on the initiative of one of the toughest CEO's of US history, but the procedure has been declared illegal in a Court of Justice in that country. Did you know that? Yet, you want to apply that same procedure here? Manipulating figures in this way is merely a capitalist form of the good old Stakhanovist method of enhancing production in Communist totalitarian regimes! You are going to drive up discontent in our Division, harbour grudges against management, and create still higher tension. Our Directors will have to hand out evaluations far below what most people expect, and which are clearly unjust. The

Directors will have to hand over those scores against their conscience and better knowledge! This is unjust!’

‘The Executive Board decides on what is just and not just, not you! It has been decided to apply the new data we gave you. You do as we tell you!’ Marie Donat cried.

‘I shall not abide by these figures,’ Sara shouted.

Andrew Raga slammed his fist on the table. His face distorted in anger. ‘This is ludicrous! You shall tell the IT Directors to use the figures of this spreadsheet. You shall adapt the figures of the Directors, or we shall adapt them for you. In that case, you shall be fired faster than you can breathe! I heard way enough and lost already too much time on this. Change your data, I tell you, for the last time, or we will nail you to the wall for insubordination. We gave you an order! In any company, refusing orders means you get fired!’

Sara Jansen shouted harder. She refused to stop shouting. ‘I shall not go to the IT Directors and tell them to do an injustice by changing the figures. Do you sincerely believe I do not see through your harebrained schemes? You are manipulating the figures only because you want the bonuses of the employees to be lowered, so that you can hand out higher bonuses to the Presidents and some of the Directors who lick your heels, without driving the global budget of bonuses up. Driving up the budget for bonuses would look bad on the Travtelio balance sheet to the institutional investors of the stock market, wouldn’t it? It might even look bad with the Government and the Unions. Do you think I do not see through your miserable plot? This manipulation is a scandal! Give me that sheet! The world must know what kind of dirty game you play with the rights of the Travtelio employees!’

‘Nothing on paper can be distributed,’ Marie Donat shouted. ‘You are bound by contract to the rule of discretion. We order you to that!’

Andrew Raga stood. ‘Sara Jansen, you are no longer an employee of Travtelio,’ he declared. He turned to one of the HR Directors. ‘Call the security guards. This woman will need to be accompanied out of the building immediately. Ms. Jansen, I don’t want to see you any longer in this company!’

Sara Jansen continued to cry, but her words were choked in tears and frustration. ‘You will not throw me out of this company! I will leave by my own will first. Michel, here I come!’

Sara Jansen grabbed the sheet of paper Andrew Raga had already tried to draw towards him. She ran to the door with the paper in her hand.

‘Hold her,’ Raga cried, but Sara was out of the room, still running. The HR Directors ran after her. Sara ran as quickly as she could down the corridor, along the offices. Heads appeared above the low panels that separated the desks. She looked around, saw a man nearing on to her, but she also saw the balcony of the corridor that opened to the Cloister, beneath. She swung her body over the parapet.

The office of Jan Stevens was on the same floor of the Villa as the meeting room where Sara Jansen had conferred with Raga. He heard the commotion, the shouting and the running steps from behind his desk. He stood up, and saw at the far end of the corridor Sara Jansen disappear over the balcony. Then, he saw the two HR Directors and Andrew Raga lean over the parapet and look down. Jan stepped from behind the panels of his office and went towards the balcony. Raga and the two Directors still looked down. Jan Stevens went near, glanced over the parapet. On the hard, cold marble floor of the Cloister, in the harsh brightness of the white spotlights, laid the broken body of Sara Jansen in a widening pool of blood.

Shouts of horror could be heard below. A woman down there had seen Sara Jansen fall, then crash to the floor. She cried out in horror and shock. Her shrieks attracted other employees.

More people ran to the body. Jan Stevens saw Andrew Raga ruffling his hair with one hand. Jan ran towards the elevator of the Villa, while Raga and the two HR Directors still looked, bewildered, as if transfixed, into the Cloister. Jan emerged from the elevator at the ground floor. He found his way to Sara blocked by a crowd of employees who thronged around her body.

Jan cried, 'out of my way! Let me through! I know this woman!'

The people opened to let him approach the body. Jan knelt to Sara. He felt her pulse, but found no heartbeat. Sara Jansen was dead, her head crushed on the marble slabs. He asked for somebody to call a doctor and an ambulance, but he knew all care would be too late. Sara had killed herself. She still gripped sheet of paper in her hand. Jan pried Sara's fingers open, saw the printout of a spreadsheet, and then looked up towards the balcony. Nobody looked down from there anymore. Jan stood; he held the sheet of paper in his hand. He could do nothing for Sara. His legs trembled. He recognised the signs of shock also on him. He went back and leaned against a column of the Cloister.

Two men ran towards Sara with an infirmary stretcher. One of the men was the Travtelio company doctor. The man brought his stethoscope to Sara's chest. A few seconds later he shook his head. The men put Sara on the stretcher, and walked towards the infirmary, holding the lifeless body of Sara between them.

Jan Stevens regained his strength. His heart raged. He took the elevator back to his office. He saw neither Raga nor the HR Directors in the corridor. He sank in his chair. Many minutes later, he realised he still held the paper of Sara Jansen in his right hand.

7

For the second time in a few weeks, Jan Stevens and Jana Kovar attended a funeral of a colleague and friend of Travtelio.

HR Directors are popular in no company, so only few people shuffled in the first rows of benches in the little village church of a Flemish suburb of Brussels. The church was old. Plaster hung in shreds under the high windows, and the wooden panelling that covered the walls below was cracked and in dire need of new varnish. Against the square columns stood large statues of Saints, polychromed and devoid of character, and the traditional sombre, dark oil pictures of the Passion of Christ on Calvary hung below them. Sara Jansen had a brother, his wife and two nephews as family. These stood in the front row. Thomas Denis and two other IT managers accompanied three women of Travtelio who had known Sara. Jan supposed the other people present were neighbours and members of a choir in which Sara sang occasionally. Her coffin was covered with merely three wreaths of white flowers, one of them the one Jan and Jana had brought. The ceremony was short and boring. The priest said few words, for he had not known Sara personally. Jana and Jana accompanied the priest and the coffin to the nearby cemetery, a place behind the church, but not more than about ten people gathered to lower the coffin in the tomb. Thomas Denis stood close to Jan.

He murmured, more to himself than to Jan, 'it is said one never dies alone; this one did.'

Jana was deeply touched by the drabness of the funeral. She had liked Sara. Sara had consoled her and helped her with Radek. When Jana arrived rather surreptitiously in Brussels, Sara had arranged for her lodgings and given her much advice on where to get furniture. Jana knew by Sara the most interesting stores to buy clothes. Sara had also succeeded the last months in keeping Radek Navratil at bay.

After the funeral, Jan and Jana returned home. Jana sulked, caught in her sad mood. She pondered about the transitoriness of life, about the randomness of events, about the total lack in determinism of life and about how little control one exerted over one's fate. She wondered

by what chance she slept with a stranger. Jan remarked the distance from here to China in Jana, and he feared she would fall out of love with him, and leave him in a sheer fit of lassitude and spleen. He tried to convince Jana that maybe, just maybe, their coming together had not been mere chance. Maybe fate indeed had destined them to meet and to fall in love. When Jana did not respond, Jan got worried. He would have liked to cheer up Jana, make her find new confidence in his love, and convince her second encounter with a man was a true gift of the gods. Jan understood then he could not let Jana doubt much longer about their future.

8

At the hour of the funeral, also Rachel Kyle was thinking of Sara Jansen. Rachel sat in the business class of an airplane that flew over the Atlantic Ocean at that moment. She too sat in a sad mood, not reading or listening to music, just looking out of the small window at a sea of grey and white clouds below, musing about her life. Rachel had turned one more page in her book after her stay at Travtelio. It had been a brief experience, far shorter than she had planned. Rachel had liked Europe. She had not much travelled in France, Italy, Germany or the United Kingdom before. The culture she had been immersed in so suddenly, had overwhelmed her. Europeans literally swam in culture, breathed culture. She had been astonished at how much the French and the English cherished and took pride in their ancient patrimony of castles, mansions and gardens. Rachel had travelled several times with other expat women in Kent, driving from castle to castle, from Chartwell to Hever to Hampton Court, and to so many other, wonderful places. Still, the US was her home and her country. She wondered how she would spend her holidays and weekends now, with so few exciting cultural festivals and exhibitions around. In her region, there were no remarkable historical sites to visit! She would have to start her career all over, however, so she would have to work hard. Maybe she could contact again the charity associations of which she had been a member before.

Rachel had no particular feelings for Sara Jansen. She had not been friends with Sara. The woman had kept her distance. Rachel had felt from early on Sara Jansen was emotionally very shaky. Sara always looked very fidgety. Sara had remained aloof, she stayed suspicious of Rachel, and that probably with good reason. Rachel could hurt. She knew she could be a callous manager, lashing out with a viper tongue at inefficiency and at mistakes. Rachel knew she was haughty, the tough American managerial type, and that was the armour she had fled into also at Travtelio. Sara Jansen had never been her confident, and Sara had never confided in her. That was good, thought Rachel, such lack of relations protected you, provided you the freedom to act without having to break bonds of affection. Managers had to be lonely people. Friendships with Belgians were bound to end and had better be severed without pain. From the beginning, Sara had been a small, unimportant being in Rachel's life. Sara would not leave an imprint in Rachel's heart, in fact, nobody would. Still, Sara was part of an environment in which Rachel might have wanted to remain for the rest of her life. Had she met a European man, she might have stayed on. Anyhow, the episode was over, and Rachel was glad she could leave without any heartache.

Rachel looked to her right. Two rows in front of her sat other expats of Travtelio, all returning forever to the US. Among them sat Lauren O'Sheridan. Lauren was so much younger. Why hadn't Lauren stayed in Europe?

Lauren O'Sheridan sipped from a brandy. She needed one, to not let sadness and depression overcome her determination. She experienced a turmoil of emotions she could not yet fully cope with. Her hands shook. She noticed she had grabbed often to brandy the last weeks. Europe had been a deception. Andrew Raga had been a deception. Lauren had looked to Raga

for a while as if he were a demi god. She had fancied being the wife of a brilliant businessman, the mother of children, travelling together in Europe, visiting France and Italy, talking about the paintings in the main museums of the European capitals, wealthy, learning the history of the continent, showing her children the splendour of green Ireland, and foremost, resting in the arms of someone who could blow away loneliness with a smile and a hug. Andrew Raga had proved to be a mean bastard, a man with an ego as high as the Eiffel Tower, ambitious, ruthless, and also as shallow as a brook. Lauren had guessed rapidly enough he was a sexual pervert. She had escaped from Andrew Raga, but she dreaded meeting other such men who might better hide their true nature than Andrew Raga. She feared giving in by sheer loneliness to such a man in the US. She shuddered. She would prefer to remain single, then.

There had been another man, of course, a man who had interested her and even excited her. Jan Stevens might have been the husband she longed for. But she had been involved with Raga at first, and then that white, Czech vixen had beaten her to Jan Stevens. Lauren though she had been lucky, in the end, to have put no hopes on Jan Stevens. Had she spoken more to that man, invited him into her sphere, would she then have been able to ensnare Jan Stevens? Had fate not separated them? Lauren thought so, yes, for she had never reached that point of touch from which love starts and hopefully deepens. Jan had been attracted right away to that Jana Kovar! She grinned. Even the nicest men fell for a superb figure, for big boobs and saucy bottoms, long, blonde hair, long black boots and high heels. Jan had not been an exception to, that! Lauren wished Jan well.

Lauren kept on thinking. The same thoughts ever returned to haunt her like the regrets of a dry mistake. Lauren had been looking too much to Andrew Raga, and let Jan Stevens be captured by Jana. Yet, she had felt close at times to that strange, mysterious man called Jan Stevens. A relation like she might have had with Jan Stevens was what she really was after. She knew that now, but it was too late. Jan Stevens would always remain an embryo of love that had not been able to grow. It was not much, but nevertheless a nice memory to take back to the US. Could she still meet such a man, gentle and timid, maybe somewhat weak in convictions, but caring for people? She doubted that, and she laughed to herself. She would probably spoil such a chance again. She always looked at the wrong choice! Could she have lived with Jan? Jan Stevens was a European, and Lauren wondered whether she could live in Europe. She was an American in bones and heart. She sipped at her brandy and browsed in a book of European art. She looked down from the window into the white sea of clouds and imagined her hovering in those clouds, oblivious of all the spectres and worries that pervaded her now.

Chapter Eight. The Labour Union

Jan Stevens walked briskly into a restaurant near the Place du Sablon. He thought he was late. He had chosen the restaurant because it had two floors, and very few guests went up the stairs to the second floor for lunch, so that one could eat and talk in relative calm there, unseen by the crowd at ground floor. Jan also knew the owner of the restaurant, an old friend. Jan had also often taken Jana to this restaurant for a quick bite in the evening. Jana loved the monstrous Italian salads the owner prepared for her, Parmesan cheese sprinkled over mesclun and roquette salads, a dish that would have sufficed her for an entire day. Today, at lunch time, Jan had proposed this restaurant to meet Robert Daaks, the head of the largest Labour Union of Travtelio. Daaks did not hold a position very high up in the hierarchy of the National Union overall. He was nevertheless the leader of the Union in the industry sector of Travtelio. He wielded the power of the thousands of affiliates in Travtelio, and he sat every week in meetings with Bart Peters, Travtelio's HR Director for Labour Union Relations, and also with the President of HR, Bernard de Voncques. Jan Stevens supposed the man also met Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre occasionally, to discuss the most difficult issues and to cut through the last Gordian knots. Jan might have asked to meet the Union leader in the premises of the Union's headquarters, but he had not too much confidence in the secrecy of that building and he preferred the good old Belgian way of business meetings over a long lunch in a place of his own choosing.

Jan had hurried, but Robert Daaks had not yet arrived. Jan asked a quiet table upstairs, in a darker corner, got one from the owner who went upstairs with him, and he ordered a drink while waiting for Daaks.

Jan Stevens was a paying member of Daaks' Labour Union. Jan paid a membership since he had started to work at Travtelio. He had never been a very active member, though. Jan believed in Unions. He thought they were necessary for a company to maintain fine relations with personnel, to guarantee a humane form of management, and to maintain the balance between powers inside the enterprise, the balance that guaranteed harmonious relations. He was not too sure anymore of the continued existence of that equilibrium, though, and that was one of the things he would say to the Union leader. Jan had nevertheless also an issue with his membership. He was a Director. There had been strikes at Travtelio. Jan had not participated in the strikes, torn between sympathy for the Unions, and being a member of management of the company at the same time. How was he to be a member of the oppressed and an oppressor at the same time? Jan had never been an oppressor, at least that was what he thought, but during conflicts he could not hide he was a Manager and later a Director of Travtelio. His solidarity was split. He had chosen sides only lately, knowing he would have to blow up some bridges because of that. He surmised he was on the side of the oppressed, now. Would he not lose his Directorship soon? He had come here to tell Daaks what he knew about the Presidents of Travtelio!

A little later, Robert Daaks was brought to Jan's table. Jan looked up and stood to shake hands. He was surprised. Daaks was accompanied by a woman, presented as Anne Degambre, and that was not really according to plan. Jan had asked to see Daaks alone. Daaks was Flemish, Degambre Walloon.

'I brought Anne, my assistant,' Daaks excused. 'She knows everything I know. You can trust her as much as me. Anyway, she is my ears and my eyes already!' he laughed.

Daaks was not a tall man. He was big, with a pot belly developing under his jacket. Jan knew Daaks drank a lot. Yet, the man was entirely dedicated to his work in the Unions. He was

dressed in a shabby, grey costume. Daaks' trousers may not have been ironed for a month, and the Union leader drew his trousers up at least three times before he sat in his chair, an obvious sign of nervousness that made Jan smile inside, for it was rather he, Jan Stevens, who should have been ill at ease here. Daaks had thick, ruffled, black, sticky hair flecked with grey streaks, a red face like of a farmer freshly sunburnt in spring, a bull's nose, little ears set wide behind his face. When more light fell on Daaks' face, Jan remarked the red was not from the sun. It was too rosy and too regular for that. Daaks had to suffer from high blood pressure. Labour Union representatives did not live long. Jan had known well the previous leader who had died a few months ago, but not this Daaks, who had not been in office since long, and who had been transferred to Travtelio from another section. He did not know what he might expect of this man, nor how the Union man's judgement formed. Still, Thomas Denis had told Jan Daaks was a decent and honest man.

Jan looked at Anne Degambre. He saw a rather attractive woman, but a woman with a leathery face of thin lips and angular shapes. She had an interesting face, denoting the woman of action, of much work, of constant worries, and a nice, slim figure. She looked at him with piercing, very striking blue eyes, which made her face exceptional and very attractive. Jan thought she would age before her time, however, and she would age badly to sharp features and lines in her face. She should care for her face and her figure, like Jana did, he thought. Nevertheless, when Jan sighed and when she had finished probing him too, which lasted only an instant, she nodded encouragingly at him. She gave Jan a warm hello and a dry hand that felt pleasant at the touch.

Jan proposed to start with a drink. Daaks asked for a whisky immediately; the woman wanted a tomato juice. Power and blood, Bloody Mary, thought Jan, but he let the other two begin by a short talk that was supposed to set Jan at ease with Daaks and Degambre. Jan was totally in control, however, and not in the least intimidated. He had prepared meticulously what he wanted to say. He was also very much aware that if somebody from Travtelio HR would hear of his conversation, would even only hear of him having talked to Daaks and Degambre, he would never have any chance at promotion at the company, and probably risk very much being in the next wave of dismissals of managers.

Jan had arrived at a decision only a few days ago about what he should do. The talk today with Union leaders was the first of a series of actions that would lead him inexorably into another phase of his life. He was determined to go on with his resolutions. He only had one nagging question, and that was about how Jana Kovar would think of him, but he forced that issue to a far corner of his mind for the moment.

When Daaks' whisky was half empty, which lasted only a few minutes, Daaks began. 'You asked to see us. You had Anne on the phone, actually. You wanted to talk to us about Travtelio.'

'Yes,' Jan acknowledged. 'I talked to a woman on the phone. Thank you for having let me convince you to meet. I wanted to talk to you about what happens at Travtelio. You know of course also quite well what happens at the company, maybe not how the Directors feel. Everything must be put in a perspective, the causes explained. I am a member of the management of Travtelio, and also a member of your Union. I have some interesting things to tell to the Union about what is really going on, where things may lead to.'

