

## DIFFERENT

*A Manon Maxim novel.*

(original title: ANDERS, Een Manon Maxim roman)

(Translator from Dutch: Ester Magis)

1.

So here I am, sitting in Jabar's private jet, and on my way to New York to bring a devil into line or, when it comes to the worst, to get his memory blotted out by Diedie.

I'm having a book with me to kill time and to take my mind off things. Although it isn't my first order, I'm still nervous. So much could go wrong and I hate making things hot for an otherkind. They are, after all, just like me and not fully human.

The view is a real bore and the book can't hold my interest, so I decide to keep the pilot some company. Automatically, I reach for my side where my pistol used to be. Of course I'm not having it on me right now. The airport security of Ostend would not thank me for that, even though I have a gun license. It so happens that it is only legitimate in Belgium. I'm missing my Glock 17 and my, yet illegal, blackjack that's normally in the inside pocket of my leather jacket.

I put the book on the empty chair and stand up. It still feels odd to be the only passenger in an airplane. It's a Falcon 900C that purrs like a spoiled kitten. I've been told that normally it can seat for about eighteen passengers. Nevertheless, Jabar made it redecorate in order to fit five luxurious grey leather armchairs, a suite, a large bathroom and a kitchen. Originally, the type was called *Mystère*, but it didn't appeal well to the American market. Too bad, because I think the first name fits us best.

The cockpit's door isn't locked. It would have no use. A locked door, even though it would be armored, doesn't stop me.

I open the door and look inside. 'Tony, I'm here to keep you company. Is that alright?'

'No problem, Manon. Make yourself comfortable.'

The co-pilot isn't present at the moment; he probably retired to the sleeping cabin. I'm taking his seat, which is at Tony's right hand. The view from the cockpit is far more fascinating than the one from the little windows where I was sitting first. I'm taking a seat and enjoy myself, impressed by the mass of clouds we're flying through. Tony is being relaxed, sitting back in his chair, but he's staying focused. These buttons, pointers and signs, I fail to see what it's all about. The only thing I know is that this jet can fly about 1000 feet higher than a Boeing and

that it flies faster, although the game of time doesn't matter.

Jabar has once put forward the idea of letting me take flying lessons; both for the jet and the helicopter he has standing in his garden. I immediately refused the offer. I'm not at all technically-minded and mathematics was my weakest course at school. No, I wouldn't trust myself as a pilot.

Tony is nervously biting his lower lip and I can already guess why. 'Missing a cigarette?' I ask him.

'Kinda. Even those clouds remind me of smoke.'

'Light one up than.'

He shakes his head heavily.

'No, I promised myself not to smoke while flying.'

'It wouldn't bother me if you'd smoke,' I assure him.

'Do you know what's pathetic?' His smile wavers. 'I once was out of cigarettes at home. It was night already and I didn't feel like looking for a night shop. But I was willing to lick off the ceiling just to get enough nicotine down.'

Tony is an angel. Their biggest weakness? Right, smoking. Maybe it's in their DNA, because I've rarely met an angel that didn't smoke.

'Still an hour before arrival. It was an easy flight.' He clearly wants to change the subject of our conversation.

I sink deeper into my chair and heave a sigh.

'Difficult task?' Tony asks me.

'Nah, it won't be so bad, I think. I hope.'

'What? What kind of otherkind are you going to deal with?'

'Probably a devil.'

'Devil? They usually don't cause any problems. Even when they're drunk, they're like newborn babes.'

'Well, I've already dealt with something else.' I grin at that thought.

'Than he must have had enough drinks.'

'She. It was a she and yes, she drank about five bottles of bourbon.'

'What did he do?'

For a while, I look at him incomprehensively.

'That devil in New York.'

'We suspect he has used his gift to rob different stores at Fifth Avenue.'

‘Not so good. Was he drunk?’ Tony grins at me. His snow-white hairs, the angels’ characteristic, shine as if they give light themselves.

‘Maybe,’ I say smilingly. ‘That robbing is one thing. Should be something for the police to deal with, but if they eventually succeed in catching him and figure out what he has done precisely. Luckily he thought about stripping the security cameras.’

‘That chance is small, isn’t it?’ Tony looks at me with a frown.

‘You never know. Jabar doesn’t want to take risks.’

Tony nods. ‘Rightly so.’

For a while we’re occupied with our own thoughts. I wonder if the world will ever be ready to accept us, otherkinds, without immediately labeling us as “freaks”. After all, we’re a side branch of the human kind and we exist just as long as they do. The only difference between the humans and us is that specific parts of our brains evolved differently, which makes us strangely gifted. Further on, our DNA only differs slightly. So slightly that, so far, they weren’t able to detect it. Nevertheless, we fear that it will not last that long anymore and we hope to have found a solution by then. It so happens that it is crucial to keep our existence under cover. Not a single otherkind feels like getting part of a charade or getting stripped down in the name of science.

I stand up. ‘I’ll get some coffee.’

‘Tasty. Black, just like my ladies. And no sugar, although I like my women to be sweet.’ He chuckles silently.

First I’m going to fresh myself up. My worn-out face betrays that I have had a short night behind me. At this moment I still look like I usually do, shoulder-length dark blond hair, grey-blue eyes, a somewhat crooked nose and high cheekbones. I’m free to adapt it, but than I would never be myself.

I’m really feeling naked without my weapons, missing the pressure against my side. Luckily, one of Jabar’s chaps is awaiting me in New York with the needed munitions. It somewhat makes me feel at ease.

In the luxurious chrome kitchen, amply provided for comfort and more, I make two cups of coffee and wait until they’re ready. For the second time I check whether the note with the address upon it, is in my pant’s pocket. I’ve dressed myself casual and nondescript for this assignment. A white blouse on a jeans and ankle-high boots. I grin when looking at the boots’ heels. Their height doesn’t come in very handy when it comes to a fight, but I’m not expecting one. I rarely wear heelless shoes, because my length, 1 meter 63, is the only thing I

cannot adapt at will, unless I make the shape of my body ridiculously thin.

Coffee's ready and I run with the two cups towards the cockpit.

'Hm, I can really use one of those,' Tony says and he thankfully takes a cup. He almost swallows the coffee in one draught down. I wonder if he has burned his throat. I take a seat and only nip a little bit from the hot brew.

'New York is beautiful this time of the year,' Tony says. 'How long do you think you'll need?'

Of course, he hopes to do some sightseeing before our return to Ostend tomorrow. And to Tony 'sightseeing' is all about the females. It wouldn't be the first time I would catch him with a pretty piece.

'I have no idea, Tony. I'll call you on your cell phone. I expect to have it done today in order to leave as soon as possible tomorrow.'

We finish our coffees in silence. That's what I like so much about Tony. Right before an order I'm in need of company, but also silence, how contradictory that may sound. Tony, who knows me for two years, knows this and keeps it in mind. Sometimes I want to prepare myself mentally and sometimes I need distraction. Nevertheless, more often these two needs intertwine and I hop from one need into the other.

It's time to land and the co-pilot is joining. The co-pilot or First Officer is not a permanent employer of Jabar. It's never the same person, but so far always a human. I'm disappearing from the cockpit and take away the empty cups.

When I take my seat again in the leather chair, I fasten my seatbelt. I believe this is the best thing about flying; the landing and the take off.

The swelling sound of the engine, the runway coming closer and closer and finally the light wobbly landing of the plane. For me, it can't last long enough.

2.

We land on a little, unknown runway and Tony taxis the plane towards the indicated place. I'm getting my stuff that is still on the chair. I put on my green leather jacket and cram my wallet with the travel papers and dollars in one of the inside pockets, my cell phone in the other one. I put on my sunglasses, in a retro design form the eighties, immediately. I'm ready for it. Well, at least I think I am.

When we finally pass the security fuss and stand outside, the hot and oppressive weather takes me by surprise. I'm wrapped up too well, that's for sure, but I can't take off my jacket. First, I don't have a purse with me and second, I have to keep my pistol, which I'll receive immediately, out of sight.

The air smells like petrol and sweat. Only a few meters further on, a woman is standing with a lifted sign. She leans nonchalantly against a yellow cab. The sign reads my name in curly letters.

'See ya later, Tony. Be kind to New York's women.' I kiss him rapidly on the cheek and head towards the woman.

'Like they can't deal with me!' Tony yells after me.

I chuckle. Angels are such incredible lady-killers and womanizers.

The woman sees me coming and lowers the sign. I can't immediately see what otherkind she is. She isn't an angel, because angels are the only kind that always has white hair. Unless she has dyed her hair of course. She's extremely attractive. Her face looks perfectly symmetric and her body voluptuous in all the right places. She has dark brown, curly hair at a shoulder length and a sensuality that's even perceptible from a distance. She sure could be a vampire. Luckily she isn't that much bigger than me, so my self-image isn't totally severely damaged.

'Manon Maxim?' Her American sounds melodiously pleasant. I suspect she grew up in Louisiana. She probably speaks Dutch and a bunch of other languages as well. That's typical for otherkinds that move a lot to other countries.

'Yes, that's me.'

We shake each other's hand. Her hands are perfectly manicured with red nail polish. That in sharp contrast to my own bitten fingernails. I've tried it several times, but long, beautiful nails are only granted a short life and nail polish doesn't stay on intact for one day.

'You can get in,' she says it with a gesture towards the yellow cab.

'Your cab?' I ask while I get in.

5

The car's air-conditioning immediately freshens me up mildly and it smells like coconut oil.

She takes a seat on the driver's chair. 'Yes, indeed.'

She starts the car and joins up the traffic that leaves the airport. From my own experience I know that it is at least a one-hour drive to the centre of New York.

'Being a woman, isn't it dangerous to ride a cab?'

I can only just see her eyes through the sunglasses she's wearing. She looks at me confidently in the rearview mirror. 'Not really, I'm a vampire.'

That explains a lot. Vampires are much stronger than the average human being.

'And I've got my protection with me.' She taps on the glove compartment.

I suspect she has at least one pistol lying in there, some extra sunglasses and tubes of suntan oil.

'Oh, feel under the seat for a second,' she then says.

I lean down and my fingers bump against a hard object, packed in a plastic bag. I can already guess what's inside of it and I immediately feel much better. In the bag is my favorite pistol, the Glock 17 and hooray, a blackjack. I check the magazine: inside are fifteen 9 mm bullets, instead of seventeen. Terrific, because a full magazine runs the risk of breaking down more easily. I put on the shoulder holster that's also in the bag and put the blackjack and the spare munitions in my inside pocket. There, now I'm invincible. As long as I say it often enough to myself, it may be the case.

'My name is Selena,' the woman says.

'Nice to meet you. I honestly thought Ben would come and pick me up. Isn't he the contact person in New York anymore?'

'No, he retired. I'm the new one.'

I find it strange Jabar forgot to tell me about that.

'Did he train you?' I ask.

'Who? Ben?'

I nod.

'Yes, all of his computers are in my flat right now. I bumped almost immediately on that strange incident of those robberies. At first it didn't attract attention between all the newspaper reports. At least it didn't for someone who doesn't pay attention to it.'

'I thought Ben discovered it, but either way great job.'

'Devil, isn't it?' The look with which she looks at me in the mirror stays unmoved.

'Probably.'

‘Just what I thought.’

I startle when Selena hoots loudly.

‘Asshole,’ she screams at a driver. Immediately afterwards, as if she switches it off, she says in a gentle tone: ‘It was already too peculiar. The staff doesn’t remember a thing. One moment the stuff is still there and ten minutes later almost the entire store is robbed. Nobody knows how it happened or can remember who came into the store. And the cameras all of a sudden didn’t function anymore.’

‘A vampire could do that too.’

‘Our hypnosis techniques serve to seduce, not to steal.’

I can’t read off her reaction through her sunglasses, but she sounds fierce.