'We do know a lot from our members,' Daaks reacted, 'but we are always eager to hear more, especially at a pleasant lunch, such as you invited us to!'

'Right', Jan thought, 'and with those words you want to make sure I know who shall pay the bill. Not that I care!'

‘First,’ Jan continued, ‘I need to tell you about how I believe Gerald Godelin was ousted out of the company by Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre.’

Anne Degambre had taken her glass up. She put it now back down, without bringing it to her lips.

Jan explained what he had discovered about the accesses of Buisseyre and Andrew Raga to the private files and mails of Gerald Godelin. He explained to the Union leaders what was in the files, what information of misdealing was exchanged in Godelin’s mails. He handed over a report to Daaks. Daaks immediately gave the report to Degambre.

‘Do you have proof of what you state?’ Daaks asked.

‘I have a report here of what accesses were taken, to what kind of information. I have copies of the mails and of the contents of the files. This information was copied illegally, however. If ever you state me as your source, I may well go to jail. I have handed this over to you as proof, for you to get a feeling of what happens at the company, but illegally won information cannot be used in a Court of Justice. I ask you, of course, never to mention your sources. I have proof that Buisseyre accessed the data before he became CEO. The proof is in the report. I have no proof he used the data to dispose of Godelin at Travtelio, but that seems obvious.’

‘That information confirm what we suspected,’ Daaks smiled, ‘but is no news to us, and hardly useful.’ He snorted and leaned back in his chair. ‘You see, we take intrigues among the Presidents of Travtelio and among the members of the Executive Board and the Shareholders Board for granted. We do not intervene in the fights of sharks unless that affects our Union members!’

‘You will find in the report further proof of actions of frauds of the current Travtelio Board. Foreign subsidiaries are involved in these frauds, especially the subsidiaries in Abu Dhabi and Singapore. These subsidiaries have no economic activity whatever, except laundering the money and diluting taxes of the company. Travtelio uses them to evade taxes. You will find evidence of a holding company in Luxemburg used to raise leverage funds for Travtelio investments, also weird tax avoiding schemes. Travtelio profits from tax reductions and from low taxes there, profiting as well of the concept of notional interests here!’

‘Do those provisions not serve to raise the earnings of the company and enhance the profitability of the company?’ Degambre remarked. ‘With the profits Travtelio generated, very generous pre-pension plans have been installed. Our Union members have profited from those. We would have suffered a bloodbath of layoffs by the thousands at Travtelio without those plans. Godelin was a bastard, like all CEO’s. He killed a few people in business also to get in the place he sat at Travtelio. He was tough with his Directors, but he was also the very paternalistic type with his lower personnel. We do not complain about the programs of voluntary departure from Travtelio he organised. We do not condone illegal practices in companies, but is it our task to point to those wounds?’

Jan Stevens wanted to cry out, ‘what do you do with the ethics of the frauds?’ but he said, ‘right! There is more.’ He attacked his dish of pasta with clams. ‘Travtelio’s balance sheet has been published lately. Have you looked at the figures, at all the figures?’

‘Of course,’ Degambre said defying Jan, then looking with sheepish eyes at him and then again at her own plate of steak.

‘Then you must have read the figures of the percentage of Travtelio shares, the distribution of the shares over the various shareholders. Those figures are in the public report.’

Jan met a blank in the man and woman in front of him. Did they care one second about what he was telling? They seemed to be more interesting in stuffing their mouths full than in what he brought.

‘Travtelio’s Finance Division published the figures of the shares distribution,’ Jan continued. ‘Eighty-five percent of the shares are held by investor funds, among which fifty-one percent by the Belgian State. The remaining fifteen percent, a staggering amount of money, have been reserved for Travtelio personnel.’

‘We do not oppose to that,’ Daaks said, without looking up from his plate. ‘I grant you we also do not feel very comfortable with employees taking shares in their company. Union members oppose Boards of Shareholders and Executive Boards. They should not be in them. We do not have the German “Montan Mitbestimmung” concept in our country. We are not in favour of a mixture of roles and interests, and we warn our members against a participation in capitalist stock market speculations. We can hardly forbid them to buy stocks, however. Share value is volatile. Shares are risky investments. We warn our members against casino roulette practices!’

‘The distribution within the fifteen percent is what is interesting,’ Jan continued stubbornly. ‘Employees of Travtelio took up a mere two percent of all shares in the voluntary program. For thirty thousand employees, that is a very low number, indeed. Your advice has been taken to heart. Five additional percent has been promised as shares to the two hundred top managers of Travtelio. Three percent has been given in direct shares to the Presidents of the Executive Board, about six to ten people, and five percent has been handed over to the CEO. Therefore, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre alone owns more than double of all the shares the thousands of employees of Travtelio have acquired. Not only has Buisseyre received a salary six times higher than Gerald Godelin had, a few months ago, he has become with one stroke a millionaire in tens of millions of Euro by bringing Travtelio to the Euro stock market. He has not cashed in on his shares yet, but he owns that value. Travtelio made him very wealthy in one masterly stroke he staged himself. His contract also states bonuses, but those have not been disclosed. The bonuses also amount to a few millions of Euro, tens of millions over the five year period of his contract. In the report you will find a mail stating the amount of the bonuses. I did not find a copy of his contract. I wonder how much severance pay has been concluded and is mentioned in his contract, for his golden parachute, also a figure that has remained undisclosed, but I suspect it to be close to three years of salary and bonuses. I wonder whether his contract mentions that if he gets fired because of mismanagement he will receive nothing. I very much doubt that! Do you not think that is a major scandal? How much do you earn, both of you? Is Buisseyre such a genius of management? Is he so much better than you? Is he so much better and smarter than the common employee of Travtelio? His salary and bonuses alone this year make that he earns about three hundred times more than the common worker. Yet, these workers are being dismissed by the dozen, quietly, regularly. Is that still ethical?’

Degambre looked at Daaks now, but Daaks continued to eat and did not change one muscle in his face but for his chewing mouth. He also did not lower his head deeper in his dish. He seemed to think about something. Degambre looked at Jan and she continued to stare at him for quite a time. Then she looked at Daaks again.

Finally, Daaks laid down his fork.

‘We are not jealous in the Unions,’ Daaks replied. ‘We condemn abuses of management. As long as our members are treated decently however, we do not intervene. The members of the board of Shareholders determine how much the CEO gets paid, not us.’

‘Does not the Government hold fifty-one percent of all shares,’ remarked Jan dryly. ‘How many Ministers are linked to your Union movements?’

‘The amounts you mention are in line with what the CEOs of other, major European conglomerations earn. In the US, these bonuses are even a multiple higher. Like I told, we are

alert for our members and care about them. We do not feel it necessary to handle all oddities of the finances of the companies. That is the job of the Boards.'

'Your motto is to do well and not look over your shoulders,' Jan grinned bitterly. 'Hear not, see not, and speak not, as long as Union members get their meagre due. Is that what you do?' Daaks did not answer. He pushed his dish brusquely away, over the table. He was angry and irritated.

'You have also not reacted when fifty Directors of Travtelio were fired on one and the same day,' Jan said.

Daaks did not answer.

'Of course not,' Jan said. 'Directors of Travtelio, regardless of whether they are Union members or not, which many of the older ones were, are no concern of yours. You are the Union of the Poor Worker. Thousands of employees have fled in the pre-pension plans. Why should you care about Directors? Still, because of those dismissals the shares of Travtelio rose steeply. Who do you think profited from that?'

Jan Stevens drank from his glass and said then to the silent Daaks and Degambre, 'in the report you will also find a mail exchange between the CEO and his Finance President, from which you can read they wished the dismissal of the Directors to draw the value of the Travtelio shares upward. They may apply that, and other tricks, a few times more in the next years. Buisseyre and Raga mention clearly in those e-mails they want to spare their own fortune from devaluation by diminishing share value.'

'Nevertheless,' Jan continued, not waiting for a reply, and seeing Daaks' face redden deeper, 'I have also proof in that report of the manipulation of the percentages of the annual evaluations by Travtelio. The Executive Board pushes people into lower categories of scores overall by fixing target numbers. The targets fixed are a lot lower than the average scores of the previous years. Therefore, employees will be disappointed, depressed, leave by their own accord, at least the ones who get only lower scores. The global amount of bonuses paid out to employees will be less by that manoeuvre, but Travtelio will only publish the total amount of bonuses paid to personnel, not the distribution over the categories of employees, and the absolute value of the budget is not lower than the budget of last year. Presidents will get higher bonuses within the total amount provided by the budget. How can you agree with that? How can you agree the employees are being stolen from, whereas all the bonuses of the Executive Board and of the CEO rise? Why you do not react to that is what I do not understand.'

Anne Degambre whispered, barely audibly 'what proofs have you of this?'

'I added a copy of a mail sent by the HR President to Andrew Raga, to the Finance President, and to Buisseyre, with the target figures of the Executive Board printed out. The sheet I have joined holds annotations in the handwriting of Raga. There are stains on the sheet and on the photocopy in the report. The stains are blood stains. I pried the sheet out of the hands of my friend, Sara Jansen, the HR Director who committed suicide recently. She clutched that paper while she fell.'

Robert Daaks and Anne Degambre looked at Jan Stevens with very wide eyes. Daaks again pushed his dish farther from him. He tugged at his belt. He grabbed a scurrying waitress at the arm and ordered another whisky.

They held silence now, at the table. Jan Stevens supposed Daaks felt nothing for desert. The waitress returned with the whisky, and Daaks gulped it eagerly. The waitress took away the dishes and asked what they would have for desert. Jan and Anne Degambre ordered a piece of chocolate cake. Degambre had reacted more coldly to Jan's words than Daaks. Daaks still did not say anything.

Jan said still, 'I brought together in that report also a list of about fifty examples of what might be called unethical management initiatives, applied by Travtelio in the last two years. Maybe that list can be of help to you.'

When the chocolate cake was brought, and when Jan and Anne plunged their spoons in it, Daaks suddenly spoke. His words were uttered slowly, softly, in a much less defensive way. 'I heard of two more suicides. Two more suicides have occurred in Travtelio premises, not in the headquarter building, but in district buildings of the company. No, we are not going to remain silent about those.'

'Then the paper I brought may help,' Jan replied.

Robert Daaks again did not react.

'This guy really acknowledges nothing,' Jan thought. 'He is as hard as a ball of steel. He may do things with what I brought, or then he may not. He is not going to tell me, anyway, what he intends to do, when and how. He is a real cool bastard, but I would act the same way. We are playing risky games.'

Anne Degambre said, 'if all that is in your report, we may indeed have useful elements, for which we thank you. What is in all this for you? What do you seek? Your name must be on some of the pages of the report. The printouts were made for you. The userids may lead to you. We shall keep this information confidential, but Travtelio will put two and two together, given time, and the paths will cross over you. You are running high risks here. You may lose your job. Travtelio may call you to a Court of Justice. Do you know how many lawyers and investigators Travtelio can throw against you? Why did you bring us this evidence?'

'I am a member of your Union,' Jan hissed. 'I have been a member ever since I got hired by Travtelio. I am not a naïve fanatic. I do would like some ethics to be applied in the company I work in, especially in the people domain. Two of my friends have committed suicide, but looking at those facts from another angle one might also conclude they have been murdered, maybe only by callousness and carelessness, but murdered anyhow. I do not generally seek revenge, but those deaths must serve at something. Travtelio will not attack me. I shall raise a scandal in all circles of society, a scandal that will reach higher than the Skyscraper. If they do attack me in Court, I shall call to witness Presidents and employees, who will have to testify under oath. I do not really care about the consequences!'

Daaks still remained silent. The three drank their coffee, but the tension ran high between them. Degambre glared at Jan from above her coffee. Then, Jan Stevens told he had to return to office. Soon thereafter, seeing neither Daaks nor Degambre held him back, he stood up and left. He remarked how Degambre clutched his report. She had not placed it somewhere next to her. She had held on to it under her arm while she ate. Jan smiled, and left. Downstairs, he paid the bill, added yet another whisky for Daaks, and ran to his car.

2

'Jesus, how I hate these idealists,' Daaks said. 'I detest them. What this Stevens just did is a trap for us all. For a moment I saw myself at thirty years of age in him. I was very idealistic and innocent then too, a "petit con", as they say in French, a stupid young boy. One does learn to be a little more pragmatic in our business. That guy is dangerous! Who knows what he will do next? Guys like that are uncontrollable. I had the immense luck to have my former boss teach me about reality. Does he think he is the El Cid Campeador fighting the Moors at Valencia? Does he think he is a reincarnation of Jesus Christ?'

'I thought he was rather cute, Robert,' Anne Degambre sighed. 'It is refreshing to meet somebody who still believes in something decent. He believes people have to be kind to each

other. Is that not what Christianity is about? He was a friend of Sara Jansen. He sure had a sense of drama when he told how he had gotten that sheet out of the dead woman's hands! I have never experienced such an awful moment! I think he may be seeking some sort of revenge.'

'If you want to go to bed with him, be my guest,' Daaks replied crudely. 'Anne Degambre joins Prince Courageous! Please do! Take care with a guy like him! You will not be able to control him. He is way too obsessed with his role as purificator. I believe he is led by resentment and hatred. He thinks he is a Prophet! Such people are either Saints, and then their place is in heaven above and not on earth, certainly not in a Labour Union, or he is a dangerous hypocrite, and we should know more about his motives. He may be a fool or a madman. Anyway, we can use his information. I guess Mister Jan Stevens does not at all realise how much powder he has poured in our gun.'

'You sure did not say anything about whether what he brought was useful or not, Robert. You even did not say thank you, mind. I don't think he expected a thank you. I think he does know what you are going to do with his report. He is no fool. He is a university engineer, and he seems more mature than most of the technicians I met. He seems to comprehend the consequences of what he is doing.'

'Stevens did escape a disaster,' Anne Degambre ventured on. 'Had he been seeing the President of the other Union, he would have been sacked tomorrow, first hour. Our competitor eats out of Buisseyre's hand. Have you noticed the new BMW four-wheel drive car he has got? I bet my head that car was offered by the CEO of Travtelio. The other union guys ought to act a lot more to the left than we, cry out loud they defend the poor and the abandoned widows. Yet, that Union seems to agree with everything Travtelio proposes. I am sure our colleague, the other Union leader, has been corrupted by Buisseyre!'

'Of course. He is corrupt,' Daaks replied. 'I know! I have all the proof!'

Daaks did not tell however to Degambre what proof he had gathered. Daaks had enough proof, lying in his drawer, proof given to him by one of the secretaries of the Executive Board, a woman who was not a member of the Union, but whom he had known intimately many years ago.

Yes, Stevens had avoided the danger of speaking to that Union leader, but Stevens had also been a member of Daaks' Union since ever. Daaks knew that too, for he had checked it out, which Degambre had not done. He also knew Jan Stevens slept with a Czech expat, and he even knew Jan Stevens was familiar with aristocrat circles. His friend, Thomas Denis, had told him so much. Denis had also told this Jan Stevens could be trusted. Daaks trusted no one, not even Thomas Denis, who he had known for over twenty years. Daaks did not quite place Jan Stevens as a man of simple convictions, and that made him very cautious. Daaks always closed his personality and released no information to people he could not trust completely, for a hundred percent. It was difficult to gain his trust. Even Anne Degambre, his closest collaborator, had not reached such a degree of confidence. How would she be in bed?

'Well, then I drink to that,' Daaks concluded, emptying his fourth whisky that noon, and not the last one of the day. One had to rehearse for Labour Union meetings! Jan Stevens had paid for the lunch before leaving.

3

'You fool! You stupid, naïve fool,' was also the reaction of Charles de Trioteignes when Jan Stevens told his friend that evening what he had done.

'God in heaven, what will that Union leader Daaks do with what you handed over? You gave the guy dynamite, Jan! The Government may topple over such a scandal as the Union can now start!'

They were sitting once more in Charles' salon of the Castle of Trioteignes. Jana and Monique had driven to Namur for a ladies' shopping spree, in which neither Jan nor Charles wisely desired or dared to intervene. They had remained at the castle, and talked over a brandy.

'I give the same report to you,' Jan whispered, 'and there is quite more in that report than in the one I gave to the Union. You will also find proof of price fixing among international competitors. They pour illegal contributions into political parties. Travtelio is also using its reserves of cash to buy in stock. Why else would the Board allow buying outstanding shares but to buoy the prices of the stock? That keeps Buisseyre's fortune nice and steady! At least two Presidents are scrounging up cash! Jesus, I never imagined I would dig so much up. I find it incomprehensible how careless people like Buisseyre and his Finance President can be with their electronic mail systems. They seem to believe their systems are inviolate, but the encryption method they use is very simple to break by algorithms and software available on the Internet. Somebody must have ensured them their encoding is reliable and safe. It is not! They also almost never change their passwords. They do not use the application I and Thomas Denis proposed to Godelin, which would be a lot more secure. I have no idea where they got the software from they now use, but it is as transparent as a sieve with extremely large holes.'

'What do you want me to do with this information?' Charles asked.

'Do with it whatever you want!'

'You are blowing up all your bridges, Jan, do you realise that? Sooner or later somebody in the Executive Board will find out where the data come from. Even without the report in hand, they will work by elimination and find out only a handful people might have access to that kind of very confidential information. Buisseyre will hire in the best detectives and IT security specialists in the country. He will find you out!'

'I don't care!' Jan Stevens cried. 'I did place some false trails behind, trails that lead to nowhere. I am an IT expert too, you know. Before they find me out, and that may take months, I will be out of Travtelio!'

'You will be out of Travtelio?' Charles said, surprised. 'How about Jana Kovar? Will she also be out of the company? Where will she be?'

Jan didn't answer. Charles de Trioteignes hesitated. Then he continued, 'Jana once told us she worked on the Data Warehousing of Travtelio. Tell me, Jan, you didn't use her to get to these data, didn't you?' Charles waved the report before Jan's eyes.

Jan blinked. 'Of course not! What are you suggesting? Yes, I learned from her there was an issue with Data Warehouse security. Yes, I learned from her that Buisseyre and the American, Andrew Raga, got to the data. I never used her to get into the archives myself. She doesn't know how I got in there.'

'How then did you get the information, Jan?'

'I do have friends in IT Operations, Charles,' Jan confessed. 'Friends have come to talk to me. I talked to other friends. Doors remained ajar for a few hours, here and there, not long enough to raise suspicions now or later. Nobody knows which doors stayed open. Nobody knows what he doors were leading to. All I did was too innocent, too normal to be suspected. Traces got deleted.'

'So nobody will ever suspect Jana Kovar?'

'No! What the hell are you insinuating?'

Charles shook his head. 'I think you should talk to Jana, Jan. You have a few things to explain to her. If she finds out anything about what you did, she may be so shocked as to run away from you. Do you want to take that risk? She has been hurt once already, Jan. Don't hurt her again! She is a nice girl. I like her. Monique likes her. She has grown on us. If you hurt her, you may not be welcome anymore in this house. Monique would see to that!'

‘No, no, for Heavens’ sake,’ Jan cried, ‘Jana will not be implicated in this! I will explain to her!’

‘You have a real lot of explaining to do, Jan, don’t you? How much does she really know about you? Monique has been probing about what exactly Jana knows about you. Monique is becoming a close friend of Jana’s. Monique protects her friends! Talk with Jana, and do it quickly, will you?’

Jan sat in silence. He was angry and disappointed. He began to fear he would wallow in a mess, soon. He saw Charles browsing through his report.

He asked, ‘what are you going to do with the papers I gave you?’

Charles de Trioteignes smiled. ‘It is a bit late for you to ask now, isn’t it? I thought you didn’t care. There is enough explosive material in here to blow Travtelio apart. Now, we don’t want to do that! There is also enough in here to have de Buisseyre and that Raga dance to any pipes! I have a few ideas, Jan. Better you did not know what I am going to do. Monsieur de Buisseyre will suffer a few unpleasant surprises. We shall probably be able to flatten the rough corners at Travtelio. The time has come to have the white knights ride with helmets and couched lances!’

Jan laughed. The two men continued to chat about everyday politics of the country. They were still laughing when Jana and Monique entered the room, laden with parcels and bags. The women forced the men to admire with hoos and haas and wows what they had bought. Jan was delighted to receive a blue cashmere pullover from Jana. He was oddly touched. No women had ever bought something for him since his mother had died.

In the evening, during and after supper, Jan proved particularly taciturn. Jana sensed he was brooding over something.

She said, ‘you are exceptionally silent this evening. Is something wrong?’

Charles looked at Jan.

‘All is fine,’ Jan replied. ‘Why don’t we take a walk outside?’

‘Now?’ Jana asked, astonished and a little reluctant. ‘It is dark outside, in the woods. It is cold today!’

‘I can ask Charles to light the lamps outside for us. He has installed an illuminated tour in the woods around the castle. The path is lighted. We just follow the lights, and do not wander off in the woods. Half an hour, please, Jana?’

Jana nodded. She put on her coat and followed Jan out of the massive gates of the Trioteignes Castle. Jana huddled close to Jan while they walked. The wind was cold and bit through their coats. Jana linked her arm in his. They walked a while together in silence, went up a path, and strolled from one light to the other. They lost view of the castle. Jana used the next two lights to extort two long, passionate kisses from Jan.

‘You are tense this evening,’ Jana began.

‘I have things to tell you,’ Jan answered.

‘Go on,’ Jana replied. ‘You seemed to be having a problem. Nothing serious, I hope.’

‘You don’t know much about me, don’t you?’

‘No, I don’t! I think I know enough, though!’

‘You have a right to know all about me.’

‘Fine! Go ahead, mister Mystery!’

‘I was brought up by my mother. Only by my mother. She was one of the great figures of what is now called the jet set of Brussels. She descended directly from one of the oldest families of Brussels, therefore considered an aristocrat, and allowed to dwell in the company of the greatest names of the nobility of our country. She was rich, beautiful, dazzling, exciting,

daring, challenging, and she had lovers by the dozen. She left my father the day I was born. She shielded me from my father. One of the things that could really throw her into a bad fit was when I would ask her about my father, the more so when I asked to meet him. My mother told me my father had come to despise her in the last days of her pregnancy, though I doubt that explanation. They had a special relationship, because never again did my mother marry, nor do I have brothers or sisters. Two days after I was born in England, she fled the island and drove on her own to Brussels. More than one woman would have fainted on such a trip, but my mother was strong. She arrived safe and sound, though exhausted, in Brussels, and declared me under her name a child from an unknown father. Therefore, I have two passports with different names on them, and English one and a Belgian one. I am Ian Clarkson and Jan Stevens. My father also was rich, the owner of vast lands in the UK, the owner of warehouses and a distribution chain, but he was not an aristocrat, and my mother only described him as something of a rustic boar. I guess he got fed up with her uppity manners. My mother always refused to tell me how they met.

My mother and father died a little time ago. I was their only child, so they left me quite rich. I have been asking myself ever since what to do next. I think I was shocked dumb for a while with the new situation, torn in doubt about what I wanted my life to be. And then you came, and I waited still. Now, I think I know what I want to do. The first thing is that I would like us to get married officially.'

Jana gasped, 'why, Jan Stevens, this definitely is the third proposal, and, Ian Clarkson, your first one!'

'Yes, it is. It is not the first time I proposed to you, Jana. We should make work of it. At least, I would like that. I am not just proposing marriage to you, however. Marriage is a life project for me, something to build upon, and something that can enrich us every day, not something static and dull. I want us to do things together, to discuss and have fights over important items of our lives, and I also would like to propose to you a place to live, not in Brussels and not in Prague. We shall have to leave the places we were born in, you and I, but we will be together. I would like us to live in Great Britain, in Norfolk.'

'I shall have to think about that, Jan!'

'Yes. You should. I know that. Take your time.

There is a lot more I have to tell you, though. My mother dragged me to the finest families of the capital, but I use the word "finest" in the sense of the richest, most flashy meaning. When I was a kid, I sat on the laps of some of the most renowned men of the country, of Counts and Barons, of politicians and professors. Not all of them were lovers of my mother, of course, but there were so many of them around me that I had suspicions about each of them. I adored my mother, of course, she was a great seducer, but I hated every one of the men!'

Jan stopped talking. Jana laughed and pinched Jan's arm. 'Go on! What more is there to tell?'

'At university, I was like something between a communist and anarchist, a blend of a Trotskyist and a Leninist, but I suppose I was too much of a coward, too soft, to act truly like a revolutionary. I read "Das Kapital", but Marx's theories bored me when I got through the thousands of pages. So, I developed a kind of personal ethics. I want to be just with people, kind and courteous. I will do no wrong if I can help it, not that I am aware of. I will abide by the Rights of Man, by the Ten Commandments, by the teachings of love of Christ, and respect all religions, be they Christianity, Islam or the Jewish Faith, or even Marxism, as long as they are humane and compassionate. I do not claim all people should live by my values. I just decided to apply my values, to live by them, and also to put them regularly into question, with as open a mind as possible. My values were incompatible with the environment my mother lived in, so I broke with her circles, gradually, but in a very final way. I refused to become

engaged to any of the girls my mother presented to me. Some of them were doubtless intelligent, admirable young women, but I ignored them and have lived much on my own. I have never lived together with a woman. We did well these last months, together, but I do not know whether I will be up to your standards and wishes of living together, so you had better observe me and tell me what you dislike! Be sure you want me and be sure you want to live with me, because I do not believe in divorce!’

‘I will, I will consider the offer very seriously,’ Jana laughed. She made Churchill’s victory sign with her two fingers of her left hand, as if she were formulating an oath like a girl scout. ‘Don’t mock me!’ Jan smiled, hoping Jana would never really be totally serious with him.

Jan continued, ‘there is more to tell you. First: I never abused of your confidence, and I never wanted to do anything that came near to that. I also have not used you. Nevertheless, when I said I wanted to do everything together, especially the important decisions of our life, I realise I made a very bad start! I have to apologise abjectly for that. When you began your Data Warehousing project, I did not know I was going to fall in love with you. I did not know you were going to find security breaches in the Data Warehouse. When you did find out about those issues, however, and when I realised who had been reading private data and sensitive corporate data, I guessed why that information was used. I have been thinking about the many examples of unethical management I saw at Travtelio. I guess the suicides of Michel Doriant and of Sara Jansen affected me much. Anyway, continuing on the facts you found, how breaking into the Data Warehouse could lead to secrets of the Executive Board, I too did the same. Don’t ask me how, I did it. I put together a report of other things I found out, not only from the Data Warehouse. I got to other archives.’

Jana Kovar listened intently. She walked on, bowed her head deeper.

‘I wrote a report that may give some people power over Buisseyre and Raga. I gave the report to a Labour Union two days ago and to Charles this afternoon. Buisseyre must be stopped to harass people and to profit from it.’

‘How can you be sure your report will stop Buisseyre?’ Jana asked.

‘The reports will be used! I checked out on the Union leader from friends. He is a bulwark of a guy when it comes to employees’ rights. I heard he was not corrupt. He meets Travtelio HR representatives and he is a tough negotiator. He will use whatever is given him. As to Charles, well, I know Charles. He will do no harm, but he opposes Buisseyre’s clan. Monique will not allow Charles to do harm. The Union leader will neutralise Travtelio HR and stop them from doing worse; Charles will do the same with Buisseyre and Raga. That brings me to what I really had to say to you. The fact is: I was not very clear in my mind about this. Charles forced me this afternoon to think this over.’

Jana looked straight in the distance, now. Jan saw she was angry, worried and on her guard.

‘I may be found out by Buisseyre and Raga,’ Jan continued. ‘That is not so bad, because by the time they can find out about me, I will be far. However, I did not ask your opinion before I handed over those papers, and I have two issues with that. First, I will leave Brussels. I don’t really have to do that, but I want to do it. I have to look after my business in England. I don’t want to go alone, so I ask you not only to marry me, but to leave the country with me. That is a difficult decision for you, but if you fear losing your job, I can tell you I am very rich indeed, so rich that if we marry you will not have to fear for your way of living. You can have a job of your own, of course, whichever you want, but it will have to be in England.’

‘And the second issue?’

‘I did follow upon what you found in the Data Warehouse. There is always a chance, a small one, people may ask you about that. Since you did nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear.’

Still, it weighs on my conscience to have drawn you in some way into my personal vendetta. I am truly sorry for that and I apologise to you.'

'You are so sorry, but you did it anyway! How am I supposed to feel about that?'

'I know I should have talked to you about it. My best excuse is that this evolved before we declared our love, and I have been used to do all things by myself alone, and when Sara and Michel killed themselves I entered into a strange state of mind. These had been my friends! Somebody killed them, Jana. They were not strong people, yet they were pushed into despair, callously, pitilessly. I could no longer accept the abuses of management. I just couldn't continue to work as if nothing had happened at Travtelio! I can only make you the hard promise I will never again act without telling you first. I realised too late I should have spoken to you. I should have talked to you before handing over the reports. I promise something like that will not ever happen again.'

'I don't know, Jan. You seem a bit quick with your apology, right after having distributed the reports. Whether there is little chance to it or not, I may be drawn into a plot, a scandal, or worse. You should have thought about that! I need to think about all this! I am not so sure anymore I can still trust you.'

They arrived at the end of their walk. The round towers of the castle and the bridge emerged from the woods. Jana walked on in silence. She did not hold onto Jan's arm anymore. She crossed her arms over her chest and walked with her head down. When they passed the gate, Jana drew Jan back to her and said, 'I do love you, Jan, but you have changed my view of you. Too much turns around in my head for the moment. Let me think, will you? Give me some time.'

Jan replied, 'I truly, truly love you. I am not a bastard. I really want to live in a home with you, a home far from here, far from Travtelio, in a home where I hope we will not be confronted again by such dire injustice as I saw at Travtelio. Please trust me!'

Jana nodded, but she withdrew again from Jan. They entered the dining room together, but in silence.

Jana said little during supper and Jan was morose at the table. They ate a salad, followed by a young wild pheasant shot in the woods of Trioteignes by Charles, boiled potatoes and red cabbage prepared by Monique. For desert, they drank a cup of coffee and added a piece of cake from the village baker. This time, Jan and Charles placed the dishes in the dishwasher of the kitchen, and they rinsed and cleaned the pots. They remained for a while in the kitchen afterwards, to put the plates and pots in place. During that time, Jana and Monique sat in the deep brown leather sofas of the salon.

Monique began immediately with, 'come on, Jana, what is bothering you? Anything I can help with?'

Jana left her thoughts and explained to Monique what Jan had said to her, also about his wish to live in England.

'Men, men, men! How stupid they can be sometimes! I knew that Jan was rich from two sides,' Monique replied. 'His family is as old as Charles'. Jan's mother was well-to-do, and his father made a fortune in the distribution sector in England. Jan should manage his business in Great Britain. He has hesitated to do so until now, for he is a slow mover, something of a Hamlet. When you get him on his way, however, he acts faster than lightning. Charles is like that, too. How often have I not heard those two talk about something, hesitating and waiting, but when they come to a decision, get out of the way! Jan is still young. I understand easily such a decision on what to do in life, leave his friends in Belgium, having to ask you to leave everything behind too, was a difficult dilemma for him. You know, Jan and Charles are truly

good people. I can tell you that! They are honest, courteous, and they care for people. They can also be very dangerous and even vicious when somebody stands in their path and bars their route. I have seen Charles provide for rooms to poor people of the village who had gotten evicted of their house, give them money, a job, and worry about them. I have also seen him be ruthless and vindictive with merchants who tried to cheat him.'

'Jan is soft and hard too,' Jana said. 'I can live with that, and I was almost sure he would be nice and gentle with the people he loved. I have a sour taste in my mouth, however. I am afraid he used me at Travtelio. I mean, I am not afraid about the fact. I am sad he might have used me. I wonder, now, why we became so close. Did Jan seduce me on purpose? Was I only an instrument of his revenge? My world may be shattered with the answer on that question!' 'Jan should have told you before of all of this, but do not forget he too did probably not trust you completely. He may have feared you would deliver this information to your Czech company. One thing is certain: Jan would never have seduced you to use you in this Travtelio intrigue. I know Jan in and out; he would never do a thing like that. This guy is whiter than white! I think you should make a clear distinction between what happened to the two of you and between what Jan is doing with the Union and with Charles. Also, Jan confessed to you! That must have been difficult. Jan is intelligent. He may have feared to lose you, yet he told you. He would not have done that if he hadn't cared about you. You know, Jan and Charles are friends because they are so much the same. They are deep men. They keep worries inside. Charles has a lot of patience when people try to cheat him or harass him. He can take a lot and remain polite, up to a point. When he has stored up all the resentment and tension, and when he boils over, he explodes. I have seen Charles throw the butt of his rifle in the face of a fellow huntsman, a nobleman by the way, because the man had irritated him for months with embarrassing remarks. The man insulted me in public, while Charles stood around, so Charles had enough.

Jan is like that too. Jan is truly a gentle man, one might even call that weakness, and he ponders over decisions, but when he explodes, he too is probably ruthless. I have to say there is something comforting for a girl to have a loving man who can protect one when necessary. Jan is like that. Jan told to me and to Charles over the phone he has proposed marriage to you, quite some time ago. We were so astonished! If he had only seduced you to reach secret information, he would not have asked you to marry him. You would have been merely a burden to his leg once he had got what he sought. He would have tried to ship you back to Czechia, fastest way possible. I never would have thought somebody could have brought Jan to marriage! He has been a loner, your Jan. We invited several women here before you arrived, to have him meet women, not that we wanted to be matchmakers for him, just to make sure he had company. His relationships never lasted long. They were never impetuous, passionate affairs. My guess is he was very demanding in his feelings. He really waited until he could fall in love with someone. So, Jana, we all have to pass the Rubicon at one or other time in our life. Your decision is on trusting Jan or not. Then you can think about forgiving him. I think you can trust Jan. The decision is yours, of course! If ever we, Charles and I, hear he has abused you, he will never set one foot again in this house. I don't think he has used you. It simply would not be like the Jan Stevens I know!'

'Thank you. You say so much I wanted to hear. I have been deceived and hurt once. I was so sad to hear it happen all over again. I suppose I should have faith in Jan. He is asking me to leave everything behind, everything I had imagined my life to be. I would leave Brussels gladly. I have no ties with that town. I would also have to abandon Prague, though, and Prague is my home. Maybe I have hoped Jan might come with me to Czechia. In England, I would have to look for a new job, and that may be not so easy, for I am Czech. I don't want to

depend from a man. I have seen too many women stay with a man they despise merely because they have no financial means and depend in that entirely from the man. I am like you. I want to be independent. I must be able to have my own income and be able to stand up to my man.'

'I know what you mean. The men of the generation before Charles and Jan hated independent women. Charles and Jan do understand. Charles has never asked me to give up my farm. He even helps occasionally, though you should see him in a stable! He is dangerous with a fork! After half an hour, I am sure he would have stabbed in his own foot. He also knows less about electrical appliances than I!'

Monique and Jana sat laughing in the sofa when Jan and Charles entered the room. They mimicked outrage seeing the two women laughing and lazily leaning back in the sofa, while they had been working hard in the kitchen. The cake had almost been finished, too. Jan hesitated, but then he went to sit next to Jana. Jana moved closer to him, until their bodies touched, and then she hugged him. Jan knew everything was all right, then. He felt elated. Monique winked at him.

4

The opening of positions of IT Directors in the new organisation soon proved to be a total sham. Seven such positions had been defined, and the IT managers had sent in their candidatures. The IT groups were distributed over the Directors of the Business Divisions, however, and only one specific IT Director was appointed. The Executive Board refused the candidatures and decided to not appoint new Directors by way of economy. The current IT Directors were fired or retained as Group Managers, working under the Business Directors. The function of CIO disappeared.

Karl Geerts remained IT Operations Manager, but he lost the data centres, which were incorporated in other operation centres and their management. Thomas Denis and Roland Devos were dismissed. Denis was a civil servant who could not be dismissed. HR told him he could do whatever he wanted at Travtelio. He could quietly remain sitting at his desk reading comic books, or he could stay at home, or accept a pre-pension plan concocted just for him. Jean Collet accepted a job as Development Manager, retaining his former salary.