‘I’m sorry, but fair is fair,’ I say while shrugging my shoulders. ‘The chance that it is a devil is indeed bigger. They’re telepathically enormously strong and can more easily influence people through thought manipulation. But still...’

‘It’s a devil. For sure,’ she interrupts me.

I find that she soon takes it personal, but I don’t go on about it.

During the remaining drive there’s an icy silence in the car. It seems as if I really can’t keep my big mouth shut! I could have known she would take offence at it. Although there’s solidarity between otherkinds, it is still stronger within each mutual kind. Understandable, of course.

As if she wants to punish me for my suspicions, she drives hard and bumpy. Not surprisingly, I’m relieved when we finally reach the centre.

‘Do you have the address of the company he works for?’ Selena asks in a cool tone.

‘Yes’. I suddenly feel less confident. ‘By the way, how did you get a hold of his home address?’

‘Simple,’ she answers haughtily. ‘The robbed stores are located around the area of his house. On the list of otherkinds of New York he was the only one who lived in the neighborhood, so I considered the chance to be big that he was the culprit. I think they should keep on the list which otherkind is dealt with.’

‘Far too risky,’ I think. ‘If a human being gets to see that list, there’s the devil to pay.’

It becomes time to transform myself and I already decided into what. Before I left this morning, I looked for schools and their uniforms on the internet, so I would look like an innocent girl that goes from door to door to sell ballpoints for the good cause. I have no idea whether that still happens in New York, but I don’t think the devil will be suspicious

immediately and that he will give me enough time to force my way into his house.

After the transformation I wear a woolen, grey pleated skirt that already itches like crazy and ends right above my knees, a white blouse, a dark blue jacket, ankle high dark blue stockings and plain black shoes.

The school that makes its students look this ridiculous is the Academy of the Holy Angels of New Jersey. I thought it was an appropriate name. The ballpoints, which I supposedly sell, all cleanly have the school's logo upon them, a matter of taking the details into account. The fact that I need to hold something and I therefore chose for ballpoints is because of the following reason.

I'm a transformer. That means that I can change and transform myself into what I want. Nevertheless, the form must have an equal amount of molecules than my original mass. A school-going girl is smaller, so I put the remaining molecules in ballpoints. As long as something touches my skin, clothes for example, I can freely adapt it with me. The pistol and the blackjack stay the same in the inside pocket of my jacket.

I can just as well transform into fog and sneak into the devil's house through chinks and keyholes. Nevertheless, a role-play from time to time, gives much more fun and loads of satisfaction.

Selena doesn't move an inch when she sees me in my new form. 'I'm going to drop you off at his home address. If he isn't there, you can go to his working address that was given to you. It's only a few blocks further on, so you won't need me for now.'

She takes a sharp turn, which makes me tumble aside and the pistol to bump painfully against my ribs.

*Thanks a lot, goat!*

'Call me tomorrow when I have to come and pick you up.' She doesn't sound as if she thinks of it as a pleasant prospect. Me neither.

'Here it is, that yellow house.' She parks the cab and I step out quickly.

Just as I expected, Selena tears off even before I've just closed the door. I take a deep breath and suddenly feel like a damp rag. The heat outside, the annoying conversation, the long flight and the all too early wake up are taking their toll. And now I still have to give a devil hell! Maybe I do need to follow Jabar's advice to stay a few days in New York and, after some sleep, get to see the devil tomorrow.

Jabar has properties all over the world of which his contact persons inhabit some and I use some when I have an order. But when I don't have to work in Oded's pub or in one or another



country where an otherkind causes problems, I'd rather be just home. That's why I took the stupid decision to take care of everything in one day and turn homewards tomorrow by jet. If it weren't obliged by law to grant a pilot twenty-four hours of rest in between two trans-Atlantic flights, I would persuade Tony to fly me home again right away.

The environment where Selena dropped me is a pleasant neighborhood with amusing terraced houses and a lovely little park. I've got no idea where I am, but that doesn't interest me. The yellow house is the only thing that matters.

Before I knock at the door, I give Diedie a short call.

As soon as she answers the phone, I say: 'Diedie, it's time. Do your mojo.'

'I will. Listen carefully.' I listen to the magic words Diedie whispers to me. I don't understand them, but I don't need to. 'It's done. Be careful, my girl.'

I grin and snap the mobile phone shut. No matter how old I'll get or how many dangerous orders I'll bring to a happy conclusion, to Diedie I stay a little girl that needs to be protected. Now, let's see what I'll have to deal with.

*Showtime.*

I ring at the door.

3.

I wait patiently, but it seems he isn't at home. Damn it, I don't feel like searching him at his work. It complicates my order tremendously. Witnesses and possibly some hidden cameras have already made a mess of it. I want to turn around and search a cab, when I suddenly hear shuffling footsteps. I check whether my Glock is hidden well and put on a sweet girly smile. It wasn't until now I discovered the peephole through which he peeks at me. 'What do you want?' His voice sounds as if he's under influence of one or another substance.

'Sarah, sir,' I say on a dearest tone and in English. I waver with the ballpoints in front of the peephole. 'I sell ballpoints for the good cause by order of my school The Academy of Holy Angels.'

I hear him grumble, followed by the unlatching of the door. It is only opened slightly in a way you can only see his worn-out, splodgy face that's characterized by dark bags under his brown eyes, cracked lips and oily dark brown hair.

I know what he's trying to do right now, I can feel it because my hair roots are tingling. I could also tell by the color of his eyes, because it changes when an otherkind is using his or her gift. But I can't see it because he's turning his head too much down.

But it is clear he's trying to read my mind to investigate whether I speak the truth or not. I may change my outlook, but not my mind. So he's indeed a devil. I'm sure he won't succeed. Diedie took care of that. The only thing he gets to read right now is that I'm a good school-going girl.

*Kudos for you, Diedie.*

'No hawkers,' he finally lisps.

He looks at me again with a normal color of eyes and not the typical black ones.

'But sir, it's to help the orphans,' I pout. 'They're only 1 dollar.'

With an effort, he focuses on the ballpoints in my hand. The door opens a little bit more, but he keeps on to it as if it was a lifesaver. He's shaking on his legs in his worn-out bathrobe that even looks dingier than the pavement.

'I don't have money inside.'

'Can I than just come in to explain our good cause, sir? I can come back later with the ballpoints when you have the money,' I hold on.

I put a step forward.

'Tomorrow,' he says.

A smoke of alcohol and dense cheese comes my way and I have difficulty not to gag on it. It just has been enough for me. I put the ballpoints in the pocket of my jacket and step forward. I give him a hard push by which he stumbles backwards and finally smacks to the ground. He falls painfully on his elbows and utters a curse even Oded would be jealous of. I rapidly run into the house and close the door behind me. The hall smells like piss and spoiled leftovers and even looks like it, but strangely enough the house especially gives me the feeling it's been empty for many years.

'What are you doing...?' he stutters. He looks at me with big eyes.

I can see him think: *how can a little girl have so many strength?*

'It isn't very nice of you, sir, to refuse your support for a good cause.'

'Goddamned,' he yells. 'Get out of my house!'

He lankily struggles to his feet, always holding an eye on me. 'What are these for guerrilla practices!'

He wobbly stands in front of me and wavers his index finger in front of my face. In one quick movement, I grab his fingers, snap it and force him down on his knees. Despite my delicate figure, I keep my own strength. He moans like a little child and tears are in his eyes. When the worst pain is over, but I goddamn hold him tight, he looks up at me with a tug. His look furious and fire breathing.

'Your name isn't Sarah, is it.'

'It could have been, you know. I was a foundling.'

'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' I turn the tables.

'Let me go and I'll tell you.'

'Okay, good deal.'

I let go of his finger and of course he jumps up and goes for my throat.

*Good little devil.*

With a satisfied grin on his conk his hands squeeze my throat. I keep smiling at him in the most polite way and suddenly he realizes why. Or, better said, he feels why. The barrel of my Glock pokes in his stomach. His look changes from amazement into fear in a nanosecond, faster than I can transform. The advantage is that his eyes are now much brighter than before, but it can even get better. I unlock the first safety catch of the Glock, which makes a pleasant clicking sound and makes him pay full attention.

'It's much easier to talk without your fingers around my throat,' I say sugary.

I barely feel his grip because I moved the mass around my neck to a lower region through which I now have bigger boobs. Finally.

He takes a hesitated step backwards and stares at me in fury. Hm, at least he's sober now.

'You're a transformer,' he hisses between his teeth.

'You're a clever boy.'

I turn the pistol on his forehead. This isn't easy, since I'm still much smaller than he is and so I have to hold my arms up high. Nevertheless, I'm not planning to transform myself into my usual looks. Jabar advised me to avoid it as much as possible on missions. As long as the misbehaving otherkinds don't know what I look like, I'm safe.

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to give you some spanking.'

It has to be a funny sight. A schoolgirl in a nun-like uniform that turns a pistol on a much bigger man and tells him as cool as you please that she's here to give him some spanking. If the situation wasn't this serious, I would have had a good laugh about it.

The devil however does it in my place and starts to laugh out loud. It sounds like a hyena with an upset stomach. His bathrobe falls open and that's the sight I really want to spare myself of.

'You... a girl... give me... spanking? Even with the pistol...'

With a satisfied grin I reach for my blackjack. I'm armed in both hands. 'The left or the right hand? You may choose.'

His eyes narrow. 'And why? What did I do to you?'

'To me nothing personal. You wouldn't even succeed to do so. You're a risk for the otherkinds.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't play ignorant. You've used your gift to rob some stores.'

'How do... so what? What has that got to do with you? You're from the police or what?'

Damn it, my pistol arm is getting tired.

'No. Let's put it this way: I have to see to it that our kind doesn't get betrayed. That they color between the lines. And everyone who colors outside the lines gets a visit from me. You sure know you have to keep your gift secret and certainly that you can't impose on it.'

'So what are you going to do about it? It happened, right? And the stuff is already sold.'

'You're neatly going to give that money back. In the same way you stole those things.'

I lower my painful arm, but don't lose him out of sight. 'One movement and you'll pee through a little hose from now on.'

‘And what if I don’t return the money?’

When will he finally get he can’t win?

‘I’ll get your brain blotted out by a witch in such a way you don’t even know how to eat without drooling and don’t know but one word: ‘mummy’. It takes as long as a phone call you have to answer. Simple and quick.’

His scrutinizing look and nervous twiddling on his bathrobe make me suspect he’s weighing his options. *Stay focused, Manon.*

‘How come I can’t influence your thoughts? There’s a shield around it.’

‘Strong mojo.’ I swing the pistol. ‘What’s it gonna be? What do you decide?’

‘You can’t know whether I’ll bring the money back or not,’ he tries, but it doesn’t sound as if he believes it himself. ‘What are you gonna do? Hold my hand?’

‘I never grab something with my bare hands when I’m caught red-handed. And don’t be so sure about the fact I can’t check it. We’ve got our ways to do so. My next visit won’t be one with much options. Only one, if you know what I mean.’

His look changes and he looks at me in a pitiful way. ‘I need that money.’

‘Why?’

‘To buy drugs.’ He turns his eyes away and looks to the ground.

‘Drugs?’

I didn’t see that one coming. Devils are known to loathe drugs, unless in an alcoholic, liquid shape. Why do I get the impression he isn’t totally honest? Something in his look isn’t pure.

‘I have personal problems and drowning my grief in drink doesn’t work. So I tried to do it with drugs. But even for drugs I have a high tolerance level.’

‘Never heard of therapy?’ I sneer at him, not impressed by his lame excuse. ‘You’ve got ten seconds to decide.’

His eyes flash back and forth, as if he’s looking for a way to escape. I’m blocking the front door. He could take his heels and try to escape through the backdoor, which I can see from here. He could try. Jabar gave me a good training in shooting and I can’t wait to test it. Until now, the wrongdoing otherkinds always cleanly did what I asked them to do.

‘Five seconds.’

‘Alright, alright, alright. I’ll take everything back.’

‘As soon as possible.’

He nods heavily. ‘As soon as possible.’

‘Remember that this is your only chance. The next...’

‘Yes, yes, the next time I’ll become devil hotchpotch.’

‘Without the sausage.’

‘Yeah yeah.’

‘And don’t even think about escaping. Wherever you’ll hide, we’ll find you.’

I put the blackjack in my inside pocket and run backwards to the front door with the pistol turned on him.

‘It will be checked tomorrow.’ With those last words I leave the house.

Outside I breathe in the clean air. Nah well, clean. But, compared to the sour odor in the devil’s house, even a dump smells fresh like mint. I put the pistol away and walk down the street.

Now I have to look for a nice café, I’m starving because of the adrenaline and excitement. Further on I see a snack bar in those typical bright colors and chrome from the sixties. A look at my watch tells me it’s eight in the morning. High time for breakfast.

I slip into a shady lane, look around carefully and transform to my usual looks, which takes only two seconds. A great disadvantage is connected to transforming. When I have my original shape back, I’m cold for at least an hour. This has to do with the energy I consume in such a short period. But luckily it’s so hot outside I’m barely troubled by it.

The next morning I call Selena while I’m trying to hold a cab. I decide to go back to the same café as yesterday. They had fucking great hamburgers.

‘I’m ready and I’m going to that snack bar, right around the corner of that devil’s house. It’s called Shaken Burgers.’

‘I’ll be there in one hour.’

‘Don’t rush yourself, I’m hungry.’

I snap the mobile phone shut before she can make a comment on that. I prefer to take a cab to the airport. It’s just that I don’t know what to do with my weapons than. Jabar doesn’t like weapons staying behind in his house; there sure could be a robbery. I’m obliged to meet Selena again. The spot where my pistol hit my ribs by the agency of Selena, still feels black and blue and painful.

Hopefully those two hamburgers and the great portion of fries I’m planning to order will not only strengthen my body for a next confrontation with Selena.

4.

I'm just having my second hamburger and banana milkshake when Selena walks in with a haughty look. She doesn't deign the men, who are gawking at her as if she's the newborn Madonna, to look at her and heads straight towards me. Despite the oppressing temperature outside her body is fully covered by her stylish black pants and red silken blouse that is completely buttoned up. Nevertheless, she still looks breathtakingly sexy. I immediately feel like the ugly duckling next to this beautiful swan.

Vampires can walk outside in the daylight, but they get sunburned more easily than human beings so they have to protect themselves with a high sun protective factor oil, sunglasses and clothes.

She gets to stand next to me and looks disapprovingly at my plate on which the fries are barely noticeable by the amount of ketchup on them.

'Are you ready? It smells in here.'

'Yeah, sweet isn't it? Oil and fries, the smell of nouvelle cuisine.'

I take the last bite out of the hamburger and at the same time stuff some fries into my mouth. I have to suppress a grin. Her disapproval couldn't be greater.

'How can you put that trash in your mouth and even do it in the morning. Haven't you got any self-respect at all?'

I pretend to think about it and take some fries between my fingers as if I'm investigating them. Afterwards I put them in my mouth.

'No, I haven't. If I have to choose between respect and these tasty things, I've made my choice rapidly.'

I empty my milkshake cup, slurping loudly. Selena looks at me as if I'm a giant cockroach. Normally I don't behave this coarsely, but she gets under my skin so much. Nah well, it's still better than feeling her sharp teeth sinking into my neck, making some little holes in it and sucking my blood.

I wipe off my mouth using a paper napkin, put down the necessary dollars plus tip and hop off the bar stool.

'Now I'm ready.'

She turns around with a tug in silence and I follow her in her tracks. The taxi stands outside with the engine running. Just like yesterday, I take a seat in the back. Without exchanging a word we drive out of the centre of New York.

It was only after we had reached the highway she opened her mouth. ‘The Glock and the blackjack?’

I get them out of my inside pockets with regret, shove them in the plastic bag that’s on the back seat and put them under the seat again.

‘How did it go?’

I get lost in amazement. What the hell is this? She wants to be social all of a sudden or what?

‘It went well,’ I answer. ‘According to plan.’

‘Than... what’s your boss’ name again? I cannot think of his name.’

‘Jabar?’

She nods. ‘Than Jabar will be satisfied.’

I find this sudden switch in behavior odd, but I don’t go into it. Vamps are quite curious creatures with bizarre mood swings.

‘Do you and Jabar do all the work by your own?’

Why do I get the feeling she’s interrogating me?

‘Didn’t you get that information from Ben?’ I answer, a bit suspicious now.

‘Erm... I haven’t been informed about everything yet. Haven’t got the time for it yet.’ She avoids my look and keeps her eyes straight on the road.

‘Than you’ll hear everything from Ben later on.’

‘Yes, of course. You’re right about that.’

I find she’s acting too nice, suspiciously nice. Does she want to seduce me all of a sudden? I can barely imagine that. Vamps especially love vamps. Has to do with blood exchange and stuff, I believe.

It’s quiet for a while, but I notice she sometimes looks furtive at me. I use the opportunity to call Tony. He grumbles about not having enough time to take his chance. I tell him chuckling that if he didn’t bring it off right now, it is a fight for a lost cause.

Thirty minutes later, right before we drive in the airport, Selena asks: ‘Where do you actually live in Belgium? With Jabar? Or do you live on your own? Maybe I can come over and visit you?’

Is she out of her fucking mind? I wouldn’t even let her come close.

‘Somewhere private and comfortable.’

She gets it she won’t get much more out of me and she keeps silent until she parks the cab.

We don’t wish each other good-bye. Fine, it wouldn’t be sincere anyway.



It's one a.m. when I get to my car on the parking lot of Ostend's airport. A red, little Citroën that's far beyond his glorious heydays. But it still drives and I'm pretty much attached to it.

I'm cold soon and the chilly temperature isn't really helping. I cross my arms in front of my chest and walk on rapidly, longing for a warm bed. To my relief the car starts immediately. It wouldn't be the first time the car would chuck it and I don't want to give Jabar an excuse to badger. The past year he passionately tried to buy me a decent car. A Mercedes or Volkswagen. No thanks. Classy, expensive cars don't fit my self-image, I think.

I immediately turn the heating up, but it takes a while before the engine is warmed up. To make the twenty minutes drive to home more pleasant, I turn on the radio. One of my favorite songs chases away my tiredness a little. Hooverphonic's 'Eden'. I join in the song and speed up to a fairly acceptable one hundred and thirty kilometers an hour.

Jabar wouldn't thank me for the umpteenth penalty and I've already made too much a mess of it recently. That's why I don't mind driving during the night, although I'm not at all a night owl.

I turn off at Jabbeke and not that much later I run in the residential district I live in; Flamincka park.

It's characterized by ginormic houses with gardens even city parks would be jealous of. Nothing different with the house of Jabar Tahon, my adoptive father.

As a foundling I could have been less fortunate. With the remote control I open one of the two wrought iron gates and drive up the long driveway. On the left of the driveway is a lake with a little isle in the middle of it and on the right is my favorite tree; the weeping willow. I sit a lot under that tree when I worry or when I don't feel well. The umbrella-like crown gives a protective feeling and I feel much better afterwards. A thought that cheers me up at that moment is for example: light blue skies and green crowns, there doesn't have to be more to be happy. I don't know what it means, it only gives me a good feeling, that's all.

A few meters away from the weeping willow stands Jabar's private helicopter.

This house was once the coach house where the further down castle's horse carriages were accommodated. But, don't get me wrong. After making it fit to live in you can, with its six bedrooms, four bathrooms, two living rooms and library, hardly call it a stable.

The lights are still on in the living room, which means Jabar waits for me. It doesn't matter whether I already informed him about the hopefully successful outcome of the order and I'm already on my way home. Until I'm in my bed, his mind won't be at rest.

A second button on the remote control opens the garage gate. I park the car and step out. Between the garage and the living room is the kitchen, equipped with oak-wooden cupboards and a round dining table in the middle.

I'm extremely thirsty and take a glass out of the cupboard. While I'm filling it with tap water Jabar enters.

He's taller than me, about twenty centimeters and has an outlook that immediately forces you to respect. Black hair at a shoulder length, which he wears as long as I know in a tail. His clothing style is sober but classy; a simple jeans and plain shirt, tonight in hard pink. He's an elf and one hundred and fifty years old or fifty in person-years. His ancestors originate from an Asian country, which is reflected in his slanting, dark eyes and cream-colored skin.

Jabar has a lot of patience, tons more than I have. It seems as if he's standing there, being relaxed with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the doorpost, but I know he's burning with curiosity. That last one is a feature that, according to Diedie, all elves have. I turn towards him and take a sip of the water.

'Everything went well,' I say.

'No witnesses?'

'No. Luckily he was at home.'

'Great.'

I hop on the counter and let my legs dangle. 'He did it to get money in order to buy drugs.'

Emotions can't be read easily on his face, but I know him. The raising of one eyebrow shows he's impressed by this announcement.

'Drugs?'

'Yep.' I empty the glass and put it in the sink. 'I believe he got the message. He's taking the money back.'

'Good.'

'It would be easier if we could just send the police to types like this.'

'Easier, yes.'

'I know. The risk that a gift is discovered is greater when an otherkind is interrogated by the police or when he ends up in jail.'

'Exactly.'

This is the way most of our conversations go. I look like a goddamn chatterer in his presence.

'Are you tired?' Jabar asks.

I shrug my shoulders. 'The ride home wakened me.'

I heave a deep sigh.

‘It’s your own choice, Manon,’ he says in a soft tone.

Yeah yeah, I know. I’m stupid and stubborn. According to Jabar, I don’t need to work because I work for him. But I don’t see the rapping on otherkind’s knuckles as a fully-fledged job. Above that, how do I have to explain it to others? Oh, yes, I certainly work, but it’s a secret job?

I let myself down from the counter. ‘I have to make some money somehow, don’t I?’ It came out harsher than I wanted to.

‘I can pay you for your orders,’ Jabar proposes.

‘I want to have a real job too,’ I say sharply. ‘A job I can talk about with others.’

‘Okay.’

I walk past him into the living room and flop down on the blue, leather Chesterfield. The hearth is still smoldering and the warmth gives me a sluggish feeling. Jabar takes a seat in the armchair.

The living room is as big as a two-room flat. In it stands a three-meter long antique dining table with chairs around it of which the leather shows some old-age cracks. Further on a shiny black grand piano on which I desperately try to play. To Jabar’s displeasure I don’t get a lot of decent tones out of it, despite the amount of private lessons I got raised with. On one side of the living room, which is at least five meters high, are three big dome-shaped windows with heavy, dark red curtains that overlook a part of the garden where the helicopter, a Robinson R22 and a giant statue of Miguel Ortiz Berrocal are located. The statue is my favorite work of Berrocal. On the other side of the living room are French windows that overlook the remaining part of the immense garden. Everywhere are expensive oil paintings of old Flemish and Dutch masters. At a door, which leads to the attic, stands a two-meter high old painter’s easel on which still one of my final examination works for the art academy is displayed. An oil painting of a naked female model.

‘Nightcap?’ Jabar asks.

I shake my head.

‘How was Tony?’

I smile. ‘In my opinion he thought that New York’s women were too self-willed.’

‘Every woman that says ‘no’ to him is too self-willed.’ Jabar's corners of his mouth slightly rise up, his way of laughing.

That brings me to the following.

'I don't find the new contact person in New York, Selena, easy to get on with.'

Jabar keeps staring at me for a while and I just want to repeat it, thinking he didn't understand it well, when I notice a green haze in his eyes.