'Yes, my boy,' Thomas Denis sighed to Jan Stevens. 'I accepted the pre-pension plan. Michel Doriant gone, you soon gone, Sara Jansen gone, why would I have made it difficult for the world of business to get rid of me? Marguerite accepted to remain my secretary for the rest of my years. No, don't congratulate me, for I have not the slightest doubt I shall from now on be the servant of Marguerite than the other way round. The most difficult thing in becoming a pensioner is the change of management! I never had a woman boss, too! And don't congratulate Marguerite either, for she will be nothing but my nurse in a few years to come. In the meantime, we shall travel a lot. I had an interesting conversation with Robert Daaks lately. I almost fistcuffed him, but I think he will act. Buisseyre and Bart Peters and Marie Donat are going to have a rougher time. There will be some movement in the Board of Shareholders too, I heard. I regret not being able to wait just a little time more to see the puppets dancing here, but my time to go has come. Rudyard Kipling once wrote that one would only be a man when one could see the things one gave one's life to being broken, and yet stoop and build again with worn-out tools. Well, I have to thank Travtelio for finally having made a man out of me, for I am going to start anew, but my tools are certainly worn-out and tired. Good luck!'

The Directors who received the IT groups in their baskets had to define new objectives for IT. They had no idea how to do that, but they would not have dared to refuse. They understood nothing of the job content, so they asked their IT Managers to do this work for them. The Directors also did not know how to organise the jobs and the groups, so they changed little, and relied entirely on the people coming from the former IT Division. The IT Managers did not comment, smiled, and wrote the easiest objectives of the last years. They relaxed, and promised the fewest projects they could possibly get away with. The new Directors for IT were at a loss on how to motivate their employees. They dared not hold a speech to their personnel. They knew not how to lead a teambuilding session with their IT Managers and define some form of strategy, because they did not understand Information Technology. Luckily, they had a knack for management, so they asked for monthly statistics on anything that could be entered in statistics. The IT people defined indicators and statistics by the dozen, filled in the spreadsheets with doubtful data and phoney objectives. They sent in hundreds of data sheets with long rows of figures, promptly presented in dazzling graphics. The Business Directors had something to show in their staff meetings. Few understood what the graphics really meant, which was not so important, as long as the curves went upward. The Director who was now responsible for the data centres had never set a foot in the IT data centres, and would also not do for many months.

The change in the organisation affected not only the IT Directors. Travelio HR suddenly modified practically all the ESC categories of IT personnel, using as a pretence the IT codes had to match the categories of the Business Divisions. Of course, almost all employees of IT and most of the managers were placed in lower categories. The Labour Unions protested, and the Executive Board decided to keep the assigned ESC's, for that would have meant loss of face and of authority, but not to adapt the salaries. The only effect of the change was on bonuses, for with lower ESC came lower bonus.

The IT people were used to realise projects in which different experts worked together. Despite the fact IT groups were now scattered over various divisions, they continued to form virtual teams working on projects. For instance, when the telecommunications network had to be modernised in a Travelio building, telecommunications experts had to work together with computer server experts to determine the impact of their changing the devices, and people from the data centres had to put in place the new equipment, then all had to work at a certain date to bring the new network into operation. This demanded now that people working in three different divisions met and agreed, but in each division other objectives had been set and none on inter-departmental cooperation.

Jan Stevens was out of a job. He received a new job description in a Business Division. His job content was left very vague, but it included responsibilities for the cohesion of the IT projects. The IT people continued to form virtual teams over the divisions, and Jan mainly managed the program of these projects. He had only about two days a week work with that follow-up. The other days, he began to write reports he was sure nobody would read. He did not have the title of Director anymore, but had the ESC category of a lower manager, at the same salary as before. He prepared his departure for the UK.

Many among the best of Travelio's analysts, developers, IT experts, began to leave Travelio. Each week one or two of those people left, often finding work in competitive companies. The less expert managers and personnel remained working at Travelio. They continued to maintain the systems. That seemed not really to be an issue, for the computers continued to run as before. Jan Stevens remarked how quality indicators began to slide slowly toward

worse figures. The managers that kept working at Travtelio suffered in a tough job. Several of them could not cope with their responsibilities. They relied on lower employees to solve any crisis. They knew not how to reorganise their teams for more efficient work, for these tasks had been performed by the former IT Directors who had left. Many of the managers flocked to the office of Jan Stevens like the birds of a feather, and Jan discussed with them what should be modified.

****5****

One of the Labour Unions struck a deal with the Executive Board to accept the layoff of a hundred and fifty employees who had either received low annual evaluations, or whose job had become redundant. All of these men and women were still under civil servant statute, so could not be fired because of that implicit contract. Yet, Travtelio HR management supposed that protests would be quenched since the most powerful Labour Union agreed with the dismissals. In fact, Travtelio let fly a tentative balloon into a blue sky. If these one hundred and fifty civil servants could be fired without hinder from the Government, the press and the Unions, then all former civil servants, of which still several thousand remained in the company, could in the longer term be fired without too much fuss. The people fired were no managers. They were among the simplest and worst paid of the company. Who would worry about them but the Labour Unions? The people had been told to leave Travtelio on a Tuesday, so the operation came to be known as the dismissals of “Bloody Tuesday”.

One of the other Labour Unions, however, the section led by Robert Daaks, attacked the dismissals in a Court of Justice. The issue was taken up by the press, and the event developed into a minor scandal. The Court proceeded very rapidly, in record time, judging the dismissals abusive. Travtelio HR looked incredibly ridiculous. They could not really contest the charges against overwhelming evidence of state contracts. The Court ordered that the former employees had to return to Travtelio in their former jobs. They even received a financial compensation for having been fired. Travtelio remembered serendipitously the rights of civil servants, and apologised. The reputation of the company was squeakier after the incident. The HR President, Bernard de Voncques, had his knuckles rapped, but that was the only blame the Board delivered.

The next day, the men and women who had been fired ignominiously assembled all on the sidewalk and then entered Travtelio in triumph. They returned to the company till, shouting and laughing in the lobby of the headquarters building, waving the flags of the Union who had gotten them back in their jobs. They stoked alarm with slogans like “wealth to the few, misery to the many”. After having run amok in the hall for a couple of hours, they returned fearlessly to their former jobs, to their former bosses, who had not been informed by HR of the arrival of the former employees, now employees once more. Nobody dared to assign the men and women to other jobs than the ones they had occupied before. The episode devolved to fodder for jokes.

Hugo Martin had a difficult time in the data centre under the Skyscraper. He had first been fired on “Bloody Tuesday”, together with the underperforming employees of Travtelio. He had been ashamed of being fired in this group. He bowed his head when he met other IT employees. He thought he had worked on an important job, and he was convinced he had done his job well. He remembered Michel Doriant having told him so. He found no logical reason for his dismissal. He had been chastised, but he soon raged with anger over so much raw injustice. He sought revenge, but he could work out his revenge on nothing, and nowhere.

He felt terribly frustrated. He was out of a job, lived on social security for the jobless, and had not for a long time the energy to truly seek another job.

Three months later, Travtelio HR notified Hugo Martin in a letter he had to come to work again. He knew Karl Geerts had sought revenge and put him on the list of dismissals. Geerts was not his boss anymore, but Hugo was fairly certain Karl Geerts had proposed his name. Hugo was the only employee of IT to be pushed out of Travtelio. A woman of HR had told him at ten o'clock on the morning of "Bloody Tuesday" he had to gather his personal things and leave by eleven. He had been shaken, but too shocked to react at the time. He had been the only person in the data centre at that moment, and he had protested saying somebody was needed to guard the servers, but the HR administrative had orders to force Hugo Martin into leaving the premises immediately, so she had insisted on that. Security guards accompanied everyone out, and Martin walked out between two guards like a criminal. He had been deeply humiliated and understood only weeks later, from a letter sent to him by another Labour Union than the one he was a member of, this had all been a dirty farce. He was angry. He blamed Travtelio for having destroyed his family and his life.

The dismissal of Hugo Martin from Travtelio had also been a major disturbance in his family. It was the last straw for his wife, who was quite fed up with his drinking and violent outbursts. She left him while he was looking for another job, and took her two children with her. She feared having to support a husband who was already burden enough when he still brought decent money in the household. Hugo sat the entire day on the sofa before the TV set, doing nothing, slumbered on the pillows, just watching programs he could not explain two minutes later. He left the sofa at most one hour in the morning to look for another job, but she saw him once merely wandering aimlessly about the town and entering a pub. She could not do with a jobless man in her life. She told Hugo Martin over the phone she would sue for a divorce. Martin lived now all alone in the large house of his deceased parents.

Before his dismissal, Hugo Martin had seen three different managers coming to tell him and his colleagues they were now in charge. Two of these had come almost at the same moment, so Hugo Martin and the other men in the data centre laughed at the absurdity. One of these managers must have had indulged in wishful thinking, but Martin never heard what really had happened with the managers. The third manager seemed to be the right one, but that man could not tell Hugo Martin what he was supposed to do, except more of the same, and the man asked Martin what his job was in the basement. When Hugo Martin explained to the man what he thought of him, politely and calmly but mockingly, at the edge of insolence, the guy yelled and made him shut up with threats of dismissal, which were finally executed too, although Martin really suspected Karl Geerts of having persuaded his colleagues-managers to fire him.

'All right, then, tell me what I have to do!' Hugo Martin shouted to this same manager the day he came back to Travtelio, refusing obsequiousness, but having discovered his job had actually been taken over by nobody in his absence. Only occasionally would an IT person now enter the data centre to look at how the servers worked. Control was entirely remote, and the people who brought in new servers dumped them wherever they could find place; cables for power supply and telecommunication links sprawled all over the floor. The new boss only said, 'do as before!' Then, he simply left the basement and never returned. Hugo Martin began to bring order in the chaos. He placed new cables in the double floor, drew out wrong cables early in the morning, stopping the servers for the shortest time possible, but each time he drew out a cable the computers of course stopped working. The applications

were automatically taken over by other computers, however. The servers started up automatically after the interruption. The servers thus rebalanced their loads among other servers, so that the outages were short, though not negligible. Hugo Martin waited for protests and new insults, but he was very surprised when none came. Nobody seemed to care anymore for a major defect more or less of a computer server in the data centre. Hugo Martin thought management had forgotten about him. He had not forgotten about them.

Chapter Nine. The Fire at Travtelio

On the rainy Monday of the second week after his forced return to Travtelio, Hugo Martin arrived at work at the usual hour, which was then eight o'clock in the morning. Hugo did not expect to meet people in the data centre before the afternoon. A lot had changed since the few weeks he had been fired from the company and then told to come back. A lot less activity was now on in the computer room. Many functions had been transferred to the control-room. This was Monday, so no servers would be brought in today. Computers were being delivered from Tuesday on. The printer team also did not work today. This week was not in the period when invoices had to be prepared for sending out to customers. The employees of the printer team had therefore been called to reinforce the print room of the main data centre. Hugo Martin expected to remain alone in the data centre of the Travtelio headquarter.

When he arrived, he phoned the control-room of the operators to ask whether he would have something special to do. No updates of computer software had been planned for the weekend, so there had been no outages and the servers hummed quietly. The technician of the control-room told Hugo Martin nothing special was up. Nothing out of the ordinary was scheduled for the day. He might check on the status of newly installed telecommunication routers, but that also could wait. Hugo Martin laid down the telephone in the small office of the huge basement hall. Then he looked at the vast room where the computers and other devices purred peacefully. He was struck, as always, by the aseptic cleanliness of the hall, a view from a science fiction film become reality in his lifetime. He buried his head in his hands and remained seated that way behind the office desk for several minutes, thinking. Then he seemed to have taken a decision, and he stood up.

It was eight thirty in the morning. Above Hugo Martin, hundreds of Travtelio employees were streaming into the lobby of the building. The elevators rose and came back down in a constant rhythm. Hugo went to a cupboard in the office and took out a key. With that key in hand he walked to the rear part of the data centre. He opened a board in the wall. He looked at the various switches and handles in the board, ran almost lovingly over them with his fingers, and drew down a switch. Nothing happened. The switch shut down the fire alarm system in the data centre. By manipulating that switch, an electronic signal would be sent to the control-room of the computer servers in the Villa, several floors up, but Martin knew the operators would not lend much attention to the signal. A man was the cause of the manual operation of that switch, so the signal was not really an alarm. The operators might call him at some time during the day, and ask him who had activated the handle and why, or ask him to verify the alarm system. He had some time before him. Hugo did not bother to close the door of the board. He threw the key behind a server. Then, he doubled back to the other side of the centre, and walked to his individual wardrobe.

Each day of the past week, Hugo Martin had carried in his briefcase all sorts of bottles filled with chemical products. Each day he had brought to Travtelio other bottles, as much as he could conceal in his briefcase. The bottles were all of plastic, and they all contained cleaning liquids. If ever Hugo had been stopped at the gate of the Travtelio headquarter, he would have explained where he worked and argued he had brought the flasks with him to clean the top of the servers and other equipment of the data centre. No guard had stopped him. Hugo had twelve bottles in all on the shelf of his wardrobe. He placed the bottles in a cardboard box. He took a bar of iron from out of a corner and pried open other wardrobes. Clothes hung in the closets. He threw the clothes also in the box. Then he went with the cardboard box to the long

rows of computers. He opened one bottle after the other and poured the contents over the tops of the computers, careful not to spill liquid in the ventilator grids. He poured the liquids over the metal and the plastic coverings. He threw clothes against the computers and sprouted more product over those. He also made sure to leave a trail with the liquids on the floor. He had only two bottles left when he reached the printing room. He squirted the contents of his last two flasks over the paper stacks and on the printers, especially on the greasy parts of the chains that would grip the paper. Again, he left trails all over the floor. He emptied scrupulously all the bottles to the last drop, placed the empty bottles together in his box, and left the box standing in a small pool in the middle of the printer room.

Hugo Martin strolled back to the wardrobes. He pried open more doors of wardrobes. He found only clothes at first, but then he reached what he had expected. One of the last wardrobes held bottles of beer, and also of brandy, leftovers from a party data centre personnel had organised to feast he anniversary of one of their colleagues. He grimaced at the memory of that feast. He had been drunk from that same brandy, caught later by Michel Dorian, and sent home. He weighed one of the bottles in his hand. He took out the bottles of vodka and whisky and tequila, kept here for the next anniversary. Hugo Martin thought there would be no more anniversaries in the data centre. He placed these bottles too in a box. He went back to the computers. He took two bottles of whisky, opened the capsules, and with a bottle in each hand he poured the whisky over the floor. He went back for the tequila and the vodka, and emptied these also over the servers and in the printing room.

Hugo Martin looked at what he had done. He wondered how long it would last before the alcohols would cause a short circuit. He went once more back to his wardrobe, put on his coat, and called for the elevator. When the elevator doorway opened, he stepped inside the car, and then he hesitated.

Hugo Martin looked at his watch. It was now close to nine o'clock. The first business meetings started on the floors of the Skyscraper and the Dawkins Villa. Many people would be hurrying through the corridors. Hugo Martin still hesitated. Then he took out his little gas lighter from his pocket, clicked the stone and watched the little flame that ensued with fascination. He set fire to the liquid trail in front of the elevator. He threw the lighter into the hall.

A common feature of the cleaning liquids was that they were highly inflammable. The alcohol caught fire rapidly, and Martin saw a trail of flames light up and run with blue flames into the middle of the computer room. Hugo then felt a moment of panic, and of remorse, but even if he had wanted he would not have been able to stop the fire. Hugo was satisfied not to hear any fire alarm. All remained quiet in the basement. He grinned, stepped into the elevator car and pushed the buttons that would bring him to the ground floor. He went up and came to the Cloister, where he stepped through the crowd of people, saying hello to nobody, and hurried to the small revolving door that led from the Villa to the car park. He experienced another moment of panic when he entered the door, for the small rotating door closed behind him and for a fraction of a second was also still closed before him. The door was a small chamber with a door in front and behind, one only opening after the other closed. He could not escape from the chamber without a Travtelio badge. He expected to be called back any moment and stopped. He felt trapped. The feeling lasted only for a second, though, and then he felt the cold wind tear at his hair. He quickly walked to his car, never ran, opened his car, sat, pushed the ignition key in the lock, started his old Renault, and drove slowly out of the parking lot, onto the boulevard that led him quickly out of Brussels. He drove on and took the highway to the Flemish coast.

2

It took another ten to fifteen minutes after Hugo Martin had left the Villa, before the first red flashes of warning messages appeared on the computer screens in the control-room of the servers. One server stopped working, but the other servers quietly and automatically took over the load. The office automation servers continued to handle the applications and traffic of the thousands of personal computers in the building. Then a second server failed, and later a third, and that one had no backup server. Indicators flashed on in the control room, one after another. The operator on duty saw server after server fail. He was flabbergasted. Something like this had never occurred before. He wondered whether the control system was in error. In the first minutes, he tried desperately to reschedule manually the software from one computer to another, until he had far too many indicators on red to still be able to redistribute loads of computing. The operator realised something dramatic was on in the data centre of Travelio. He called his colleagues in. He had by then about twenty of the one hundred twenty servers down, and the number of stopped application servers he did not even try to count. He thought he had a major power breakdown in the centre; maybe a power cable had short-circuited. A major communication link was also failing, cutting off connections for hundreds of personal computers in the building. He began to sweat. Two men stood now looking over his shoulder at the indicators. They too had no clue on what was happening.

One of the operators took the emergency telephone off the hook and dialled Hugo Martin's number, but nobody answered. The men called their group leader out of his office. The manager came, and blanched when he saw so many computers and links down, and more failing by the minute. He sent one of the operators to the basement to have a look at what was happening there. He then phoned to other managers, people of the development teams and more technicians of Business Operations to warn them of a major outing of many applications. The administrative work in the Skyscraper would come to a standstill. When over thirty servers failed, the manager called his Business Operations Director. The secretary of the Director answered. The Director was on a conference in London, so the man could not be reached, but the secretary said she would call the second-in-command. In fact, the secretary had no idea who was really in charge of the IT data centre under the Skyscraper. She called successively two other managers, who directed her to a third, who was attending an important meeting. The man ignored the buzzing of his mobile phone. The secretary decided to walk to the meeting room and bring the warning by way of mouth. She had to ride an elevator and go up five floors.