'What new contact person?' he asks.

I suddenly turn ice cold. 'Selena? A vamp?'

'This is serious.'

'What's serious?' My voice rises.

Jabar stares into the little flames and over his otherwise so serene face now hovers a dark glow. 'There isn't a new contact person.'

5.

The coach house's attic covers the entire upper floor and is so spacious you can at ease accommodate two families in it. Jabar had other plans with it.

In one half of the room are three computers, a ping-pong table and an original Wurlitzer jukebox. Diedie namely adores playing ping-pong, she thinks it lets her muscles work after hours of being behind the computer screen.

The Wurlitzer is my toy. It's full of original singles. Music from the sixties until the nineties; pop, rock, classic, reggae, all kinds of genres mixed together. It took me several days to label the singles and to make labels that matched the position of the single.

On one wall are built-in cupboards that are crammed with books, comic books and records. For some extra atmosphere, I've put several plants there that don't need much sunlight, since there are only two attic windows at this floor.

In the other half of the attic I get fight training and a punching bag hangs to the ceiling over there. Several 'weapons' are hanging on one half of the wall, from long sticks that have to represent swords up to short ones for the practice in the disarming of pistols. On the walls are still posters from my teenage years of the Spice Girls displayed. I urgently need to remove them. There are also two attic windows in here and further on the room is empty.

Next to that there are still two rooms at the attic floor of which Diedie uses one and which is spacious enough for a bedroom and living room in one. Following on she has her own bathroom.

A stair down eventually brings you to the meditation room.

Jabar immediately takes place behind a computer and contacts Ben, his connection in New York. I come to stand behind him and follow his ticking on the keyboard. God, I could kill myself for being so stupid!

'I'm sorry Jabar,' I start to apologize. 'She said Ben retired and she was the new contact person.'

Jabar waves his hand, but keeps looking at the screen. 'You couldn't have known.'

'I should have been more suspicious. Sometimes I'm so stupidly naïve and credulous!'

'You're still young. You'll eventually learn.'

Ben appears on the screen. I've only met him once before and still it's clear something is going on. He rubs with his one hand over his head, as if there's a bump and pulls painful faces.

‘Jabar,’ he says. ‘Something happened to me.’

‘I was suspecting that already,’ Jabar says. ‘Are you alright?’

‘It isn’t something I won’t survive, but I think I better go and see a doctor. The smack on my head was a heavy blow and with a stump object. She also doped me. I’m only awake for fifteen minutes and I’m starving. I’ve been off the world for almost two goddamn days!’

Ben is a devil with high blond hair and a nearly invisible moustache. His face looks like a map consisting of wrinkles of which ravines even could be jealous.

‘Did you see who it was?’

‘A female piece with brown hair. I suspect she’s a vampire, because she was quite strong.’

Jabar nods. ‘Could be right. Manon has met her. She pretended to be the new contact person for New York.’

‘Shit. Unbelievable. Is Manon alright?’

I come in front of the webcam and wave. ‘Except for my ego, I’m okay.’

‘Luckily,’ sighs Ben. ‘She has hacked into my computer and read our messages to each other. That’s why she knew where, when and who would appear in New York.’

‘I wonder why. She didn’t harm Manon and properly dropped her at the devil’s house and brought her back to the airport.’

‘She even knew my favorite weapons where a Glock 17 and a blackjack,’ I add.

‘It’s strange at least,’ Ben endorses. He takes an aspirin in his mouth and swallows it through with water. ‘The entire fuss eventually didn’t bear fruit for her.’

‘Not that I know, no.’

‘So she isn’t out to catch me?’ I ask.

‘Maybe,’ Ben answers. ‘Not at first sight, but who knows.’

‘How could she know Manon would go to New York, anyway?’ Jabar thinks.

I can see at the frown on his forehead he’s tormenting his brains. It’s a strange situation, I can’t make head nor tail of it either.

‘Maybe we’re dealing with a hacker that keeps an eye on your computer,’ Ben proposes. ‘Let Diedie have a look at it.’

‘I will. Ben?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know what this means?’

‘Yes. There’s a traitor among us.’

There aren’t many otherkinds well-informed on our activities. Diedie, Jabar, Oded, Tony and

me in Belgium and further on one contact person in the big or most populated cities. Jabar knows them all and I know he considers it to be impossible that there's a traitor among us. He has screened them elaborately one by one, analyzed their personality and past with surgical precision. Above that, they're royally awarded and that only to keep an eye on newspaper reports and gossip in the country, looking for indications whether an otherkind speaks beyond his book. When I put in at their country, they drive me around and provide me with the necessary weapons. That's all they normally have to do.

'Be careful,' Jabar says to Ben.

'You too. Meanwhile, I'll keep an eye on everything. Did it work out with that devil, Manon?'

'Yes, it went fine. You have to check whether he indeed brought the money back tomorrow.'

'I'll take care of that. I'll let you know.'

Suddenly I hit upon something again.

'I got the impression that Selena, that vamp, was interrogating me. I called your name, Jabar.'

Jabar looks up at me, luckily not offended. 'Don't worry about it, Manon, we'll take care of it. Still said something else?'

I bite my lower lip and shake my head.

'Manon?'

'No, certainly not.'

'Good.'

For centuries Jabar's family has kept watch over the possibility for otherkinds to secretly live among the human beings. Passed on from parent to child. Why exactly Jabar's family is also a mystery to him. He assumes his ancestors once pledged themselves to undertake that task because they have always been rich, powerful and influential. When Jabar finally considered me ready for the task, after many years of training, he left the active part to me.

And now I, a stupid girl that isn't even a relative of Jabar's family line, may be responsible for the fact that everything comes to light. I'll never forgive myself if everything gets out of hand.

Jabar sees my tormented look and softly lays his hand on my arm. 'Manon, we'll solve this. Really.'

He looks at me so confidently I just have to believe him. But it costs me a lot of effort.

'Yes,' I eventually say.

'It could have happened to anyone of us, Manon, anyone of us,' adds Ben and winks.

'Ben, you need to move as soon as you can. And Manon?'

'Yes?'

'Change your number tomorrow.'

'Okay'.

'Than I'll go and see a doctor and devour ten hamburgers,' Ben says. 'My head is about to explode. See you tomorrow.'

We shut down the computer.

'Are you alright?' Jabar asks.

I nod. 'Would you blame me if I fucked everything up?'

'Have I ever blamed you?'

'Well.' I pull a face. 'Do you remember when I was five years old and we went to the children's farm? You didn't like it that much when I plucked all of your vegetables without telling you and above all gave them to the goats.'

Jabar smiles. 'But was I angry?'

'You can never tell whether you're angry or not,' I say chuckling. 'But I didn't get an ice cream that day and that said enough.'

'If something goes wrong and you, unjustly, want to take the blame, you can as far as I'm concerned punish yourself by not eating an ice cream.'

'Hm, ice creams don't mean much to me anymore.'

'No chocolate for an entire week than,' he says in a seemingly severe tone.

'Heh no. I won't.'

'I'll never blame you, Manon, let that be clear.' I can hear he's being honest.

'Let's go to bed.' Jabar stands up. 'I'll let Diedie take a look at the computers as soon as possible and maybe there's even nothing wrong.'

I nod and kiss him goodnight. With my shoulders hanging down I slink off to my bedroom. I already know it's going to be a restless night.



6.

The next morning I absolutely don't feel like going to the pub I work for. But if I want to hold up a somewhat normal life, I'll have to. Last night was a hell in which feelings of guilt were thrown at me in extreme waves and I cursed myself so many times I can thank my lucky stars when I'll ever end up in heaven. Not that I'm a believer, but well, you never know.

I take a quick, cold shower and put on a comfortable jeans and white blouse with trimmings. With a little bit of mascara and lip gloss I'm ready for the day. Too bad I have to leave my weapons at home. I grew up with my weapons and learned to shoot when I was eleven years old, so not surprisingly I feel so much better when I have them with me.

I stroll to the kitchen in which the lovely smell of coffee meets my way.

Diedie, as usual in a simple stretch pants and summery shirt, stands whistling at the cook stove, baking eggs.

'Good morning,' I mumble and take a seat on the kitchen chair.

Diedie turns around and looks at me with a smile covering her entire face. 'Good morning sunshine. Coffee?'

'At least half a liter,' I moan. I put my head on my arms on the table.

'I've checked the computers,' she says.

'And?'

'Nothing's wrong. Not a single trace of hackers.'

The full cup is put in front of me. Slowly I tilt my head and take a sip.

'Are you really sure about that?'

'Pumpkin, I know computers just as well as I know magic.'

That's true. Not only is Diedie a wonderful housekeeper and a powerful witch, but above that she's also a marvelous computer expert. If those things, of which I don't get much, would be living creatures, Diedie would certainly marry one.

'I've been so stupid,' I say pouting.

'You learn from your mistakes. That's the way life goes.' Diedie turns to the cook stove and sprinkles some pepper on the omelets.

'Where's Jabar?'

'In the herb garden, as usual. He can think about things best out there.'

Diedie takes a plate from the cupboard and shoves the omelet on it she puts in front of my nose.

‘Eat,’ she orders. ‘You still have to work for an entire day and I don’t think you’ve slept that much tonight.’

She also lays two toasts on my plate.

‘Is it that clear?’ I ask.

‘Darling, I’ve known you since you were dropped in front of the door. I know every trifling change in your condition like the back of my hand.’

‘Can’t you cast one or another magic spell on me so the tiredness disappears?’ I heave a deep sigh, because I already know the answer.

‘No, sweetie, I won’t and you know that. Witches only use their magic when it’s uttermost necessary. Like Chaucer said: ‘It is not good a sleeping hound to wake’.’

‘No, only making me to wake up is enough already.’ I grin.

‘Just eat your omelet.’ She starts emptying the dishwasher.

I obey and take a bite from the delicious omelet with coriander and chopped onions. Diedie is a real mother hen. Not only in her behavior but it also seems to be in her outlook. She has a little, plump figure, ginger hair and a round, ruddy face that still looks smooth and youthful despite her age of sixty-five.

Without a decent breakfast that I have to eat entirely she won’t let me go. Believe me, she can stop me without touching me, only by using words. I’m defenseless against it, even with an elaborated practical experience in defense and martial arts.

When my plate is empty, she comes to take it away and kisses me on my crown.

‘Jabar really isn’t angry at you. He understands you’re still a beginner and still have a lot to learn.’

*Autch.* Sweet of her, but on the other hand I feel so immensely small hearing it. It wasn’t my first order and I goddamn thought I could really deal with it without making mistakes.

‘Thanks, Diedie.’

‘You’re welcome love. By the way, the spell that protected your brains against telepathy and manipulation has been removed.’

‘As far as I’m concerned, it could have stayed. It worked splendid.’

‘Of course it worked splendid, but it’s never a good thing to keep walking around too long with magic inside of your body, honey.’

‘I could have known.’

‘Something that shouldn’t be inside of your body, always has its consequences.’

‘Will I than get a third eye all of a sudden?’

Diedie first looks shocked and than chuckles. ‘Silly. But it may be the case you’ll have to go to the toilet the entire day.’

Now it’s my time to look shocked.

‘Just kidding,’ she says with a wink. ‘If you can do it, I can too.’

‘Ha ha ha.’

‘The fact you’re so tired is probably the result of the magic.’

‘Pfuh, that’s everything? How long does it last?’

She shrugs her shoulders. ‘At the most one day.’

‘Okay, so be it. You made a delicious omelet, Diedie.’

She beams with pride, as always when someone praises her cooking skills.

‘My program will start in a minute.’ She puts the last dirty plate in the dishwasher and snaps it shut. ‘See you this evening.’

Diedie and her endless soap series. At this moment she’s totally hooked up on ‘The Bold and the Beautiful’. I think it’s just a dense and boring business, but she loves it and seldom misses an episode.

The coffee meanwhile turned lukewarm so I swallow down several cups. I collect the remains of my energy, put the empty cup in the washbasin and walk into the garden.

I look at the lake with the little isle melancholically. How many times have I swum in it when I was still a little child? Then I pretended to be a drowning person that washed ashore on the isle. Together with Oded I once even made a raft out of wooden planks and old barrels. I can still see Oded standing aside and laughing with my plays. Like the time when I made the raft shake and shrieked out because I was pretending there was a shark underneath it. Those carefree childhood years are over and done with now.

Past the lake I arrive at the garden shed where the herb garden is located. Jabar is weeding on his knees. Being an elf, he has the ability to influence nature. Not only the flora, but also every animal species. From insects to elephants, birds and reptiles. Above that he can manipulate the weather; making fog appear, make the wind change its direction, local showers, and even more. Nevertheless he doesn’t use his gift to keep the entire garden in order, he namely loves a challenge. Luckily he has green thumbs.

I don’t know much about vegetables and forget their names often, no matter how many times Jabar has told them to me. There are only a few that I remember because of their specific shape or characteristics. The Lady’s Mantle, which is valued for the leaves when covered in morning dew because it would keep the skin forever young, is blooming well, I see. Further

on I only know Devil's nettle with its tiny leaves and Feverfew, because I think the name is pretty cute.

Jabar doesn't realize I'm right behind him. Between greenery he can lose himself and be so wrapped up in it he wouldn't even notice it if the world stopped turning. I love to see him work and for a while I enjoy looking at his rooting hands in the earth. He digs a hole, puts some homemade fertilizer in it from our own compost bin and carefully puts a plant in it. Every plant is touched and handled with the same amount of care and love. They are like his children.

'Jabar,' I say softly so he doesn't startle.

He looks up at me. 'Manon, good morning.'

'I'm going to Tempus Fugit.'

'Say 'hi' to Oded and tell him I still have a great bottle of whisky we need to drink together.'

'Okay, I'll pass it on. Something else?'

'No, nothing that comes into my mind right now.'

'Diedie told me she didn't find any tracks of a hacker.'

Jabar stands up sighing and dusts down his pants.

'Yes, it stays a curious case that probably isn't over yet.'

'I believe you're right,' I say and look away contrite.

Jabar looks at me intensively. 'Manon, that Selena had overpowered Ben and already collected the necessary information. You didn't have anything to do with that.'

'I shouldn't have taken it for granted she was the new contact person.'

'And then what? What would you have done then?'

I shrug my shoulders. 'I could have interrogated her.'

'Listen, you finished the order and what will follow now, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

He softly lays his hand on my cheek and tenderly looks at me. 'To err is human.'

*Fine, it's just that I'm not a human being.*

'I know.'

'So? The next time you won't take it for granted, so you've learned from it.'

'Uhum.'

'Take care, will you?'

I nod.

Then Jabar turns around, leans down and continues with his gardening.

‘What time are you ready?’ he still asks.

‘Around eight, I guess.’

‘Good. Don’t worry too much, Manon, it’s doesn’t have any use.’

‘Yes, Obiwan.’

I walk to the garage and get in my car.

7.

Tempus Fugit, Oded's pub is in Ostend on Van Iseghem Avenue. Oded is Jabar's best and oldest friend. I understood they have fought together in Normandy and that only creates a strong bond that's unbreakable.

I take the same way back as tonight and reach the centre within twenty minutes. Tourists only crowd the route between Jabbeke and Ostend during the vacation periods, further it's usually calm and peaceful.

It's a beautiful spring day and the cloudless sky manages to cheer me up a little. Lamb's 'What's that sound' does the rest, so I park my car in front of Tempus Fugit with a smile on my face. I lay the resident parking card in a visible spot under the front window, get my fingers through my hair and step out.

The pub isn't open yet, so I use my keys.

Oded is standing behind the bar, cleaning glasses. Tempus Fugit is at first sight an average pub, pleasantly equipped with dark wooden furniture and soft armchairs. The walls are decorated with memorable souvenirs Oded has collected throughout the years. Old number plates and pamphlets, signed posters from celebrities from the forties, funny pictures and so on.

Oded is a devil and one hundred and twenty-seven years old, which is around forty-two years in person-years.

The pub is known to have the biggest and most exclusive whisky collection of Belgium so people from different levels and from far and near come around to have a taste.

'Hi, Oded.' I immediately get behind the counter, dump my wallet and car keys and give him a kiss. The rat, Squeaky, which Oded drags along always and everywhere in the breast pocket of his shirt, gets a pet on his little head.

'Hey Manon. Had a rough night?' Oded has a roguish look in his eyes. His dark blond, luxuriant hair is spiky as always.

I heave a deep sigh. 'I think I'll adopt another outlook today. It seems I look like a mess.'

'Nah, I'm just teasing you. By the way, what would the clients think? That I took on a new waitress, while you were so fucking great?' Oded smiles and puts the glasses in the closet behind him.

From the beginning we agreed on the fact that he would put the most used glasses and bottles low, because with his length of two meters he can reach everything, but I can't.

‘And you’ll never find a better waitress again.’

I take the dishcloth and with a wink I turn to the little, round tables to polish them clean. ‘By the way, the order I had to deal with yesterday was in New York.’

‘New York? Neat! Wicked city with a bunch of stressing baboons inhabiting it. Had the time to see something of the city?’

I grin at him. ‘You know me, don’t you. Returning home as soon as possible.’

‘Girly, how can you see something of the world than?’

‘I’m still young. Oh, say, can I go to the telephone shop for a while this afternoon to get my number changed?’

‘Of course.’ Oded looks at me, wondering, but he doesn’t go on about it. It’s a luck; I don’t want to rake up my blunder again.

I take the ashtrays standing on the bar and put one on each table. If things really get so far smoking will be forbidden in pubs, I already know for sure Oded won’t keep to it. Being a confirmed smoker he won’t put up with the government minding his business. He’ll probably say something like: ‘I fought in the Second World War and was in Normandy. I have made my contribution and now they have to leave me alone and fuck off.’ He’ll probably add some more steep curses to it.

I chuckle when I think about it.

‘What’s the matter? Can I join in your private joke?’ Oded asks.

‘Will you put up with it when they forbid smoking in pubs?’

His face simultaneously spells trouble. ‘Are you nuts? Never in my life! I’ve fucking fought...’

At the same time I finish his sentence for him: ‘in the Second World War.’

‘And...’ He looks at me and bursts out laughing. Me too.

I’m pleased to laugh out loud and soon the tears are rolling down my cheeks.

‘You know me too well, Manon,’ he keeps chuckling and simultaneously lights a cigarette.

‘Say, Oded?’

‘Yes?’

‘Devils loathe drugs, don’t they?’

‘Normally speaking, they do, yes. Why?’

‘That devil in New York claimed he needed money to buy drugs.’

‘Could be of course. There are exceptions in everything.’

‘Yeah, probably. By the way, you’re wearing a nice shirt again.’

Oded looks at his Hawaiian shirt as if looking at it for the first time and beams. 'Found it in the secondhand shop at Newport road.'

You can count on Oded, he barely changes. I can easily imagine his closet is bulging out with Hawaiian shirts in all kinds of patterns and colors and cotton pants.

I put the chairs orderly and the first two costumers come in. With their custom-made suite and tie they make me suspect they're businesspeople that come to drink their afternoon aperitif. They take a seat and each order a Glenmorangie The Lastana. Excellent choice. After two years I very well know which whiskies are good and which are less.

I get behind the bar and start to tidy things up. Meanwhile Oded is replenishing the stock. Although I don't keep an eye on the two gentlemen, I can feel their eyes on me from time to time. But every time I look up, they seem to be talking busily and not taking notice of me. Maybe I'm just imagining things. After all I'm tired and my head isn't so clear. And possibly the recent events have made me paranoia. Oh well, it isn't bad. In my kind of work this is better than being too credulous.

I need to go to the toilet badly and walk past the table of the businessmen. They're sitting with their faces close to each other as if they're discussing the biggest secrets. One, with a nose even an elephant could be jealous of, furtively looks at me and silences the other one with a *ssshhh*-sound.

Oded sees it happening and when I pass him he grinningly whispers: 'You've pulled.'

I turn up my noise. 'I'd rather not with those two, thanks.'

I took a closer look at myself in the toilet. The bags under my eyes and my washed-out stupid hair aren't really 'men-attracters' today. But ah, maybe those gentlemen aren't choosy and they seduce everything that somewhat moves and has female shapes.

I wash my hands and splash water on my face, vain hope to chase away those pouches.

When I re-enter the pub, the two men have left. Luckily, I find it deadly if someone invites me for a date and I need to refuse it. It's difficult because of my job on the side and the fact that I'm an otherkind to start a relationship with a human being. Actually to start a relationship with anyone or anything. I'm afraid I'll end up alone as an old spinster on the big domain, together with Diedie and Jabar.

I clean the gentlemen's table and rinse out the glasses. With the tip they left I can't even buy an acid drop. *Scrooges!*

The rest of the afternoon is relatively calm so it isn't a problem when I slip away for a while to get my number changed. It's odd, but I'm much more careful. I can feel that threatening



dark cloud in the tips of my nerves and hold my mind sharp and my look attentive.

While I'm waiting to get helped in the telephone store, I feel looked at. I turn around with a tug towards the window and don't let me freak out immediately now! That one guy, with his thick nose, is spying on me from the opposite side of the road! I return a nasty look and with quick steps he disappears into a side alley. Spying on me. The guts!

I tell it to Oded later on and he advises me to tell it to Jabar and Diedie this evening.

'I don't think it's just an interest in your femininity,' Oded says. 'Maybe there's more going on.'

'I start to suspect that too,' I say. 'I already thought it was strange he liked the bags under my eyes.'

The rest of the evening we're too busy serving costumers, so I don't have the time to think about the entire incident. I keep working a little bit longer to help Oded out. Around nine p.m. a figure enters, fully dressed in black. His hair is shiny black and seems to absorb all the light of the room. With a self-assured pace he walks towards the bar and takes a seat on a bar stool, his long black coat neatly draping backward.

He isn't extremely handsome, but he has a face you'll never be able to forget. Like a puzzle that keeps intriguing you. I've got difficulty to tear loose from his look. He notices and smiles at me. I smile faltered and walk towards him.

'What will it be?' Good, I've got my voice under control.

'I've heard you've got excellent rum.' His voice sounds warm and inviting.

'We certainly have. But we've even got better whisky. We only don't do cognac, the boss thinks it's an overrated drink.'

'I totally agree with him.'

His gaze is so penetrating I'm getting rocky on my legs. I should serve him quickly and than clear off before I start drooling.

'What kind of rum did you want?'

'You know what. I'll take a whisky and you may choose. I have implicit faith in you.'

'Okay.'

I turn towards the bottles. *Think, Manon, think and don't make a mistake! Impress him with an excellent choice!*

Without looking his way, I ask: 'Is the price of any matter to you?'

'Not at all,' he answers resolutely.

I choose for the Dun Bheagan, Vintage Bottling of eleven years old. Excellent to start with.

He takes a cautious sip, lets the golden drink caress his tongue and swallows.

‘From now on you can always pick my whisky,’ he grins.

It wasn’t until now I noticed he has two protruding canines. He certainly could be a vampire, although it isn’t a convincing evidence. A vampire’s fangs are small, not as in the movies and even human beings can have them. It doesn’t matter anyway, I conclude and go serving another customer.

Nevertheless, I keep a secret eye on him when I’m sure he doesn’t notice. He’s talking to no one and keeps staring into his glass or in front of him most of the time. He frowns from time to time, as if he’s involved in a deep discussion with himself. I think he looks lost, tormented. Someone who’s bearing a heavy past. But maybe that’s just my imagination and I’m ascribing mysterious characteristics to him that aren’t there.