Meanwhile, the operator who had been sent to the data centre called the Villa elevator car and pushed the button for floor minus two. He remarked a thin veil of smoke in the car, and a smell of fire, but he did not panic immediately. When the elevator reached the floor of the data centre, the doors opened, and a sudden draft of fire hit the elevator car. Hot gases enflamed and thrust to the rear wall in an explosion of yellow and blue flames. The operator was caught in the blast, but he had the presence of mind to throw his body instantly aside, so that most of the hot flames passed him. The adrenaline instantly made his muscles tighten and his heart pump more rapidly. He had a quick view of an inferno of flames in the hall in front of the elevator. He frantically slashed his badly burned hand on the command buttons on the side of the doors, and the doors obediently closed again. The elevator rose. At ground floor, the Villa elevator doors opened. Astonished men and women saw the elevator doors open, a gust of smoke gush out of the elevator, and a scorched man fall through the doorway. The man crawled over the floor until the elevator closed behind him. The man's

hair was burnt, flames still tucked at the cloth of his suit. Heavy, white smoke rose now from the elevator well, causing a mild panic in the Cloister.

Somebody cried, 'fire, fire!' and then the panic spread and became uncontrollable. The man lying on the marble floor shouted and groaned with pain. The man thrashed with his arms. He hit the flames on his body. Nobody went forward to help him at that. He passed no information on as to where the fire was. People just ran away from him, to all directions. Luckily, the Group Manager of the operators of the control-room had sent a second of his men to the data centre. That man, hearing the commotion below, looked from a balcony of the Villa into the Cloister. He too took an elevator, but went no farther than the ground floor, and had a closer look at what was happening there. He recognised his colleague, lying groaning and moaning and turning on the ground, the man's clothes smoking white. The operator remarked the burns on the face and hands of his colleague. The second operator asked the badly wounded man what was going on.

The man who had been in the data centre cried, 'fire! There is a goddamn fire in the data centre downstairs! The entire centre is on fire! Call the fire brigade! I'm hurt! Call a doctor!' The operator crouched to the wounded man, got out his mobile phone and he phoned the infirmary. He asked for a nurse, for a doctor, and for an ambulance, shouting a severely burnt man was lying near the Villa elevator. He shouted a fire was on. He caused a panic in the infirmary too. Then he called the control room and explained about his colleague who lay now fainted at his feet.

The Group Manager in the control-room asked to repeat the message twice, for he did not initially believe what he heard. It was by then over nine-thirty. At that same moment the shrieking sirens of fire alarms sounded in the Skyscraper. The fire alarm had been set off by smoke that mounted in the elevator shaft of the Skyscraper. Smoke also had risen thinly in the stairwell of the same reinforced concrete structure that supported the building. This fire alarm was the sign for the general evacuation of the building.

Once a fire started in the data centre, no automatic fire protection system would stop it from spreading. Water sprinklers or water mist sprinklers had not been installed, because the water of such a system might cause short circuits and thus provoke more harm than was on. Such systems were also expensive, and when only a very local fire had started, the water would be projected over large surfaces, damage many servers and many more than was necessary. Inert gas systems existed, but were supposed to be dangerous to the employees working in the centre because these systems worked by replacing the oxygen in the room with inert gases. Without oxygen the fires would stop, but the operators would not be able to breathe any longer. Hence, such systems too had not been installed. More sophisticated systems which sprayed gases in the centre but left enough oxygen to breathe for human operators were under study, but would need time and funds to install. For practically the same reason, there was no sprinkler system on the floor minus one. Sprinkler systems had been installed on minus three and minus four, but the smoke at first rose upward.

Everybody in the Travtelio headquarter heard the sirens. Many men and women, employees, managers and Directors cursed, for they sat in meeting rooms. Many refused to abandon their discussions. Others remained seated for a while at their desks, working on their personal computers, finishing their text processing and their spreadsheets. But in the corridors, the sirens sounded deafeningly. The sirens shrieked everywhere ominously. They kept wailing in waves of sharp, loud, penetrating sounds, impossible to ignore. They also did not stop. A metallic voice coming from the loudspeakers then urged everybody to leave the premises in good order, and this message kept being repeated.

The employees of Travtelio knew what to do in case of fire alarm. On each floor, four assigned men or women put on their orange fluorescent jackets of fire brigade stewards of the company. They would not fight the fire, although they knew how to handle fire extinguishers. Their job was in the first place to guide the employees down the stairs. They were also to check that everybody, without exception, would leave the floor. Nobody could remain in the offices. The stewards and the employees had practiced such total evacuations by the staircase twice a year, and in these exercises all four thousand of Travtelio employees left the building in good discipline.

The stewards waited however for a few seconds now. They lingered, not eager to shoot into action, waiting for the usual announcement over the intercom system that this was but one of the yearly exercises. The stewards grumbled, because exercises were usually announced to them beforehand, and then kept a secret until the right moment. They were proud of being stewards, and they expected early notice of an exercise. Irritation left their faces when no such announcement came.

‘This is the real thing! Hurry! No exercise, real fire!’ shouted many stewards on all floors of the building, and the men and women began to shout to everyone to make for the stairs.

‘Do not use the elevators!’ they shouted, ‘leave the elevators! Down the stairs!’

A few people had reached the elevators however, and the doors closed. These were the lucky ones, for the fire alarm system had at that moment ordered all elevators to ground floor. The people in the cars reached the lobby without harm. The elevator cars opened their doors dutifully once on ground floor, and stopped and waited.

At that moment, the electric power was switched off on all floors of the Skyscraper and the Villa. It was day outside and quite bright now, but the failing tubes of light developed a new panic. The last personal computers closed down abruptly. Everybody hurried to the staircase, guided by emergency lights along the walls, which were not really needed because the light of the sun served well enough.

The stewards forced all employees to the staircase near the elevators. They then ran to the meeting rooms, opened all the doors there, and ordered the people out, whether manager or Director or employee.

‘No exercise! Real fire alarm! Keep calm, just walk down! No panic!’

Julie Geerts sighed. She sat in a meeting room of the sixth floor, presiding over a hard discussion among ten people over three business processes. The processes would be automated soon. Tests of the new applications had been organised, and the tests had proved to be a disaster for the business teams. A group of IT analysts discussed now with her and with two business managers and their assistants on how the software applications should really work. Julie Geerts, a Business-IT Coordinator still, had called the experts together. She had barely started the crux of the discussions when the stewards rushed in, wearing their conspicuous orange vests, crying to get the hell out of there and hurry down the stairs. ‘Evacuation!’ they cried. ‘Hurry, hurry, but there is no need to panic. Just proceed to the stairs and go down! Everybody out!’

The crowds of hundreds of anxious people began to descend the stairs, slowly so not to stumble, as they had done during the exercises. Few still truly doubted a fire was on somewhere. All this had been exercised before. This was just one more stupid rehearsal, surely. The employees knew what to do. Most of them chatted and joked, believing the alarm to be a false one anyhow.

3

The elevators of the Skyscraper and of the Dawkins Villa had been blocked automatically. All elevator cars had descended to the ground floor and waited there with open doors like gaping wounds in the concrete towers. In the Villa, people poured out steadily of the stairs at ground level, proceeded calmly to the entry hall of Travtelio, and they began to leave the building in good discipline.

One elevator that was not blocked because it had been built later and had its separate control systems that were not linked to the general alarm equipment, was the exterior elevator serving the highest floors of the Skyscraper. Only fifteen people at most could use this elevator at the same time, but the car rode faster than any other and few people worked on the three highest floors. Many Presidents were not in the building, or not on the Executive floor. The elevator filled with the Presidents first. Buisseyre and Raga had to share a car with secretaries, cooks' aides, waitresses of the Executive restaurant, and Directors. He did not grunt. He allowed himself to be crushed to the glass wall of the car. He swallowed his pride. He made a note to force these people out by the main elevators or by the stairs the next time. He smiled nervously. His face was as pale as the faces of the other people around him. The ride lasted a short minute.

In less than a quarter of an hour the three upper floors had been evacuated. Then that elevator car too stood aimlessly open in the entry hall, open but still under power and serviceable.

The people that had escaped gathered on the grass lawn of the parking lot. They looked at the Skyscraper, but saw no sign of any fire. They began to be convinced the alarm was indeed an arranged hoax. They heard the first sirens of the red trucks of the Brussels fire brigade arriving at full speed from the far.

Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre stood outside but near the Visitor's Lobby with Eric Terhulsen and two other Presidents. Andrew Raga stood a little farther, talking to the President of Legal Affairs, Koen Smets. Smets used his mobile phone to continue a discussion with a business partner. He had been arguing over his mobile all the way down. He did not stop now. Once every while he would halt talking, explain what he had heard to Andrew Raga. Raga would answer angrily, and Smets would continue his conversation. The men walked on to the lawns. They seemed oblivious of what was happening in the building. They regarded the alarm at most as a temporary nuisance.

Eric Terhulsen, however, was worried, and he was sweating. He wiped his face with a pristine white handkerchief. He realised his place was maybe within the building. He should have been coordinating the rescue teams. His place was in the control-room, bellowing orders. So many were now streaming out of the building, however, he could not push his way through that crowd, couldn't he? Terhulsen remained standing with the CEO and the other Presidents in the grass, in front of the Skyscraper. He wondered where his Vice-President for Security, Lieven Segers, was.

Segers was one man who was where he should be. When he heard the sirens, he had run immediately from his office in the Villa, not to the outside of the building but to the control room, and he was now watching with growing amazement and awe how all the indicators blinked red on the screens. Then, his screens went blank one by one, even in the control room, for the servers of his control applications stood in the basement. A few of his most crucial control computers were still being fed by an emergency alternator under the Auditorium, and the batteries for the emergency lights housed in a bunker room near the Lobby, could hold out

for a few hours, but when the power was cut in the entire building he lost all connections to the data centre in the basement, and also most of his control computers gave no sign of life anymore.

He knew by now a large fire was devastating the floor minus two of the Skyscraper and even of the Villa. He ordered floor minus one to be evacuated, not just of people but also of all the trucks and other vehicles that could be found on that floor. He feared the fire would reach upward through the ventilation vents and commodity shafts and set ablaze the delivery trucks that had arrived earlier that day. Few trucks would be in, but the ones that had driven down might be dangerous enough. He hoped no chemicals or oils had been brought in.

His orders were being executed. Segers expected the floor to be empty within a few minutes. His main worry was about the gasoline, gas and oil tanks on that floor, even though he knew those well protected by concrete shelters. They would hold against any fire for a few hours, at least if the employees of the floor had left the doors closed. He wondered how many loose smaller containers of inflammable liquids and how many stacks and palettes of cardboard, paper and cloth lay on that floor. By now, many paper containers of documents that had to be destroyed would have been brought to that floor for transportation. Paper did not easily go up in flames, but when it did it could become dangerously hot on that floor.

Segers, the Vice-President for Security, did not care very much about the floors minus three and minus four, because he would not be able to do anything about them. He could not allow Travelio employees to go down to there and drive their cars out. The cars had to stay where they were. Segers worried about that too, of course, for if the cars caught fire their tanks might well explode and add to the blaze in the basement.

Segers had ten voluntary fire brigade men of Travelio in the control room, and three operators. The others, fifty in all, had not been able to make it to the control floor in the Dawkins Villa. He dared not send the firemen down to the basement, to minus two, to the data centre. The injured man had cried the centre was entirely on fire.

Segers was wondering how he could even reach that floor. The elevators had stopped and the stairs might become filled with smoke. His men were not equipped with oxygen masks. They were trained for small fires, for working with the powder fire extinguishers of the building, not for fighting major fires of entire floors. How could an entire floor be on fire so quickly? When all his computer screens went black, he did send his men out, two by two, to find out what damage had been done to minus one, to know how the evacuation of the Villa and the Skyscraper proceeded, and two men had the Captain of the Brussels fire brigade on the phone and kept in touch with him.

Segers ordered again all inflammable materials to be drawn out of minus one as quickly as possible, and he sent two men down the spirals of the car parking in minus three and minus four to have a look at the situation there. His men kept in contact with him by mobile phones. For those contacts he had three phones: his own and the two mobiles of his operators. Since all his screens were down, he considered leaving the control-room altogether and establish a new control centre outside the building, communications held merely by his three cell phones. He asked his operators to dress up a list of mobile phones on paper. A book of phone numbers was not printed anymore: all numbers were held in files on the server computers!

Thomas Denis and Marguerite Dupas had unhurriedly packed their briefcases, taken their coats, and walked down the staircase of the Villa to the lobby of the Skyscraper. They had not panicked, Thomas continued to proffer a few jokes very loudly in the lobby, but Marguerite's face had turned very pale.

‘Don’t worry, honey,’ Thomas Denis said, ‘some fool has pushed on the wrong button. We take a stroll outside, they we will be called back in. I wonder whether we should not stay out and have a nice lunch somewhere in the city today.’

Marguerite managed a smile, but she walked more rapidly than usual in the lobby, to safety. Denis and Dupas went to the parking lot, to Thomas’s car, stood a while looking up at the Skyscraper, watching out for smoke but seeing none on that side. They could see nothing special. Thomas Denis snorted, pushed Marguerite in his car and drove to the city.

4

The control room of Travtelio was situated on the second floor of the Dawkins Villa. Jan Stevens’ office was on the fourth floor. Jan went down amidst the employees who worked in the Villa, but he decided to have a look in the control-room and offer his help. People still streamed out from the door to that second floor, but Jan could fray a way through. He ran through the deserted corridors to the control room. He witnessed the failing of all the computers and remained standing with open mouth, frozen in astonishment at all the black screens.

Jan asked Lieven Segers where the fire was. Segers looked at him with anger in his eyes, because the fire was in the data centre. Segers wanted to shout IT people had fucked up real badly, but he knew Jan Stevens from before and he liked him, noticing also Stevens was the only IT person who had bothered to have a look in the control room, so he tolerated the presence of a computer expert, and explained.

Jan asked, ‘how extensive is the fire?’

‘I don’t know,’ Lieven Segers chuckled, ‘I really don’t know. There was no fire alarm on minus two, and that is very strange. One of our men went down and he was blown away by a backdraft of fire. He succeeded in coming up by elevator, but he got badly burnt. He said the data centre was ablaze. Before I lost my control screens, practically all the servers failed. My guess is the fire must be consuming everything in there. I am very worried, Jan! We have a major problem on our hands! This is not a small, local fire.’

‘There must have been a major short circuit then,’ answered Jan Stevens. ‘There is always somebody on guard in the data centre. Even a large short circuit could have been extinguished in a short time, however. Have you phoned our guy in there?’

‘Nobody answered. The technician may have been blasted, though I have no idea how that could have happened. I’m sorry, but that man must be dead by now! The data centre is entirely on fire. We lost all contact with that floor, and I do not dare send once more one of my men in there. The fire brigade will have to enter with special equipment, very special equipment, I’m afraid, with special fire protection suits and oxygen masks! My worry for the moment is to get everybody out of the Skyscraper fast.’

It was the first time Jan Stevens heard anyone mention a dead man. He was appalled.

‘The printer room contains much paper, oils and grease also. How about the other basement floors?’

‘I have sent two men down the car spiral,’ Segers replied. ‘They have mobile phones, our only communication means. We will hear from them soon. We have to leave this room, too. No use staying here, all our computers are out. I intend to set up a new coordination centre in the grass,’ Segers grinned sadly.

‘My God,’ Jan Stevens exclaimed, ‘the printer room! There is a lot of paper in that room. The paper is stacked along the walls. The printer room is isolated from the rest of the data centre, but the doors there cannot withstand a fire. If that paper gets on fire, the blaze will spread into

the main stairwell. The paper is also placed against the doors of the central staircase, and that door can hold back the fire for about one hour, not more!’

Lieven Segers’ eyes widened once more. He looked quizzically at Jan Stevens, then back at his useless computer screens. Segers could not do much except check the status of the doors below, but for that he would have to send people down, and have people enter the stairs now was sheer impossible. The stairwell would be filled with people. He and his operators kept their headphones to their ears. They spoke to the stewards on the floors. Many of these had already called the control-room to ask how serious the fire raged. The control-room operators could not give them much information, except that the alarm was real, a fire was on in minus two. They told the stewards to use only their mobiles from now on.

5

At that moment, at a quarter over ten, the fire Hugo Martin had caused also in the printer room of the data centre reached its highest temperature possible in the stacks of paper placed against the fire protection doors of the elevator tower. The stairwell of that concrete shaft reached until floor minus two, went even deeper, and that floor began to smoulder and give away. The fire protection door collapsed a few minutes later, and a whirling wind mixed with the superheated gases that had formed from the plastics in the hall, the plastic and foam coverings of the computers, of the cables and of the paints on the walls. The gases exploded and threw away the rests of the door. A gust of fire blew upward in the stairwell. The flames did not burst very high, but the oxygen that entered the printer room afterwards was sucked in fiercely, fuelled the flames, and they rose with renewed violence. The fire blew away an entire wall of the printer room. Everything that could burn ignited in that room and the flames melted the rest of the computers. The wooden panels of the double floor and of the ceiling took fire. The flames embraced the data centre totally. The stairwell and the elevator shaft sucked in heavy smoke. The smoke rose, hot and toxic.

The firemen sent down the spiral by Lieven Segers heard the noise of the explosions. They heard the fire raging behind the large doors to the data centre. These doors held, but they felt as hot as hell. One of the firemen burnt his hand against the door. The men did not dare to open the doors. They phoned what they had found to Lieven Segers, and continued their way down to the car park. They glanced anxiously behind them, wondering how long the doors of the data centre would hold. If the doors yielded, their way back might be blocked. They hurried down.

A shockwave of hot gases shot up the central stairwell and blew out the doors of minus one. The gases found new oxygen there and enflamed in one swift movement everything they encountered in a radius of five metres around the opening. In that perimeter stood two large containers of oils, which blew up almost instantly, spreading their burning contents all over the floor and in the air. Two men got hurt by the fire. Men were still working on that floor, tugging away other containers of inflammable liquids.

A forklift loaded with pallets of old paper was blown aside, tilted and then turned over. The paper spilled in the way of the blue flames. The driver of the truck was hurt and the flames licked at his clothes, but two colleagues dragged him out of the seat, away from the fire. Two other men ran to the fire extinguishers, and spread powder over the flames, trying to contain the spreading of the fire. Five men stood there with large extinguishers in their hands, but two extinguishers just blew a thin splash for a while, and then stopped abruptly, their gases leaked out since long. Yet, the men had also some success in throwing the flames back.

All the extinguishers soon emptied, however. The men continued to roll containers to a second forklift. They rolled containers to the opposite walls. One man phoned to Lieven Segers for the fire brigade to hurry to his floor. They needed help.

****6****

The draft of fire that had burnt in the stairwell diminished first in flames, as it found little materials to ignite in the concrete shaft. The sudden draft of wind drew the heavy, poisonous smoke farther upwards, up the stairs, and that smoke reached the ground floor now. Hundreds of people were still coming down the stairs from all upper floors. The smoke instantly filled the space at ground floor, and then the smoke blew up two more floors of stairs. It caused instant panic and pandemonium in the staircase.

The few men and women who descended the stairs near the exit staggered out of the open door into the entry hall, blinded, but they escaped. The Lobby of Travtelio began to fill with smoke. The people a few stairs higher up could not see anything anymore, not even the stairs. They feared the fire had reached their level. They coughed in the hot smoke that burnt their lungs. Then they were caught in the toxicity of the fumes. Two women fainted and fell. The people stopped abruptly on the stairs, bent down. The people higher up, however, continued to push on, down. They ran into the stooped men and women lower, and crushed them to the walls and the stairs. People stumbled. One fell over the other. The first people suffocated against the walls of the stairwell, crushed by bodies falling over them, and lacking in oxygen. The first deaths of the Travtelio fire happened there, in a few seconds of time. As more smoke rose, a shock wave rippled through the descending employees. The movement of people stopped slowly. Shouts were relayed. Stewards cried to back out of the stairs. People cried one could not go down anymore. The smoke rose ever higher and gradually filled the entire shaft of the spiral stairwell. The people pushed back through the open doors of the floors, stumbling back onto the floors. More people waited at each door to come into the staircase. The people who wanted to escape from the smoke crashed into the people who stood at the doors and who desperately now still wanted to get on the staircase, despite the shouts of panic they heard. At some floors, fistfights ensued. Lower down, people heaped the ones upon the others, died, suffocated among colleagues and friends.

Emma Wauters, the former secretary to Gerald Godelin, had received a job as secretary to a minor Director in Marketing. She had waited for Godelin to call her to him in another function. She wanted again the enviable status of being Godelin's secretary, in other companies. So far, Godelin had not called.

Emma worked on the fourth floor of the Skyscraper. When the sirens sounded, she had at first stalled, and then reluctantly followed the stewards to the staircase. She hated to be disturbed. She had reached the second floor in the staircase, when she heard people shouting in front of her. The shouts were of panic and pain. Then, suddenly, smoke filled the stairwell, and she could only see just the people in front of her. She stuck out her arms before her. A man stopped abruptly and bent. Emma stepped against that man, and she fell against him. Other men crashed into her from behind. She fell to her knees. She shouted in anger and frustration, but she was trampled upon by a woman who stepped sideways. She got hurt and experienced physical pain for the first time in her life. She was angry and cursed and shouted. Then more men fell over her. She found herself crushed to the steps, head down. A very fat man lay almost entirely over her legs. She could not move. She gasped for air, but the smoke was all there was to inhale. Emma Wauters fainted and suffocated in the staircase.

There were terrible scenes at the doors to the lower floors. Tens of people at each door were waiting to get down, most in panic, for they saw the smoke rise. Tens of people wanted to get out of the staircase. People fought their ways in and out. Fists and legs were used to kick where they wanted to go.

The stewards cried the stairs were blocked. Their orange jackets gave them some authority. They urged the crowd to step back onto the floors, away from the stairwell. They succeeded on all floors in calming the people at least temporarily, and slowly, slowly, the stairs emptied, the people receding back onto the floors.

On the stairs of the lowest two floors about fifty people died, crushed or suffocated, and nobody dared go down to reach them. They died under the weight of corpses that fell on top of them, suffocated by the lack of air that the toxic fumes had chased. The lowest three floors had been emptied of people, but the people that were at that height in the stairwell, not many, ran onto the floors, to the other side of the building. These were among the luckiest to have gotten to safety out of the stairs, but they panicked for they feared the fire they knew by now to rage beneath, would make the Skyscraper go up in flames.

Their colleagues, who had been working on those floors, had evacuated. They stood now under the windows of the Travtelio Skyscraper, looking up for a possible fire higher up. They had no idea the fire actually raged below.

On the ten lowest floors, several people were wounded from blows they had received in their faces from colleagues who tried desperately to flee from the stairs.

On the fourth floor, the stewards transported two fainted women and put them on the large desk tables. One of them was Marie Donat, the assistant of Bart Peters, the Union Relations Director. The women were in shock, had received blows, and had fallen through the door of the stairs.

On that same floor, three men and five women crouched against the walls in the corridors, coughing, exhaling the acid, sour smoke out of their throats and lungs. Tens of people waited there, and more people flowed onto that floor and on the three floors higher, coming still down the stairs. This flow trickled to but few people, however, as the smoke gradually filled the stairs till very high. Many people now waited near the doors of the stairwell. The stewards slammed the doors shut, but smoke began to blow from under the doors. That caused more panic.

A woman shouted, 'we are all going to die! The Skyscraper is on fire!'

The fire detection systems of each floor took quite a long time to detect enough smoke to turn on the sprinkler devices. The signals almost simultaneously notified the existence of smoke, and therefore of fire, on the floors from the first to the tenth. The pipes were automatically put under pressure and water was blown from out of the sprinklers at the ceilings. The water was pressed from out of the tanks on the top of the building. The sprinkler jets were supposed to quench any fire rapidly, but there was no fire on the floors. No sprinkler system and no smoke detection had been installed in the stairwell. All sprinklers came into action simultaneously on the lower ten floors. The people on these floors got thoroughly soaked in water. They began to lack in oxygen. They gasped from the cold water. They hid under the desk tables in an effort to escape from the water that rained upon them in dense rays.

Men began to throw chairs and desks against the double-paned huge windows, hoping to crash the window panes in an effort to breathe easier. They broke a few windows. Winds drew into the building like in a giant chimney, drawing hot gases up to find new oxygen. The

gases ignited and burnt all plastic and cellulose materials they met, creating more hot gases. The flames crept up along the walls. More smoke was created, more sprinklers opened, and the water that might have drowned a floor for an hour, stopped after ten minutes because of empty storage tanks. Sprinkled water cooled the heat created by fire. Now, it cooled only but considerably the people on the Travtelio floors. The women shivered, adding cold to the stress of their shock. Most of the water did not stream downwards. The water soaked the tapestries of the floors or remained in hollows of the double floors. The water stood in puddles on the floors, and left little liquid to pour down the stairwell. The water transformed partly into steam at minus two, and that steam added to the smoke, and it partly ran down to the lower floors still, to the parking lot deeper in the Skyscraper.

On the eighth floor, another man died of cardiac arrest. He fell, and nobody looked at him. When the sprinklers stopped, many women remained frozen in place, wet hair clinging to their faces, and mascara makeup drawing long black lines over their cheeks. The stood now, many trembling in short spasms.

On the fifth floor too, two men grabbed iron chairs and banged at the windows. They succeeded in crashing several window panes. Fresh air rushed in, and then the openings sucked out more air by the slight pressure of the air conditioning, which had continued working. That drew more smoke over the floor. Flames emerged from under the doors of the stairwell. The fire ate at the tapestries that covered the ground. The men and women at that floor also heard explosions now, far down.

A woman ran in panic to an open window and although she cut herself badly at the rests of the glass that stuck in the aluminium frame, she jumped out of the window. She fell to her death four floors lower, among employees of Travtelio who waited below. The other men and women on the floor looked in horror at the scene beneath.

On the fourth floor, Marie Donat gained conscience, totally soaked, lying on a table. She saw other soaked, haggard, shivering men and women around her. She did not really understand what was going on, but she saw a woman disappear out of a broken window in front of her. She also heard shouts of 'fire, fire!' from every corner of the floor. Marie had an uncontrollable, inborn, panicky fear of fire. When she arrived in a dark room, she would always look first at where the fire escapes were. She smelled fire, and thin veils of smoke entered the floor. Marie felt still dazed, but she knew only one thing from that moment on: she had to escape from fire. She suddenly stood up from the table, ran to the same broken window and leaped out.

More windows crashed above. Large pieces of sharp glass fell along the Skyscraper façade. They fell on the people who lingered on the lawn and the flower beds. One woman got hit by a large piece of window pane. She died instantly. People fled away from the building and away from the falling glass. Buisseyre, Raga, Smets and Terhulsen ran about twenty metres away from the Skyscraper. They watched the horror now in disbelief. They saw people fall out of broken windows and they heard the thuds when the men and women fell to their deaths. They began to realise a major catastrophe was in the making.

The first journalists of the written press arrived at the Travtelio Headquarters and the men and women ran with micros and notebooks in their hand to Buisseyre and his Presidents, indicated to there by employees of the company. A large van of a television station stopped on the lawn almost at the feet of Buisseyre. Doors slid open and a camera team emerged. Other cameras were being directed at the Skyscraper.

Stewards downstairs urged the people farther away from the building. Two more ladies fell from higher floors, from as high as the twentieth floor. Again the stewards, who had received some training in holding back panic, but also almost wild with fear, succeeded in holding other men and women away from the windows. Nine people died when they jumped out of the Skyscraper.

Men dressed in fancy business suits banged with their fists on the elevator doors. Many men cut their fingers while they tried to pry open the doorways of the elevator shaft. One of these was the HR President Bernard de Voncques. He had been holding a meeting on the fifteenth floor. He had climbed down the spiral staircase, together with many others, and then sought refuge back on the tenth floor. He was desperate. He was too young to die! His fine career could not end in flames! He pried at the doors, though he must have known well he would find only a deep empty shaft in the elevator tower. He just could not think rationally anymore. The doors did not give way.

Women in silk dresses tore at their hair and cried in despair. Men slapped women to stop them shrieking uncontrollably. Few people managed to remain calm. These helped the stewards to bring order to chaos on each floor.

On the fifth floor, a group of men began to throw out of the broken windows all the cloth panels that surrounded the office desks, arguing the panels were bound to catch fire. At least that effort calmed them down. They brought the panels painstakingly to one window. They broke the panels to pieces and other men threw the pieces out. A small mound formed against the walls of the Skyscraper. Yet other men and women tore up the tapestry coverings from the double floor and thrust the cloth through the same windows, fearing the floor coverings might catch fire under their feet. A man jumped down onto the pile of cloth, but he broke his back when he bounced from the pile to the ground. That led to more panic on that floor.

Shaggy-haired Jean Vandoren, the Courier Boy, not any longer for IT but for Business Operations, stood also at a broken window on that floor, looking down at the heap and at the men that had jumped down. He reckoned he could do better. If he jumped vertically, his arms stiff to his body, legs stretched and held stiff under him, he could slide along the façade and bounce off from the heap. He might break a leg, but he was sure he could make it! He could survive! Jean stepped on the window sill, brushed aside a steward who wanted to stop him, stretched, and plunged down as close to the façade as he could, right above the heap of rubbish beneath. He went down nicely, as he had planned, but then his right foot caught a window sill two floors lower. He toppled forwards as his foot caught. His body bent, so that Jean Vandoren went down head first, away from the pile, and thus he crashed to the ground and to his death.

There was much less panic among the people who had remained from the sixth floor up. The people on that floor knew there was smoke in the stairwell, but not much smoke came as high. They knew by now the fire raged below. They knew the elevators did not work anymore, but they had little discomfort from the smoke. They had tried in vain to open the doors of the elevator shaft, and that was a good thing, for more smoke would have rushed onto the floors. They sat on the desks and chairs together, far from the stairwell, but they had regained their calm. They hoped the fire brigade, which they saw working on ground level, would succeed soon in quenching the fire before it reached higher. They would have liked, but dared not use the stairs to mount to the roof. Among them sat Bernard de Voncques. The President was in shock. He stared before him with fixed eyes. He did not move and ignored other people. People looked at him, but he was unable to lead them or to comfort them.

The women lurked close because they were cold and soaked with water, even though at most floors higher up the sprinklers had only blown for a few seconds.

A couple of men proposed again to climb up the stairs to higher floors, but nobody moved. The stewards told them the fire would not come up soon. They had seen the fate of the people who jumped out of a window. The men formed solid groups who talked to the people, though many still cried for help at the windows. The stewards organised groups of men armed with fire extinguishers, and these stood around the stairwell and the elevator shaft, ready to sprout powder at flames that might emerge.

7

During that time, several fire brigades of the region of the capital arrived with ladder trucks. Three ladders were thrown against the windows of the fourth floor. Firemen climbed up, and stepped through the broken windows. They pushed pieces of tapestry on the windowsills, and then they helped people step over the windowsill onto the ladders. The first woman to pass the window was in panic. She pushed colleagues aside, stepped too quickly, slid from the rungs of the ladder and fell.

Two stewards then positioned themselves on either side of the window, held people back and urged the employees to keep calm and to descend slowly. The firemen told the women to get out of their high-heeled shoes. A steady queue of men and women began to come down along the ladder. The firemen did not allow more than six men and women on the ladder, but the flow of people escaping this way remained constant. More explosions shook the ground. An air blast coming up from below blew a man from the ladder. The man fell oddly comical, but he was close to the ground. He was hurt, but his life was not in danger.

Explosions could be heard regularly now, and large thrusts of flames blew out on the other side of the building, out from the spiral leading to the lower parking lots. Flames burst also out of floor minus one, the place where the delivery trucks normally rode into the building. The sliding door panels were open. Cars on floors minus three and minus four burst in the explosion of their gasoline tanks. Despite the explosions and despite the flames, firemen dressed in silver protection suits entered the doorways to the floors with water lances, advancing against the fire, and slowly winning terrain.

8

Jana Kovar was still on the floor of the expats, on the thirty-fifth floor. She had been one of the last to go to the staircase. When she arrived, she saw and heard the stairs were blocked with people. She decided to wait until she could walk down at ease. She had no fear at first, thought she only had to participate in a fire alarm exercise. She heard a little later a real fire was on. Men called out to go back onto the floors. People in front of her went to the thirty-fourth floor and lower, as low as they could, but Jana smelled the smoke, sensed the smoke venting higher, so she went back to her own floor and her own desk. She wanted to try to phone Jan Stevens. She was almost back at her desk when the sprinklers blew for two seconds meagre jest of water over her. Jana too got soaked, and remained in her office after the furious rain that was poured over her. She waited, seated in her chair, trembling from the cold. Jana waited a long time. At times, she stood up to look down on what was happening below. She was the many fire trucks and the firemen running like ants, and she was reassured by that sight. Help was coming.

Suddenly, Jana saw Radek Navratil advance toward her. She tried to back away from him, but Radek leaped forward and caught her arm. He held her.

‘We are going to die together, honey,’ Navratil shouted. ‘This Skyscraper will become a towering inferno! The building will be our coffin.’

Jana saw the wildness in Radek’s eyes. She smelled alcohol on his breath. Radek was beyond reason.

She said, ‘you are crazy, Radek. No fire shall reach us here!’

She pried herself loose and ran to the other side. Radek ran after her and grabbed her arm again, turned her around brusquely and slapped her in the face.

A steward woman of the floor saw the scene. She ran to Radek, shouting, ‘what is going on here? Can’t you remain civilised for a while?’

The woman shouted in Dutch, of which Radek did not understand a word, but he pushed the woman violently with one hand, so that she swung with her back to the rim of a table. The woman stood then with one hand to her back, panting, and Radek slew his fist in her face, so that the woman sank to the ground. She did not move anymore.

‘That one needed a lesson! You need a lesson too, my dear,’ Radek shouted. He drew Jana behind the panels of her office, where nobody from the corridor could see them. He slapped Jana twice in the face, drawing blood from her lips. He tore at her shirt.

‘We are going to die, my love. First, I want my pleasure like before!’

9

Lieven Segers and his team could do nothing useful anymore in the Villa. He ordered his men out of the building.

‘Wait,’ Jan Stevens cried. ‘The fire is in the basement and in the stairwell and in the elevator shaft. How will the people at the higher floors get out?’

Jan had been thinking about Jana. Jana had her office on the thirty-fifth floor. Jan was very much worried. He ardently wanted to get to Jana.

Lieven Segers looked bewildered, eyes tired and desperate. ‘I have no idea, Jan. The firemen will get them out, I guess. They will also stop the fires in the basement. There is nothing we can do, here!’

‘The outside elevator is safe,’ Jan Stevens cried. ‘Why don’t you activate the outer elevator again, send it up, and tell the people from the upper floors to use that elevator, going up the stairs, not down! The smoke should not be thick in the stairwell so high! The controls of that elevator are also outside the building. It cannot crash!’

Segers thought for a moment.

‘Yes, we might just do that,’ Lieven said, a little sudden hope brightening his face. ‘That elevator has its own power supply. The power supply of that lift is in the bunker of the Auditorium, near the emergency supply. Many hours will pass before the fire reaches that place, and even then the bunker should resist for hours more. Dear God, that lift must still be operational! It may still work. Only few people, who have the right badges, can use it. I cannot control anything anymore from here. Yet, we never stopped that elevator, because only the people working at the three highest floors can use it, and those floors are blocked by the badge system, too. The elevator does not go up now, because nobody would be foolish enough to step inside and go up. That elevator must still be working! Its controls are on top of the roof, in the small shed there, not in the basement. I have the key to that place, here. I know nothing of the controls of the elevator, though. We could have a look at that system and try to have the elevator stop at lower floors. The doorways exist, only the people’s badges don’t allow them to open the doors.’

‘Not for now,’ Jan replied. ‘Let’s go up, you and me. We ride to the thirty-eighth and have a look first at the stairwell. If there is not too much smoke in the staircase, we can call the people from the lower floors up to thirty-eight, and evacuate those who are not too fearful of stepping inside the elevator car. I doubt that will work, though, for the central elevator and stairwell shaft must work as a chimney, drawing up the smoke. I can go up to the roof and have a look at the controls of the elevator, try to have it stop at lower floors and deactivate the badge system. I am not an IT expert for nothing, although I am not sure I can make it work! I can try!’

‘The evacuation will be slow, Jan. Only fifteen people at a time can use that elevator! There may be a panic!’

‘Right! I know that! Is there any alternative you can think of?’ Jan shouted.

‘No. There is nothing else we can do. We might as well try it.’

Lieven Segers ordered his men out of the building. Once outside, leaving by the small door of the Villa, he and Jan Stevens ran back into the building, into the entry lobby, to the doors of the outside elevator. Firemen protested, but they ignored their shouts. Segers ran first to the group of Presidents he spotted on the lawn. He asked a badge from Eric Terhulsen and another from Koen Smets while he ran. These two remained standing, perplexed. They did not ask why Lieven wanted their badges. Then, he and Jan reached the elevator doorway.