Broken and exhausted I take leave of Oded around ten p.m.. He orders me not to come back before 4 p.m. tomorrow and to take a good rest.

Hopefully I’ll manage to do so tonight, but I’m afraid I won’t. That’s the way I am: at the slightest I worry and ruminate about it until the problem is solved.

8.

Back home Diedie and Jabar socially sit together in front of the hearth. A bottle of red wine and a dish of nuts stand on the coffee table. I join them and take myself a glass of wine.

'I'm dead tired,' I say while I plop down and shuffle my feet underneath me in a lotus position.

'How did it go?' Diedie asks me.

Her rosy cheeks indicate she has already had enough wine.

'Busy. I told Oded about your whisky. He'll come around soon.'

I throw a nut from a distance into my mouth. Beside it, of course.

'Good.' Jabar stands up to put some more wood on the fire.

'I'm probably exaggerating, but I got the impression I was being watched today.'

In the burning light of the flames Jabar's black hair shines as polished up opal. It reminds me of that calm, attractive costumer from the pub. I didn't even see him leave, but all of a sudden he seemed to have disappeared. Strangely enough it left me with an empty feeling.

Jabar keeps standing with his back towards the hearth and looks at me with a worried face.

'What do you mean?'

'Well,' I start. 'First there were two guys in the pub that were whispering mysteriously to each other and they shut up when I walked by. Later on, when I was in the telephone shop, I saw one of them standing at the other side of the road. He was looking at me, no doubt about that. When I looked his way, he ran away quickly.'

'Maybe he was keen on you,' Diedie suggests.

'What did he look like?' Jabar asks and takes his seat again.

I shrug my shoulders. 'Nothing special. Normal length and outlook. He did have a huge nose though.'

'Human?'

'No idea.'

'It's annoying,' Diedie says, 'we can't recognize otherkinds more fluently.'

Diedie is right, it would make my job a lot easier. But on the other hand this also makes it possible for us to live among human beings without getting noticed.

The outer characteristics of every kind are subtle and even human beings can have them. Elves have slightly pointed ears, vamps their fangs, angels snow white hair, devils are born with eleven toes or fingers and witches have a birthmark. Only transformers like me don't

have a specific characteristic.

‘What does it matter if you could recognize them?’ Jabar says.

‘Nothing, it’s just... at least you know than,’ Diedie thinks.

‘Otherkinds aren’t more dangerous than human beings,’ Jabar adds to that.

‘No,’ Diedie says. ‘But if a human is keeping an eye on Manon and he sees her transforming it’s a bigger problem than when it’s an otherkind seeing it.’

‘You’re right,’ Jabar agrees.

‘It would also be so much easier to find a life partner when you want to have children,’ I add.

‘Indeed, right you are,’ Diedie says.

For a while, it seems as if Jabar is thinking of something; a frown appears on his forehead.

‘Did anything special still happened today?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Diedie and Jabar answer with one voice.

‘No gift-imposers?’

‘No, nowhere,’ Jabar answers.

‘What a luck, I don’t feel like interfering.’

‘You still want to eat something,’ Diedie asks.

‘No, thanks. I’m going to bring a visit to my bed.’ I stand up.

‘Can we train tomorrow morning?’ I ask Jabar.

‘Good idea. Sleep well, Manon.’

‘Good night.’

I empty my glass of wine, give them a kiss and head towards my bedroom.

I have a spacious bedroom with in it everything I need. Beneath my windows are shelves crammed with books from authors as Dean Koontz, John Vermeulen, Tisa Pescar, Thirza Meta and Michael Marshall Smith.

In the centre of the room, which is decorated in a sallow complexion, stands a double bed that’s almost totally covered by teddy bears I’ve collected during my entire life.

In front of the bed: a television. And adjoining a bathroom with bath, two washbasins and sofa.

I throw my clothes on the windowsill that’s so wide you can easily sit on it with a bunch of people. After that I take a long, hot shower.

The thoughts about the attractive guy from the pub keep running through my head, alternating with the image of that nasty peeping Tom. Damn it, I can’t even quietly enjoy the memory of that clever fellow without Big Nose minding his own business!

Wrapped in a soft, warm dressing gown I get into bed, push the teddy bears aside and put on the television. Around this time most of the movies have ended already. I zap aimlessly between different channels, without really focusing on it.

Eventually I doze off with the television still on, which has already happened so many times before.

In the middle of the night I wake up because of a strange noise. I come to sit straight up in bed and prick up my ears. Maybe I just imagined it, because it's as still as a mouse inside. The television screen is black. Probably Jabar turned it off before he went to bed. Right on the moment I want to lie down again, sermonizing myself because of my jumpy behavior, I hear a scratching noise in the room next to mine.

Now I'm sure of it!

The room next to mine is a bedroom that isn't used. Not even guests are lodged in this, but in another bedroom. Diedie sleeps in the attic room and Jabar has a bedroom on the first floor, so the noises couldn't be originating from them. Besides the room is, aside from a few chairs, empty.

However, I do know that in that room, behind a painting of Permeke, there's a built-in wall safe. I don't know whether Jabar keeps valuable things in it and maybe the safe is empty. Nevertheless, that doesn't give a burglar the right to sneak into our house.

Jabar could now be persuaded, contradictory to his principles, to get the house electronically secured. At least I hope so.

I get up quietly and tie the dressing gown, with which I fell asleep, more tightly around me. Not really a practical battle dress, but I don't want to waste time right now. Who knows how long he or she is already busy. As silent as I can I open the night table and take out, from a special closed box for that purpose, my Glock. It's prohibited to keep the bullets in the pistol, except on the shooting range of course, but I always put fifteen bullets in it, so I luckily don't have to check that. I don't fire at someone unnecessarily. It creates a lot of mess and confrontations with the police, although I have a gun license. So I put the pistol on my back, between the tie belt of my dressing gown.

Why don't I change my hand into a pistol? It would indeed be easier and I can't drop it by accident. However, the problem is that when I would fire and the bullet would get stuck in someone's body, I would lose a bone in my finger or so.

I do take the telescopic blackjack in my hand, ready for use.

I creep towards my room's door and slowly open it. Not a sound. *Phew.*

It's only one meter to the door of the room next to it. The redstone floor feels cold beneath my feet. I hold my breath intently. The door of the room next to it is closed, but I unmistakably can hear a movement.

*One... two... three.*

I open the door and turn on the light immediately.

9.

In front of me stands a figure, completely dressed in black tights and mask and all. It's a man, I could tell by the deep cry of surprise. He looks at me with big anxious eyes through the groove of his mask and drops a leather-like book at the floor, which he was holding in his hands. It makes a hard, muffled sound and I hope Jabar heard it and rushes to my assistance. The painting lies on the floor and the safe and a broken window are open.

I rush towards the intruder and unfold the blackjack at the same time. I aim at his head, but he just puts a step aside, through which it lands on his shoulder. He drops himself to the floor, rolls and jumps back up again a meter away from me. He has the book in his hands again, which he throws out of the window in an elegant gesture.

After that, everything goes quickly. Out of the corners of my eyes I can still see a figure in the garden picking up the book and rush away. The guy outside apparently has a bunch of tools with him, because it makes a rattling noise when he runs away. At the same time the man in the room jumps towards me.

I fall flat and painfully on my back, but I still have (and I'm proud of that) the blackjack in my hands. However, the pistol will cause a firm bruising. The man is now on top of me and makes a grab for my hands to pin them down on the ground. However, he isn't fast enough.

A hit with the blackjack in his neck makes him moan, but he stays on top of me and even sees his chance to lay hold on my wrists. He's heavy and in my feeling fucking muscular. I try to get from underneath him, but don't get him off of me.

That's enough! Whether he's a human or something else, I'm going to give him hell!

I transform my fingers so they become longer and thinner and get my hands on his wrists. I keep an eye on his look, but he doesn't look as if the transformation comes as a surprise.

The door flies open, the moment he wants to stand up to escape.

Meanwhile my fingers have changed into steel wire so that he gets stuck on me, as if he's handcuffed.

'Try to get out of this, you cunt!' I yell.

'Let him go, Manon, I got him,' I hear Jabar saying, but I don't see him standing.

I transform my hands back to normal. The guy is pulled back and falls with his head on the windowsill where he collapses.

Jabar is looking down on me and offers me his hands to get me on my feet again.

'Are you alright?' he asks with a worried look in his eyes.

I tidy my dressing gown, pick up the pistol and blackjack and nod. ‘Stupid burglar. He had a partner that made off with a book.’

‘Get a generous piece of rope from the garage next to my office and give me your pistol,’ he commands.

I hand over the Glock, lay the blackjack on the windowsill and hurry towards the front door, because before the office I have to go outside. Next to the office is a second garage in which Jabar’s Porsche stands. I snatch a piece of cable rope that hangs above the bench and hurry up back inside.

‘Here.’ I give the rope to Jabar.

‘Give me a hand.’

Together we put the masked man on a chair and wrap the rope tightly around his chest and arms.

‘What if he’s a devil or a vampire?’

With that I mean that a devil can do in thought manipulation and a vampire has the gift of hypnotizing. Two things Jabar and I aren’t immune to and a pistol is useless against.

‘Get Diedie. Quick,’ Jabar orders to me. ‘Before he comes round.’

I sprint up the wooden stairs that lead to the first floor, for me nimbly avoid the furniture and take the following stairs to the attic floor. Panting I knock on Diedie’s room door.

‘Diedie, quick!’

I keep knocking until she appears at her door in a cute flowered sleeping dress.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Burglar... now... need your magic.’

Diedie doesn’t hesitate and readily follows me down.

She puts her hand over her mouth when she sees the man sitting on the chair.

Jabar has pulled off his mask and leans nonchalantly against the windowsill with his arms crossed in front of him. The safe is closed again and Permeke properly hangs in front of it.

The burglar looks like the man in the street with a short brown haircut. I don’t recognize him at first without his custom-made suite and in those typical black burglar tights. Above that his chin leans against his chest. When I come closer, I see it’s one of the two gentlemen that were in the pub this afternoon. Not the one with the big nose, but the other.

‘Diedie, protect us all, will you?’ Jabar ask calmly.

You can’t tell from his face he has just caught a burglar in his house.

Diedie murmurs some words Jabar nor I understand. Her eyes turn into an intense, purple



color, which I always find wonderful. A light tingle against the crown of my skull indicates it's done. Right in time, because the guy wakes up moaning, looks surprised at the rope and afterwards at us.

'Welcome,' Jabar says jesting.

'It's one of the guys that was acting so mysteriously in the pub this afternoon,' I say.

Jabar nods at me and then turns to the intruder: 'Where is my book?'

'Go fuck yourself, bloody elf,' the guy hisses between his teeth. So that guy knows what we are. Nasty, but it makes the interrogation a lot more interesting.

'Let's check what kind you are,' I say and while I bend over to him, I transform my index finger and thumb into pincers.

'What are you gonna do?' he screams. I put the pincers between his lips and look into his mouth.

'Just checking,' I say honeyed. After that, I check his ears, feet and hands.

Why not just with my fingers? Pincers are much more fun and are scarier. However, I refuse to check his body for birthmarks. I don't want to touch that much.

'Keep your hands off of me!' He shakes with his chair and all.

'If you don't stop, I'll cut out one of your eyes!'

Obediently he keeps himself calm and hisses: 'Freak.'

'Well, well, that isn't nice.' I turn around to Jabar and Diedie. 'No characteristics. So, human, witch or transformer. Since he hasn't unleashed a spell yet or transformed, I bet on the first.'

Before I turn away from the intruder, I poke in his eye. Hard.

'Autch, you cow!' he cries out.

'Where is the book?' I repeat Jabar's earlier question.