When also Jan Stevens wanted to jump into the elevator, Daniel Drumont held him by the arm. Daniel had been waiting near that elevator.

Jan wanted to shed off the old man impatiently, but Daniel cried, ‘I wondered when somebody would think of this elevator. I have been waiting, Mister Stevens! It was I who installed the programs and the control equipment on the roof! It is an old pre-PC system! I have not forgotten the programming language! I know how it works! Take me with you.’

Jan hesitated. ‘It can be dangerous up there, Daniel!’

‘I know. We should not lose time.’

Daniel Drumont stepped in the elevator and Lieven Segers pushed on the button for the thirty-eight floor. The elevator car shot up. The car would arrive in less than a minute. Only fifteen people could get in the elevator car, maybe a few more if one squeezed. Jan calculated that for one minute up and one minute down and one minute to have people get in and out of the car, they could bring fifteen people to safety in four minutes, over two hundred people in one hour, the evacuation of more than two floors. The effort was worth its while. More importantly, Jan could get up, to the highest floors, to look for Jana Kovar. Below, fire brigade men were startled when they saw the elevator shoot up. They wondered what fools had activated that elevator.

10

The fire had reached down the basement floors. It raged now also in the car park. The exploding cars had set ablaze the lower halls. The fire consumed everything that could be ignited. The fire had also reached the two lowest office floors of the Skyscraper. The flames did not engulf the Cloister and also not the floors of the Dawkins Villa, but the space gradually filled with thin smoke. No people were left in the Dawkins Villa floors. The evacuation had been swift and total there. No people were also left on the three lowest floors of the Skyscraper. The fourth floor was almost evacuated, as the last people climbed down the ladders.

The fourth floor had been depleted of everything that could burn. Nevertheless, the fire crept higher along cables and plastic wall coverings. The paint on the wall cringed, released gases,

and the gases ignited and burnt. On the fifth floor, the fire blew fiercely from under the door to the stairwell. The enflamed gases found more oxygen and they slew into a large paper container that had been placed there. The container had been left at the floor for a paper cleaning action. The paper held confidential files, which would be transported to ovens to be burnt. The paper caught fire. It would burn here, not in the ovens. The people of that floor huddled to the rear windows, where other fire brigade ladders had been thrown against the windows.

People began to climb down on the outside fire ladders from the fifth floor. By then it was impossible to go into the stairwell. The smoke was too thick, but much smoke also blew out of the windows of the fourth floor, and that hampered the people who climbed down. They sought lower rungs cautiously, however, and though they climbed slower, the number of people that reached the ground rose steadily.

The men from the fire brigade looked upwards with very worried eyes. Their highest ladders, of which they had two, could reach to about thirty metres, to the eight or maybe ninth floor. They could not reach higher. How could they get people down from higher? How thick was the smoke in the stairwell? How would people react on a thin ladder, climbing down from so high? How fierce were the winds around the building higher up? On that same fifth floor already, a man and a woman had fainted because of the stress and the smoke. These people could only be lowered with great difficulty. Lowering them on strong shoulders blocked a ladder for a long time. The firemen considered leaving those people on the floors and get the others out first. If such scenes repeated higher up, the firemen would have to face insoluble problems. The only practical solution was to quench the fire in the basements!

The fire brigades fought the flames in the basement floors with over thirty men. They all wore oxygen masks. They progressed against the flames. They also used huge fire extinguishers of powder on the spots where the fire was tenacious. The firemen advanced on four floors at a time. Ever more fire trucks, also from other cities, rode constantly to near Travtelio. More than fifty trucks stood around the Travtelio headquarters. Twenty more firemen ran down the spiral and entered the basements. The fire was attacked on all fronts. More ladders were also thrown against the façade, more windows smashed with axes. Firemen climbed up the ladders to assist the people to come down.

The smoke blew thicker and thicker out of the windows of the lower office floors. Some of the ladders were placed on the west and north sides of the building now. The wind blew from the northwest, so that smoke blew out of the building mostly on the south and the east sides of the façade. Many ladders had been placed against those sides. The firemen cried the movement to down should stop, so that they could move their ladders out of the smoke. Men fought to get to the ladders before the ladders were placed elsewhere. That manoeuvre took more precious time. In the basement, the fire raged on. The Skyscraper became enveloped in smoke on the south east side. A huge column of black smoke rose in the air.

11

Lieven Segers, Jan Stevens and Daniel Drumont used the Presidents' badges to take the elevator up to the fortieth floor. Drumont and Segers knew how to get to the top of the building. Strong winds tore at the men there, and they were hindered by the smoke, but they reached the small room behind the air conditioning equipment on the roof, the room that housed the controls of the Executive elevator. Jan Stevens also noticed how impossible it was for a helicopter to land on this roof. All sorts of devices and sheds covered the surface. The wind also blew forcefully in turbulences here.

They entered the shed of the lift controls. In it, they saw a desk and two computers, a chair and cupboards. Drumont went to sit before a screen, he activated it by touching the keyboard. He noted with satisfaction the screen animated immediately. He began to type on the keyboard. He did not have to reprogram the control software. The screen was tiny, oddly rectangular, green with white characters, and alphanumeric still instead of the modern graphic ones. Drumont still remembered the commands that would make the elevator move and open the doorways. Only once did he open a cupboard and looked for a manual, which he laid open beside him. Again he grunted with satisfaction. Everything had been left in place as it had been when he had worked here with the group that had installed the system.

In no time, he allowed all doors at all floors of the elevator to be opened, without people needing a badge for it. The men had not been ten minutes on the roof.

‘I will not go down,’ Daniel Drumont announced. ‘One more place in the elevator to fill!’

‘We will come for you later then,’ Lieven Segers said, ‘but I am not going to leave you here on the top of the building. I have a key that opens Sesame at the thirty-ninth. We’ll stop on the way down, and you can make yourself comfortable in the Cosmos restaurant, courtesy of Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre! You’ll find a corkscrew no doubt, and the wine cellar. You have my permission to break it open if it’s closed. Help yourself! If I survive this ordeal, I swear I’ll come back for you in person. Just see to it one bottle of Champagne remains!’

Drumont grinned like a schoolboy bound to do some mischief.

Segers and Jan Stevens dropped Daniel on the thirty-ninth, and Segers opened the doors for him to the Cosmos, using Buisseyre’s badge. He hesitated, and then he handed the badge to Drumont.

‘I guess we won’t need this anymore. If there is a fuss later, I’ll tell I lost it. When you get down, throw it over your shoulder somewhere.’

Segers returned to the elevator, while Jan held the doors open. There was always an odd chance somebody on the floors below tried the buttons of this outside elevator.

When Lieven Segers stepped into the car, Jan still held the doors.

‘We must think on how to do this,’ Jan started.

‘We can begin at the top or we can begin below,’ Segers replied. ‘Below, the firemen are doing their job. I suggest we do not interfere with them and empty from thirty-seven on, downwards. One bellboy is enough. We can save as many people as possible. You have done well. You can ride to the ground the first time. I can handle this on my own, now. I can enrol enough stewards to organise the joy rides.’

‘I would like you to do me a favour and drop me off on the thirty-fifth floor first,’ Jan pleaded. ‘My fiancée works on that floor. She may have walked to lower floors, though. I’ll empty thirty-seven and thirty-six with you, and then stay on thirty-five. If I don’t find her, please bring me to the lower floors. If you find her while I’m looking for her, please take her down with you, bring her to safety and don’t bother about me. She is a tall blonde Czech. She is wearing a white silk blouse and tight jeans, black boots. She is a head taller than the other women.’

Segers grinned again. ‘I know Jana Kovar. Who doesn’t at Travtelio? I didn’t know she was with you, though!’

They closed the elevator doors and brought it down to thirty-seven. Segers remained standing in the doorway, blocking the doors, while Jan ran through the floor screaming for people to gather at the outside elevator. The floor had been evacuated. Jan looked in each office, in the meeting rooms, in the restrooms, and then he ran back to Segers, making the sign to take her down.

They did the same on the thirty-sixth floor. There, Jan found ten people, very happy to see him, among whom two stewards. Together, they rode to thirty-five.

There were two more stewards at thirty-five. Lieven Segers explained them what he wanted them to do. The stewards rounded up the people who had remained on the floor. Jan Stevens ran to the other side of the floor, to Jana's office. More than twenty people passed him, running to the elevator.

The stewards filled the car and one steward went down with these. He would come back up in an empty elevator. Segers meanwhile comforted the people who stood around, promising they would soon be safe. More haggard men and women appeared on Jan's way. Jan sent them to the elevator. Jana was not among them. Jan ran on to the far side. He heard noise, cries, behind the panels of where Jana's desk was. His heart pumped loudly.

12

On the first and second office floors of the Skyscraper, the firemen had mastered all fires. Only a couple of firemen remained on those floors to keep the fire subdued and under control. The issue there was to ensure the fire did not start anew. Another issue remained the heavy smoke. No employees of Travtelio had been found on that floor. The evacuation of the third, fourth and fifth floors had also been complete.

The ladders of the fire brigades were now being placed against floors six and seven. This was dangerously high for many people, and the wind was stronger at this height. Evacuation proceeded more slowly. The firemen urged some people to close their eyes, hold on to the ramps, and feel foot after foot for the lower rung. At times, a fireman had to accompany a hysteric man or woman down. These firemen saw in astonishment the outside elevator rise and come back down.

The fire had never really touched the entry lobby, but that hall was very much filled now with heavy smoke. Firemen with oxygen masks ventured into the staircase. They discovered the bodies of the men and women who had perished there. They drew the corpses out.

The smoke was less dense to the side from where the wind blew, near the Executive elevator. The steward in the elevator had therefore no trouble to have the people empty the car quickly, as soon as they arrived at the ground floor. The steward ignored the calls of the firemen not to use elevators. His bowels constricted each time he closed the elevator doors. He fought the urge to run. He moved the car back up to the thirty-fifth.

Fires blazed still fiercely on floor minus one, but these were minor ones that had been contained. The firemen had everything under control here, too. They had destroyed the doors of the stairwell and of the main elevator shaft, at first drawing onto them very thick, stinking smoke. Then, they poured tons of water down the concrete tower, into the lower floors. These actions did stop part of the smoke rising. The firemen had to work with oxygen masks here, so that they had to relay, going back to get more oxygen bottles regularly. Other firemen replaced them immediately and relentlessly. On the lawns outside, the firemen placed two rows of oxygen bottles. One row was for empty bottles, the other row for filled ones. The brigades had enough filled bottles at their disposal to fight the fire the entire day. More firemen ran in with powder extinguishers to quench the very last fires. In a few minutes still, minus one would be gained for the fire brigade.

By noon, the fire Commander could tell to the press represented by tens of journalists standing at a safe distance from the Skyscraper, that the fire was under control at all floors

except minus two, three and four in the basement. He explained the employees could not yet come down the stairs because the stairwell was still filled by smoke. About fifteen hundred people still remained inside the Skyscraper's office floors. He assured the journalists no new victims would fall prey to the fire. The journalists had seen how the exterior lift rose and came down again, laden with people, and the Captain confirmed that this lift was still in use and brought down from the higher floors, to safety, about twenty people every five minutes.

Actually, the blaze in the data centre on minus two was also practically mastered. The fire brigade teams had smashed the doors of the data centre along the spiral, drawing a terrible backdraft onto them, but then they had entered the hall with water lances. The enormous amounts of water pumped in at high pressure had almost stifled all flames. The firemen sought the last places where flames smouldered in computers and on cables, and especially in the printer room. The fire brigade Commander, returning from his press interviews, leaving the stage there to the CEO of Travtelio and to the official spokesman of the company, considered placing powerful ventilators on floor minus one to suck out the smoke from the stairwell. He wanted the evacuation to begin anew down the staircase. He knew from where he could order the ventilators, but it would take at least two hours for those to arrive, and then he reckoned it would last another hour or so before the smoke was drawn sufficiently out. It should take many hours before he could allow people to come down again by the stairs. His teams were also penetrating the basement on minus three and four, but the men had to proceed with utmost care there, for gasoline tanks of vehicles were still exploding on those floors. The fire protection doors to the elevator shaft and to the stairs held, however, on those floors, and his men cooled the doors now with water lances, so whatever happened could not add much to the smoke in the concrete tower.

The Commander sighed with satisfaction. He was winning this one! He was fighting against time, now. He wanted all people out by nightfall. By that time, he had agreed to allow the outside elevator working and pouring out to safety twenty people every five minutes. The stewards of Travtelio had convinced him of the safety of that lift, and he let them operate it. He had only ordered two firewomen to help the people that arrived run out of the building in good order.

13

Jan Stevens heard shouting behind the panels of Jana Kovar's office. He ran to the panels, and saw a woman lying on the ground, a woman dressed in the fluorescent jacket of the fire stewards. He stepped over the moaning woman, and when he turned beyond the panel, he saw Jana Kovar fighting ferociously with Radek Navratil. Jana's shirt was torn at places, her jeans half opened. Her shirt was stained with coagulated blood. Blood ran from her face. Radek tore at Jana's jeans, but she hit him with her fists. She clawed at his face and kicked with her feet. Radek stood with his back to Jan. He did not see Jan coming.

Jan hated violence. He had never started a brawl; he had never been in a fight before. Now, he bundled the fists of his two hands and slew Radek with both as one hammer in the neck. Radek was not particularly dazed, but he drew back, away from Jana. He let go of Jana with one hand, and turned to see who his new opponent was. When he recognised Jan, a dirty grimace transformed his face to a mask of hate.

'So, you want a lesson too,' Radek shouted, 'you can have one!'

Radek was at least twenty kilo's heavier than Jan Stevens. Radek grabbed Jan at a shoulder, and he prepared to slam his right fist into Jan's face. The fist came forward. Radek was drunk and the hatred in his eyes made him lose all caution. His movements were slow. Jana tore at

Radek's hand and Jan turned sideways from the sledgehammer, and rammed his clenched fists in Radek's belly. That winded the man, and Radek bent double, just a bit, but enough for Jan to bang his fists immediately in Radek's face. Jana pushed Radek forward with a force Jan would not have believed in her slim body. Radek staggered aside, away from Jan. Jan also pushed Radek in that moment. Radek fell heavily against the cloth panel of Jana's office. The panel tumbled over, drawing Radek with it. Radek remained lying on top of the panel, groaning, unable to come back up, but he moved still. Jan then quickly drew another standing panel to him, mustering also a supernatural power in his body, and made that panel also fall over on Radek. Then, Jan paused. He saw Radek wriggling, caught between the two panels, unable to escape from the tangle for quite some time. Jan banged his foot on the top panel, and that quietened Radek again for some time. Jan then dropped a chair and even a third panel on the Czech. Only then did Jan turn and look at Jana.

Jana stood panting, leaning with her back to her desk. She stepped forward and slung her arms passionately around Jan's head. Jan remained also a few seconds standing thus with Jana in his arms on the high floor of the Travtelio Skyscraper. Yes, he had found his love.

Jan withdrew from Jana's embrace. He said, 'we have to go! The outside elevator works. We have to catch it, before it serves lower floors first.'

Jana cried hysterically with long sobs, but Jan held her by the shoulders and he pushed her on towards the other end of the floor, through the corridor.

About fifteen people still stood at the elevator doors, so Jana and Jan could go down with that load. They entered the car, pushing in. The people made a tiny place for them. On the way down, Jan told the steward should go back to thirty-five for there were two injured people at the far end, lying behind panels. The steward sighed. He would go back up with two colleagues to fetch them. The elevator car shot down.

Jan feared he had only a few minutes before Radek Navratil might emerge at ground floor. He hurried with Jana to a medic's tent the fire brigade had set up to treat wounded people. A nurse and a doctor examined Jana. Jana was badly bruised on her face. The doctor recognised fist bruises and he wanted to call in a police officer, looking scornfully at Jan. Jana asked not to bother, and she said Jan had nothing to do with her hurts. She would once more have a black eye and bruised cheeks, broken eyebrow, a few lumps on her head probably, bruises on her arms and legs. She had no bones broken. The doctor wanted to ship her off in an ambulance to a hospital, but Jana refused. Jan supported her, and she left the tent.

Jana only whispered, 'take me home! I want to go home! Take me home!'

Jan saw tens of firemen come out and go into the building in ranks like ants. He was not needed here. He nodded to Jana.

Jan Stevens led Jana Kovar slowly to his car. He looked a couple of times over his shoulder, expecting Radek Navratil on his heels, but he arrived harmlessly. He opened the door and eased Jana on the rear seats. Then, he left Travtelio burning in the middle of the day. Heavy smokes still blew out of the spiral and out of the windows of the lower floors of the Skyscraper, now whitish smoke saturated with water vapours, and diminishing in intensity. Jan turned his car and rode among the fire trucks, out of the parking lot. He rode to his apartment. Jana slumped in the back of the car.

Chapter Ten. Epilogue

When Jan reached his apartment, he told Jana to remain in the car and not to move. She moaned thankfully. Jan ran up to the apartment. He opened three suitcases and threw in the first all the things he would need for a stay of a few weeks out of Brussels. He grabbed a few of his shirts, underwear, socks, two pullovers, a suit, toothbrush and razor, after shave and perfume, portable PC, two books he wanted to read, and placed them in his case. He opened Jana's case and filled that with what he believed Jana might need. He found Jana's passport and her credit cards in a leather wallet. He put her things in one suitcase and then in the other. Finally, he went to the bathroom and took out everything she needed for her makeup. He brought the three cases to the trunk of his car, then returned and filled a large plastic bag with shoes and boots. He switched off the electricity and heating in his apartment, closed the door and went back to the car. Jana dozed behind him. She did not ask what he was doing. Jan rode out of Brussels around two o'clock in the afternoon.

At four thirty, Jana still sleeping, Jan Stevens arrived at the French coast of the Channel, at Calais. He rode straight to the terminal of the train shuttle to England, to the Eurostar high speed train terminal. He first rode to the shopping mall there. He hated waking up Jana, but he asked her to change clothes. Jana was still a little stunned. She obeyed him without asking questions. Jana changed inside the car to a new shirt, pants, boots and pullover. Jan drew her to the restrooms of the shopping mall and he asked her to put makeup on the bruises of her face. He combed her hair at the doors of the restroom, drawing curious glances from passing people.