He spits on the floor right before my feet. Look, I think that's just disgusting. And, above all, coarse and cliché-ridden.

'Stay calm, Manon,' Jabar says in a soft tone.

Nevertheless, I know he doesn't mean it, but that he's playing the *good cop*. He mainly leaves the interrogation to me and I know why. The such-and-such test.

'Do you want I let you get bewitched by her?' I say and point at Diedie. 'She's a powerful witch, you know.'

'Witches can't practice black magic,' he answers with a triumphant grin. 'It namely comes back three times.'

‘Ah, you know your lesson,’ I say sneering. ‘But I can transform into your worst nightmares and I’m not bound to the witches’ good ethic.’

A faint glimpse of fear appears in his eyes.

Of course, we still have our Mister Glock, but as I already said earlier, it just creates such a mess.

‘Besides, you woke me up. And I need that sleep, badly, shithead! You don’t get away with that!’

‘The book?’ Jabar repeats who has his emotions better under control than I have.

‘Gone. And you’ll never find it back.’

I studiously look up at Jabar.

‘I’ll tell you about that later,’ he says. ‘Just do your thing.’

*Playing time!*

I transform into one of my favorite animals: the wolf.

I make the mouth bigger than usual and the teeth extra sharp. I’m not planning to bite him. *Gross.* I’m not a vampire. I hope the appearance alone will be enough to convince him of our seriousness.

That’s what I thought! He fucking starts to laugh out loud. ‘Manon Maxim. Don’t think we don’t know you. You don’t dare to bite me.’

Oh, damn it. How does he know that? And how come he knows my name?

If I only knew what he’s afraid of.

And then I get an idea.

What are most people afraid of? Right. Tickling, stinging and hairy Arthropoda. In two seconds the wolf is transformed and shattered into hundreds of banana spiders and scorpions. I do need to take care of the contact between the different Arthropoda, so I stay a single entity. With thousands of facet eyes I see how the intruder is shuffling backwards with his chair. His screaming and the rasping of the chair legs cut through my auditory channels.

‘The book?’ Jabar’s voice sounds as if he’s talking through a megaphone.

I hope he gives in fast, because the sounds hurt my eardrums.

‘I don’t know his name,’ the burglar now whines.

I crawl into his trouser-legs. He shakes his legs until I fall to the ground, but my armor protects me.

‘Get them off of me! Get them off of me! I’ll tell everything I know!’

Phew, back to good old Manon. With tears in his eyes he looks up relieved at my human

appearance. The cold after the transformation immediately takes possession of me and I begin to tremble like crazy.

The guy is trembling also, but of fear. 'I've never seen the client, but I know he exists. I work directly for Selena.'

His dialect sounds Antwerp, I can hear now, and not Ostend.

'The vamp,' I say.

He nods heavily.

'What's your name? And your partner's?'

'Edward Moon and my partner is my brother, Joseph Moon.'

'Why did you have to steal the book?'

'I don't know, I really don't. I don't even know what kind of book it is. You have to believe me!'

'How come you know us and especially what we are?' Jabar asks.

'Selena told me. She knows a lot about you. I don't know how she got that information. I belong to the lowest level. She only told me what was necessary.'

'What is your client,' I ask. 'An otherkind?'

'Otherkind?' He blinks his eyes in amazement and then: 'Oh, you mean... I don't know what he is.'

'What do you know?' I insist.

If only I was a devil right now, so I could read his mind.

'The ropes cut my skin.' There's not a bit of courage in his voice.

'What do you know?' I ignore his plea.

'Nothing. I get paid for this order. Royally paid. Steal the book and get away, that's all.'

'What did Selena tell about us and about the otherkinds?'

'Nothing special.' His eyes anxiously shift back and forth between us. 'What you can do. We didn't believe it at first. But now.'

*Damn it, Manon!* I shouldn't have transformed myself!

'We can't let him go,' I say to Jabar.

'We have to, Manon, we're not murderers and we don't keep prisoners either. Besides, his partner probably knows as much as he does and that one's gone.'

'The police?'

'No.'

'Why not? He's a human and he burgled a house.' I yell angrily.

‘I’ll tell you later why not. Besides.’ Jabar comes closer and whispers in my ear: ‘I’ve got the suspicion that Selena will take care of them. She draws little benefit if they decide to earn big money on the leaking out of information.’

I nod. It’s horrible to know that those two people probably won’t survive this. On the other hand, they chose for it themselves. I sincerely hope I can ease my conscience with this, but what else is there to do?

‘So that’s why you kept an eye on me this afternoon?’ I ask the burglar.

‘Yes yes, to watch you closely. To see what we would be confronted with.’

‘With how many people does Selena work?’

‘I only know something about my brother and I. Further on, I know nothing.’

‘Where’s Selena now?’

‘We never met at her place, but every time at a different location. An empty shed or so.’

‘Diedie? Can’t you put a Truth Spell on him?’ I ask.

‘Leave it.’ Jabar leans down to cut loose the ropes. ‘I can see very well he knows nothing more and that he’s speaking the truth.’

Well, if you’re living one hundred and fifty years already, you become a good judge of human nature.

Soon after the burglar crawls back through the window and runs away like a rocket.

‘It doesn’t have any use to follow him, Manon,’ Jabar says when he sees I’m getting ready to climb through the window. ‘He’ll probably won’t search for his partner. Just leave it.’ I keep watching him run off.

‘What kind of book was it, Jabar?’ I eventually say.

10.

Jabar has put a wooden plank in front of the window. Of course none of us can get some sleep, so we take a seat in the living room. Diedie fills a glass of cognac for each of us.

‘Will you now take a burglar alarm for the house?’ I go ahead, nipping from my glass.

‘No,’ Jabar says in a neutral tone.

‘No?’ I cry out. ‘Come on, Jabar. You’ve seen what could happen.’

‘Do you really think some electronic wires can hold burglars?’

‘It makes it more fucking difficult for them, yes!’

‘I can put a magical burglar alarm around the house,’ Diedie suggests in a soothing voice.

‘I don’t know,’ Jabar says.

‘Why haven’t we ever done that before?’ I raise my hands outraged.

‘Because it’s perceptible,’ Diedie answers. ‘Even humans sense something isn’t right if they pass a magic shield. And because we didn’t need it before.’

‘Besides, Diedie has to think about it to restore it regularly.’

‘So what?’ I take a big gulp from the cognac.

‘It would be useful right now.’ Diedie patiently looks at Jabar.

‘Yes, okay, until this entire affair is over. If it goes by.’ Jabar heaves a deep sigh and fills a second glass of cognac. ‘If those two people leak out the existence of otherkinds...’

‘Than most of the people won’t even believe it,’ I interrupt.

‘They would start to investigate things. Some would believe it.’

‘But you said it yourself that Selena will probably behead them.’

Diedie sets up a soft cry and puts her hand over her mouth. ‘You really think so, Jabar?’

He shrugs his shoulders. ‘Seems logical to me. Vampires aren’t known to be peaceful and trifle with death more easily.’

‘Than we should have helped that poor man!’ Diedie pushes out enraged.

‘It’s his own fault,’ I sulk.

‘Manon!’ Diedie looks at me in shock.

‘What? It is so, isn’t it?’

It becomes a discussion without ending, so I change the subject. ‘Say, what kind of book was it, Jabar?’

He guzzles down the second glass of cognac and refills it with shaking hands. I have never seen Jabar drink so much in a short time. And I have never seen him looking so frantically.

His self-control seems to hovering on the verge of disaster and I don't want to see a steady rock like him tumbling down.

That book needs to be very valuable or special.

'That book,' Jabar begins.

I can tell by Diedie's curious look she knows as little as I do and that's, at the least, strange. They've known each other for almost fifty years and they share, as far as I know, everything with each other, except the bed.

'It's about one hundred years old now,' Jabar continues. 'I began to write it...'

'You wrote it?' I interrupt.

'Yes, Manon, a little more patience.'

'Sorry.' I grin sheepishly and burry my face in the glass.

'I began to write it because I wanted to have an overview of the different kinds. A reference work. The book is called *'Lexicon of Species'*.'

'The book is about otherkinds?' I start to feel some tiredness and lean back in the pillows on the couch.

'Yes. Looking back it's stupid maybe, but I found it useful back then. I decided to investigate the kinds in a detailed way; the behavior, the gifts, the weaknesses, everything. A reference work thus that I wanted to use for my own purpose only.'

'Why?' It's Diedie who asks it. 'Isn't it enough when it's in your head?'

'Mainly for myself, because the memory isn't always reliable. Beside that, for Manon. If something would happen to me, she would have that book in which the different kinds are listed and described in great detail. Also the humans.'

'It was a heavy book,' I say foolishly.

'The cover is made of thick leather and it's locked with a metal lock, which can be easily forced. It's entirely handwritten by myself.'

'What does Selena want from it? Or the so-called great client, if he exists,' Diedie wonders.

'It doesn't predict much good. I think she wants to blackmail me.'

'For money?' I ask.

'I can't think of something else, yes,' Jabar answers.

Jabar is very rich, no doubt about that. He owns a heritage that's passed on in the family for centuries and can never be spent entirely. Even if he would lead an exorbitant life, which he doesn't, still several families could live on it forever.

'Well, what is it that makes the world go round,' I say resigned.

'I'm going to take a walk around the house,' Diedie says and stands up.

She's going to construct a magic alarm system of course.

'Shall I walk with you?' Jabar proposes.

'No, I can't imagine they would burgle twice on the same night. Besides, they've got what they came for.'

Jabar nods. Diedie opens a window towards the garden and walks outside.

'Do you have enemies? From the past, or so?' I ask.

Jabar thinks about it for a while and then shakes his head. 'I wouldn't know who. My family led, just like me, a life in the shadows. We never explicitly stepped in the limelight and we've never done anything to insult someone. The properties are obtained legally and were paid plentifully every time.'

'Just what I thought. Sorry for asking.'

'You did great, Manon,' he says.

'Thanks. But maybe I shouldn't have transformed.'

'It helped and I didn't stop you. Only one remark.'

I sigh. He's a strict teacher.

'The next time I wouldn't transform into something that consists of so many different parts. That's too vulnerable.'

'Why?'

'I've once heard about a transformer that changed in thousands of bees. The bees stayed close together, but this way he could spy on a bigger area. The problem was that a few hundred bees got crushed. I don't exactly know why, but that isn't the point. When he transformed back into his human shape, his leg was shattered in a way it couldn't be repaired anymore. The more parts you use to turn into, the more vulnerable you are.'

'I understand.'

Still it hurts. I know he's only warning me, but it happens to be that I'm sensitive to criticism, no matter in which form. It wasn't that smart after all to change myself into Arthropoda.

'How can Selena or the big boss know anything about the book?' I suddenly think of it. 'Who still knows about the book?'

'Only my sister and I and she knew better than to talk about it to anyone. I suspect Selena kept an eye on us for a while already. Maybe she saw me taking the book out of the safe and writing in it. Because it's in a safe, she probably thought it was important.'

'She'll be shouting with joy right now.'

‘Yes.’

We take a nip from our cognac. I see Diedie, with one arm raised in the air, walking past the big round windows at the front of the house. Even in the pitch-black night her purple eyes are clearly visible.

We should learn how to protect our privacy more. Because there’s a giant garden surrounding the house and above that live in a quiet neighborhood with only mastodons of houses, we never close the curtains. No surprise Selena or whoever it was can keep an eye on us easily.

‘So that’s why you didn’t want to call the police,’ I say.

‘They would want to know what kind of book it was and if they got behind it and would find it...’

Diedie comes inside through the backdoor and takes a seat. Her eyes have an average grey-blue color again. ‘It must at least hold until the day after tomorrow.’

I stand up and close all the curtains in the living room. ‘Let’s do that every evening from now on, don’t we?’