Jana asked, 'where are you taking me?'

'We need a holiday,' Jan answered, 'a holiday at home.' Jana asked no further.

Jan drove off the parking lot. At a booth, he bought a one-way ticket for his car and two passengers on the Eurostar shuttle. He passed with Jana through the English border control. He used his UK passport. Jana drew inquisitive looks from Her Majesty's customs guards, but the men let her pass. Jana had to state she entered the United Kingdom for a holiday and visit to London.

Jan pushed Jana back on the rear seats, and she lay down again. He drove on to the trains. In less than an hour they passed the tunnel under the Channel of the North Sea. Then, Jan drove out of the terminal on the English side, unencumbered. He rode onto the M20 highway and later the M25, northwards, to the Dartford Crossing over and under the Thames River. He rode to Chelmsford, then to Thetford and from there to Norwich. He still rode north, around Norwich, to the small town of Wroxham. He rode slowly, avoiding brusque movements not to awaken Jana. He arrived in Wroxham around nine thirty, in the dark of the evening. He parked his car in a parking lot near a lake. Jana awoke when the car engine stopped. Jan brought her to a motorboat. He threw the suitcases in the boat, and started the motor.

Jana asked, 'what have you been doing? Where are we? Why are we on a lake?'

'We have almost arrived,' Jan soothed her. 'We will arrive in a quarter of an hour.'

Jana stayed awake in the boat. It was very dark by then. She saw lights on left and right, but had still no idea where they were. She huddled in a ball in the boat, for she was cold.

Jan drove the boat on. He moored at a lawn and a house. He helped Jana out of the boat and led her to the house. He opened the door, took her immediately to a bedroom. He asked whether she wanted to eat or drink anything, but she shook her head. He made Jana sit on the bed, took off her pullover and shirt and trousers and pants, and tucked her in. Jan fetched the suitcases, secured the boat, and fell, deadbeat, fully clothed, on the same bed, next to Jana. He too was asleep in an instant.

2

Jana Kovar woke up the following morning. She was astonished and immediately clear awake when she felt an alien bed and a room that was unfamiliar to her. She heard Jan snoring beside her, however, and felt safe. She had been awakened by birds chirping and winds slightly howling in the leaves of trees, and that too was unusual for her. Jan lay fully clothed on the bed, but she did not waken him. She stood up, put on her jeans, shirt and pullover, boots, and looked through the window. She saw a lawn, bushes and trees, and then, a hundred metres farther, water. Water! Where was she? She remembered then, vaguely, having driven with Jan in a motorboat yesterday night. She remembered the train shuttle and the customs control to the United Kingdom. Was she in England? Jana went silently out of the bedroom, a large and fine room furnished with a solid oak bed, cupboards and seats. She passed a long, wonderful living-room, in which also stood marvellous, fine seats, sofas, chairs and cupboards and bookcases. She granted the living-room hardly a look, but opened the door of the house and went outside. She needed free air. She walked around. The morning was fresh. A slight breeze moved gently the leaves of the trees and of the bushes. She let the wind catch her hair.

When Jana came back to the porch of the house, Jan Stevens opened the door. He stretched and gaped.

‘Where have you been? You gave me a scare. I thought you had disappeared on me!’

‘We’re on an island!’ Jana cried, astonished.

‘Yes, we are indeed on an island,’ Jan grinned. ‘Our island! This is home, darling, that is, if you want it to be our home.’

Jana had discovered the house, a charming but large villa built almost entirely out of wood on a flat terrain with about fifty metres of lawns, shrubs and flowers and trees around it on all sides, sheltering it from the winds. Behind the house the lawn covered more than one hundred metres. Water surrounded the place on all sides. The house faced a sort of very broad canal, where Jana saw a few motorboats slide past. On the other side of the canal stood other, similar houses. To the sides of the house she had slept in she imagined other houses, like theirs somewhat hidden behind the trees. The environment was very peaceful, entirely different from busy Brussels.

‘Welcome, welcome to my English house, dear,’ Ian Clarkson laughed. He embraced Jana.

‘This may be our home from now on, if you like it. I would like you to stay with me, here, and build a new life. Welcome to White Rose House!’

‘Where are we, what is all this?’

‘You are in a northern quarter of the town of Wroxham, Jana. Wroxham lies somewhat to the north of Norwich, three hours’ drive from London, and in the Norfolk Broads. The Broads are a set of lakes and waterways in the East of Norfolk. The lakes are not natural. They are the result of very ancient peat excavations that have been flooded to form vast lakes. The area is exceptional for its flora and fowl. It is a UK National Park, but we can live at the outskirts of the park. At a corner of the lakes lies the town of Wroxham, our town, and in this quarter I own this island and house. The houses around us are holiday houses mainly. Few people live

here the year round, many of them have apartments and houses in London, and we can do that also if you prefer the city. The only way to get here is by boat, but we have two of those, the small one in which we arrived, and a much larger yacht in the boathouse. I would like to buy a small sailing boat, too. Welcome to Clarkson Island! You are safe here. We can make a life here. I own the island, I own the house, I own a lake, a private lake just for the two of us, plus the surrounding land, and oh, yes, I also own a few companies. We are rich. We can marry. We can have children if you want that. And we can manage a company the way we want, develop it the honest way, the decent way. Would you like that?’

Jana Kovar did not answer. There would be time for that, later. She embraced Ian Clarkson, long and passionate, and Ian took her up in his arms and brought her back into the house.

3

Three days later, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d’Entray ran with long strides into the lobby of Brussels’ most beautiful, old Art Nouveau hotel. He walked more slowly to the restaurant hall. He stopped abruptly when he passed the first tables. He had a meeting in the gastronomic restaurant with Count Charles de Trioteignes, but he also saw sitting at a table Baron Gerald Godelin. Godelin was having lunch with two people Buisseyre had not expected to see together with Godelin. He saw Marquess Alexandre de Brioges and Gustave-Robert Trahty. These were supposed to be his own allies, not friends of Godelin. What were these men doing here at exactly the same time he, Buisseyre, had an appointment in this hotel?

Buisseyre then saw Count Trioteignes sit at a table in another corner. Buisseyre went first over to the table of Godelin and shook hands. The men did not stand from their chairs. The handshakes were brief and cold; the welcoming a mere nod. Buisseyre went on to the table of Trioteignes. From that table, Trioteignes and Buisseyre had a side view on the table of the other three. Buisseyre was suddenly nervous. He had no idea why Trioteignes had asked him to come here for a discussion, but Trioteignes had sounded rather commanding over the phone, refusing Buisseyre’s reluctance. Trioteignes had sounded adamant and hurried.

Buisseyre sat and ordered a glass of Pommery Champagne. Trioteignes corrected him and told the waiter to bring a bottle.

Trioteignes started, ‘how terrible the accident at Travtelio! How are things going currently?’ ‘We have everything back under control. The fires have been extinguished. The fire was confined to the basement floors, so the damage to the building was not too great. We are cleaning the mess out now. The damage has been assessed. We were lucky, in a way. No structural damage of importance was caused to the Skyscraper, and the Villa and Cloister as we call them have not been touched at all. We may have to pour in some concrete around the elevator tower for consolidation, but the rest is fine. Of course, the fire and especially the water damaged everything in the basement, all equipment and cabling is lost, there. We relocated our employees to the districts, and we are bringing in computer servers for the office systems. Our fire protection and backup procedures of electronic files were in good order too, so we can use the backup files in our main computer centres to start up from where we ended. The servers will go to the main data centre. We have learned our lesson. We will not bring the computers back in the basement of the Headquarters. We have fibre glass telecommunication links ready to connect our personal computers to the servers of the main centre. Within one more week we expect to pull our employees back into the Travtelio Headquarters and begin working like before.’

‘Like before?’ Charles de Trioteignes wondered.

‘Yes. We are ready to continue doing business as before. Soon, the fire at Travtelio will have been a past nightmare.’

‘How many people dead and injured did Travtelio suffer?’

‘We mourn seventy-six dead men and women, over a hundred wounded, but none of these have remained in hospital.’

‘How many Directors and Presidents are among the dead?’ Trioteignes asked, drinking from the glass of water he had ordered before Buisseyre arrived.

‘None, luckily,’ Buisseyre replied. ‘That is why we can start back on so quickly.’

Trioteignes did not comment. He asked, ‘do you know what caused the fire?’

‘Yes, we do. Experts from the fire brigade and from the police discovered the fire was started in many places by somebody in the data centre of the floor minus two. An operator should have been at work there, but we found no body on that floor. The man has disappeared. No human rests have been found in the data centre. We just don’t know where he is. We also don’t know, of course, whether this man started the fire or whether we were the victim of an act of terrorism. The police are looking for the man, of course.’

‘So it was sabotage that set fire to Travtelio, not an accident?’

‘We don’t really know, but yes, it is highly probable somebody set multiple fires in our basement. The fire did not start because of neglect,’ Buisseyre answered.

The bottle of Pommery was brought in a silver, cooled container and set at the table by a waiter. The waiter let the cork pop. The Champagne bubbled up to the rim of the bottle, and then he poured two glasses for the men. The men ordered a light lunch, no desert. Buisseyre glanced uncomfortably at the table of Godelin. Laughs were heard at that table.

Buisseyre and Trioteignes had ordered goose liver paté with a small salad first. That dish was brought in rapidly. Buisseyre picked at his salad.

‘Strange,’ Trioteignes commented. ‘I have seen a few pages of a report written by the Captain of the Brussels Fire Brigade in which the man considers the changes in the structure of the concrete, supporting tower of the Travtelio Headquarter. He seems to think the damage to the concrete and to the steel inside may well endanger forever the stability of the central tower, and therefore weaken the entire building. If I remember well the Captain proposes to declare the Skyscraper unfit to hold people and offices, condemning the building to demolition by implosion.’

‘What did you want to talk to me about?’ Buisseyre asked, no longer able to hide his curiosity. Trioteignes said, ‘the stock value of Travtelio has fallen by thirty percent. We are worried.’

‘Why should you be worried?’ Buisseyre asked, dropping a fork full of salad back on his plate.

‘We are afraid you may have bungled things badly. I represent two investment companies and a bank, as well as a few friendly institutions, which together hold an interesting stake of over thirty-five percent in Travtelio,’ Trioteignes announced, carefully watching Buisseyre’s face. ‘These have asked me to talk to you.’

Buisseyre did not even widen his eyes. He took up his fork again and stuffed the green leaves, oil dripping from them, in his mouth. Then he picked up a piece of goose liver, meticulously, with the points of his fork, and ate that too. He glanced back at Trioteignes.

Trioteignes said, ‘I have a report, here.’

Buisseyre had seen a thin, black folder on the table next to the dish of Trioteignes. Charles de Trioteignes now shoved the report to Buisseyre’s side.

‘You had better have a quick look before we continue talking,’ Trioteignes said.

Buisseyre put his salad aside and placed the report before him. He opened the folder and read each page, about fifteen of them, page after page, slowly, unhurriedly. He pored over a particular page or other, then continued. The waiter interrupted Buisseyre, asking him whether he would finish his salad or whether the salad could be taken away. Buisseyre continued

reading the rest of the report, now more hurriedly, browsing, and he nodded to the waiter, without looking up. Trioteignes had by then calmly finished his salad to even the smallest green leaf.

When Buisseyre closed the report and grabbed for his glass of Champagne, Trioteignes asked, 'what do you think of the report?'

Buisseyre did not answer.

'There is enough in there to bring you to a Court of Justice and to jail,' Trioteignes continued. We have proof you ousted Gerald Godelin out of his function using illegal means. We have proof of tax evading, equally illegal dealings set up by you and your Finance President. We have proof of collusion of companies and of illegal fixing of prices. Your company is understating its operating expenses and inflating its capital expenditures. That may indicate financial instability, unknown to the market, unknown to the credit rating groups. You two forged papers and signatures, and the Court might also be interested in a few practices of unethical management. These led to suicides and may have been the causes to the fire in the Travtelio building. The press would relish at all that, of course.'

'You spin great tales, but there is no proof of those allegations in this report,' Buisseyre demurred. 'I can read this is the report of a sick zealot. Nothing in there is justified!'

'That is true. There is no proof in those pages. The pages are a management brief of a full report. The proof is several hundreds of pages long. It would have been too long and too thick to bring here. We have all the proof we need!'

Buisseyre's eyes flickered, but Trioteignes had been waiting for that sign. Charles suddenly grabbed the report away from Buisseyre. Buisseyre tried to slam his hand on it, but Trioteignes had it already in his hands, away from Buisseyre.

'Sorry,' Charles said, 'this is ours!'

'What do you want to do with this?' Buisseyre asked.

'Like I said,' Trioteignes replied, accepting his main dish of soles slightly baked in a thin butter sauce, 'we are quite unhappy about the disaster of thirty percent slump in Travtelio's stock value. Our opinion is rather that you are not competent enough to lead a company like Travtelio for it to remain prosperous and an example of Belgian industry. So here are our conditions.'

Trioteignes saw the waiter prepare his sole at a small table. He waved the waiter away, nodding he would open his fish himself. The waiter brought him the dish. He served Buisseyre's main dish also. Trioteignes watched Buisseyre and he saw no sign of contriteness in the man. He sighed. There was then also no need to be soft on Buisseyre.

Charles de Trioteignes began to open his sole.

'You will remain CEO of the company, for the time being. The Shareholder Board will appoint a new President, soon. That President will be Gerald Godelin. He will watch you closely. Godelin will make sure the company returns to only legal workings, according to Belgian laws and international trade agreements. The company must be transformed to conform to American regulations, and then be opened to American investors. You can see over there Godelin has the support of your old friends. They too, in fact, have been appalled by this report and I may say, by the stock that has gone very deep.'

Buisseyre glanced sideways to the table of Godelin.

'You will relent seventy-five percent of the shares you secured for yourself when Travtelio went public. The Board of Shareholders will not require that of you, you will volunteer to that. The shares you relent will help the widows, husbands and children of the victims of the fire at

Travtelio. Travtelio, as a company, of course, will treat the families of the deceased decently and generously. Your fund will help.'

Trioteignes waited to let this work sink in, and then he added sarcastically, 'you will be known as a major charity benefactor of society!'

Buisseyre seethed and went pale, and then his face turned very red, but he remained seated. He wiped at his mouth with his napkin. He kept his napkin in his right hand. He leaned back in his chair.

Trioteignes continued, 'your salary will be reduced by one third. That still leaves you with a salary several times higher than the one of your predecessor.'

Trioteignes waited for a few seconds. He began to eat from the flesh of his sole.

'You will dismiss your HR President. You will find a reason. You will appoint somebody we will name to you in two days. I can tell you many of the rather unethical measures you two introduced at Travtelio will be revoked. You will let the new HR President work as he feels right, and that shall also have to be stated thus in his contract. You will not interfere.'

Trioteignes put a piece of sole delicately in his mouth, tasted, and said, 'this sole is truly delicious. I said you should remain CEO for the moment. If, however, the Travtelio Skyscraper should have to be demolished, then the stock value of the company may well drop still in the rampant speculation over the firm, and Travtelio shall be a bird for the cat. We know already for which cat Travtelio will then be, and we approve. Travtelio shall be absorbed in that event, and the CEO of the acquired company superfluous. Oh yes, there is one last thing.'

Buisseyre still remained silent, his jaw firmly set, eyes flaring with anger.

'From now on,' Trioteignes continued, 'from now on, Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d'Enray, you will do as we tell you! You see, I will use the language of the hunter: we have a gun at your head, and the only thing we have to do is to pull the trigger to take you out.'

Trioteignes held a steely gaze on Buisseyre.

Buisseyre threw his white napkin onto the dish of Beef Aubrac he had ordered and from which he had not eaten one single, tiny piece. The brown sauce splashed on the pristine linen of the table cloth. Buisseyre stood up so that his chair fell behind him, and he stepped out of the restaurant with long strides.

'Oh yes,' Charles de Trioteignes continued softly. 'You will do as we say, Buisseyre, you murderer. When we play the tune, you will dance!'

He smiled amiably at the three men at the other table, who heaved their glasses to Trioteignes, Baron Godelin laughing hard and loud. They followed with mocking eyes Buisseyre running off.

Charles de Trioteignes finished his sole with visible delight and he drank the rest of the bottle of Pommery. He had exacted his measure of revenge for himself, for his family and for Jan Stevens. The men at the other table wondered what had gone into him when he whistled "It's a long way to Tipperary" through his teeth.

Charles asked for coffee, mused alone on the vagaries of life, and then went on a nice walk through the old Brussels he loved before driving home to Monique.

4

On that same day, tourists strolling on the sea pier that advanced into the North Sea at the coastal town of Ostend remarked the body of a man caught between two large wooden beams that supported the pier. The body lay in the water and was tugged to and from by the waves. A crowd gathered rapidly and looked down. The city police was called in, and divers plunged an

hour later into the ferocious waves to get the corpse of the drowned man on to the sandy beach. There, other policemen and an ambulance waited. The man was dead, of course, and indeed he had drowned. His corpse was swollen, so he had been lying in the water for quite a while, probably since the night, and the body was soaked and softened by sea water. In a back pocket of the jeans of the man, the police detectives found a wallet. The plastic identity card inside the wallet was intact. It read Hugo Martin.

5

Three months later, in the Norfolk Broads, a small boat sailed very slowly on a lake. The boat sailed near to the shore, almost under the branches of overhanging trees. A shaft of bright sunlight slanted along the shores.

A woman was lying in the boat, a man held the helm behind her. She held her head in her hands and looked to the front. She watched the birds in the trees; she followed the ducks and the swans that swam before her. The woman then threw crumbs of bread in the water to attract the ducks, and she exclaimed softly from pleasure when the ducks dove for the bread. Many more ducks swam to the boat. Snow-white egrets poked their heads through the reeds. The woman sat upright and turned to the man. She laughed happily. She turned again, and let one hand hang in the water and move it with the advancing boat. The boat skirted the lake.

The woman was tall. She had ash-blonde hair, a rather hard and long face for these parts of England. She wore a white silk shirt, tight blue jeans, and black boots. She threw a flirting kiss to the man who sat behind her. She looked eagerly at the man with a very mysterious smile, the smile of a pregnant woman happy and fulfilled in that knowledge, shared by nobody but herself. Her husband did not know yet she was pregnant. She would tell him this evening. The man was growing a beard. He too laughed at the woman.