Jabar stands up with slow gestures. The tiredness hangs as an aura around him. ‘I’m going to take a look on the attic if there are still some new messages. Maybe from Ben.’

Diedie and I decide that it has been enough and go to bed.



11.

We all woke up late this morning and after a hearty breakfast consisting of croissants, white beans in tomato sauce and baked sausages, the three of us go upstairs to the attic to check the online newspaper reports. We take the strong coffee with us for support. Because of Diedie's mojo to protect our minds I feel exhausted again, despite the hours of sleep I've had.

Last night Jabar already heard from Ben the devil brought the money back indeed. The newspaper article reported that the store owners were surprised, but nonetheless relieved, when they noticed their tills were refilled. So they assumed someone took away the stuff with the intention to pay for them later on.

It promises to be a fine day and we immediately feel it when we reach the attic. The attic floor feels like a sauna, just as hot and dry. I open the little attic windows and beg Jabar to purchase an air conditioning.

'I can't train this way,' I put on top of it. 'I'm sweating already!'

'I'll order one today, okay?'

I puff the answer and take a seat in front of one of the computers next to him and Diedie. Jabar goes through the different news sites until I shout: 'Wait, over there! Go down.'

The article's heading reads: *Double suicide in Antwerp*.

Jabar studiously looks at me.

'Far-fetched, I know, but that guy had an Antwerp accent,' I say and start to read.

This morning two men were standing, probably around four a.m., on the roof of their apartment and jumped off. The police found a note beneath a stone in two different handwritings that resembled those of the jumpers. The letter told they weren't able to see their way out, had too much financial and personal problems and saw death as their only solution. The jumpers were identified as the brothers Edward and Joseph Moon.

'Bingo!' I clasp my hands.

'But suicide?' Diedie says shocked.

'Would Selena have pushed them?' I put forward.

'What about the note?' Jabar says.

'She could have forced them to write it. Under hypnosis.'

'No.' Diedie shakes her head. 'Vampires can only use their hypnosis techniques to seduce, to make their victims defenseless against a bite. Not to make them write a letter and certainly not to make them jump off a high apartment.'

‘Highly strange,’ Jabar concludes.

‘Wait a second. Maybe she works together with a devil.’ I look expectantly at them. ‘A devil can easily have forced them through manipulation to write that letter and to let them jump, can’t he?’

‘That’s a possibility. He could even have assigned them to do so beforehand and he didn’t need to be on the spot.’ Jabar approvingly nods and I can feel myself swelling with pride.

‘So that means she doesn’t work alone,’ Diedie thinks.

‘We already knew that. It could even be that her client is that devil, the one who’s behind all of this,’ I say and take a sip from my coffee. ‘It would explain a lot.’

‘But then we still don’t know why and what she’s planning to do with the book. And why that Selena looked up Manon in New York,’ Diedie says.

‘It’s as if the cat is playing with the mouse,’ I say, pondering about it. ‘And in that case I’d rather not be the mouse.’

‘Is the mouse ready for training?’

‘Definitely. I urgently need to let off steam.’ I empty my cup of coffee.

‘Meditation first.’

I pull a face. ‘Ugh no, please no.’

‘You know the zazen-meditation is an essential part of martial arts, Manon. You need to...’

I complete his sentence: ‘Clear your mind of unimportant thoughts to become one with the world and to react instinctive instead of using your rational side.’

Jabar nods, satisfied. ‘You know the theory, now practice.’

I stand up sighing and walk towards the room on the attic we equipped for meditation space.

There’s a deep-pile, cream-colored carpet on the floor with some meditation pillows on it. Further on stands a Buddha statue that also serves as incense holder and a closet in which my jiu-jitsu dress hangs up. I get dressed and tie the black belt tidy according to the strict rules around my white suit, which means with a reef knot. Afterwards I put my hair in a tail and light an incense stick, my favorite brand: Nag Champa.

Jabar comes in and takes a seat. He doesn’t wear a jiu-jitsu, but white, linen trousers and a loose, white blouse. I take a seat in front of him on a meditation pillow, with my feet underneath the pillow and my hands folded in my lap.

‘Focus on your breathing today,’ Jabar says with his eyes closed.

I know the story, but I wait patiently.

‘Control of the breathing is very important in martial arts. Breathe from your belly, expand

your belly as much as you can when breathing out. The more you practice on that, the sooner you lower your body's center of gravity, which makes you stand more stable during a fight.'

'Yes, Obiwan.'

'Manon.'

I grin, although he doesn't see it. 'Sorry, I'll try to do my best.'

I find meditation an annoying part of my fight training. I don't have the patience for it, but I do realize it makes a positive contribution to your strength. It's just that I don't like to admit Jabar is right.

I close my eyes. Uninvited thoughts trickle in. One by one I put them aside and focus on my breathing. I once managed to breathe in and out only once in one minute. This is absolutely not as easy as it sounds and it brings you in an inner state of peace. After that I defeated Jabar for the first time during training.

For some time I can still smell the incense's sweet scent until it totally disappears from my consciousness. The noises outside become faint, the world around me stops existing. Only the now and my slow breathing matter. My mind is as empty as a hollowed out eggshell and I lose my awareness of time.

'What is the sound of the universe?'

I open my eyes and answer intuitively: 'Black.'

'Beautiful answer on the koan, Manon, you're ready.'

'For how long have we meditated?'

'A good hour.'

'Wow.' I have the feeling only ten minutes have passed.

We walk via the computer room through a glazed door to the dojo, where I perform the standing bow. Calm and self-controlled, exactly how it should be.

'What will we be practicing today?' I ask.

'The ability to react,' Jabar answers. 'The kime no kata, only the standing positions.'

'Okay.'

'Rei!' Jabar says in a firm tone.

We greet each other.

The next hour we train intensively.

I don't sweat easily, but the oppressing atmosphere and the continuous training, quickly make the beads trickle down my face. Jabar is a strict, but extremely good teacher that has been trained in Japan when he lived there, even before I came into his life.

Otherkinds namely move every so many years. Some, like the devils, angels, elves and vampires live at least for three hundred years. Because the government keeps all the details of each and every individual, every so many time the otherkinds get their documents forged or adopt the identity of a dead man. Often in a different country. After so many millenniums of moving it runs in our blood, as with the gypsies. And although witches and transformers only live a few years longer than the average human being, it's also deeply rooted in us.

Jabar pays attention to the smallest wrong movement and keeps going on about the fact I have to use the strength from my belly and breathing out.

An hour without worries, without brooding and earthly worries.

Afterwards, when I'm standing under the hot shower, I feel extremely good and strong. The tiredness has completely disappeared. Let's bring that bitch of a Selena on.

Before I leave for work, I try to read a little. Normally, John Vermeulen's books can make me forget the world around me for hours, but not today. Being at a complete loss I go and clean my bedroom. After slaving away for one hour the room has never been so clean and fresh before.

Right on time I arrive at work in the afternoon. There are some customers already; some regular and a few German tourists.

Oded is wearing a flashy shirt again I've never seen before; red parrots and green palm trees.

Squeaky's little nose sticks out of his breast pocket, sniffing for some sweets.

Oded has already got the Commodities Act-inspectors down on his neck several times for keeping a rat in the pub, although it's in his breast pocket. But, as with most of those things, he doesn't bother.

I give the rat a peanut and Oded a kiss. After that I go and clean the glasses in such a way it seems as if I want to grind them to sand.

Oded looks at me from the corners of his eyes. 'Everything alright?'

I mumble an answer. The euphoric feeling I had after the fight training has unfortunately disappeared.

'What?'

I absent-mindedly look up at him. 'No, nothing. Got out of bed on the wrong side, that's all.'

Although he and Jabar are close friends for many years I don't know how much I can tell about the book. Oded looks at me with an expression that tells me he doesn't believe a word I've just said, but he doesn't go on about it.

He does smilingly put a hand on my arm and says: 'That glass is clean now, I would think.'

'Erm yes, sorry.'

'You'd rather go home? Tuesday normally is a quiet day, I can handle it on my own.'

'No, I need to take my mind off things.'

'Alright then.'

'But thanks.'

He winks and goes serving a customer.

I can't help it, but I can't look at the customers as plain customers anymore. I notice I'm observing them closely and try to catch conversations. When a man stares at me, I don't think he wants to seduce me or have a drink, but that he's a partner of Selena.

Fuck it, that bitch really confused me. If I ever see her again... My imagination plays a trick on me and treats me to a performance of the most horrible violence.

There aren't any special incidents during the rest of the afternoon and I can't catch someone on suspicious behavior. It's as the calm before a storm and I can feel the bursting out of it won't take too long anymore.

Around nine p.m. a familiar face walks into the pub. Yesterday's handsome guy!

I take a quick look in the mirror behind the bar. Not really a good hair day, but it falls more elegantly than usual on my shoulders. For the first time I curse my crooked nose and average face.

When he walks towards the bar, my heart makes a little jump of joy. I almost drop the glass I'm holding in my hands.

Of course Oded also sees my face is all smiles and follows my look. The man takes a seat on a bar stool.

Oded grinningly says: 'Well, that one is coming for more.'

'For more whisky, he is. Don't take something into your head.'

A gentle smile curls about the man's lips. Did he hear us? I hope he didn't. Neither a human nor an otherkind could ever have heard us from that distance. Unless... could he be a vamp after all? I can feel my cheeks turning red immediately and turn around quickly.

'Erm Oded, will you serve him?'

'Why?' His eyes twinkle mischievous.

'I think he has heard us.'

'Vampire?'

I shrug my shoulders. 'Don't know.'

‘You want me to read his mind?’

‘No, no, he would feel it immediately and then your eyes turn black.’

Oded walks towards the man and asks what he wants to drink. The answer comes out so softly I don’t understand. All of a sudden Oded beckons me. I reluctantly go towards him.

‘He only wants whisky you recommend.’

‘Oh well.’ I continue stuttering: ‘I mean, he knows more about it, you know.’ I point at Oded.

‘You’ve helped me that well yesterday I don’t want to tempt my luck,’ he says in a gentle tone.

My goodness, his voice sounds like warmed up honey, poured out on a velvet blanket. Something like that.

‘I’ll have a look.’ Relieved I turn around, facing the bottles.

It takes me longer than usual before I make my choice, in the meantime hoping my heart will slow down and I don’t come around like a bitch in heat anymore.

‘A Glenlivet this time.’ I put the glass in front of him.

‘What’s your name?’ He takes me by surprise with his question I initially stare at him as if he just asked me to marry him.

‘Your name?’ The left corner of his mouth curls up. ‘Not your PIN code.’

‘Oh, erm, Manon. Maxim.’ And there goes my heartbeat again!

He reaches his hand towards me over the bar. ‘Beautiful name. I’m Lucas Lee.’

Sigh. Could he have an even more beautiful name? Didn’t think so.

I’m so relieved when another customer beckons me, I almost trip over my own feet, but can just hold myself on the washbasin. I don’t dare to look at him, but I stake my beloved Citroën on it he has to repress his laughter right now. *Stupid, stupid bungler you are*, I heap abuse on myself.

During the rest of the evening I avoid as much as possible immediate contact with Lucas. I’ve never felt this way before by the agency of a man. Most of the time I can get a hold of myself, seen from the outside, but with him my biological system doesn’t seem to obey me anymore. I blush, am clumsy and get clammy hands.

I feel he’s keeping an eye on me. At the moments he doesn’t notice and I spy on him, he looks worried and absorbed in thought.

‘Manon, you’re admirer is calling you,’ Oded grins.

‘Yeah yeah.’

I walk as indifferent as I can towards him and studiously look at him.

'Can I get the same again?'

'Why didn't you ask Oded to do so?'

'He's nowhere near as beautiful as you are and I don't fancy men.'

'Well, me neither,' I blurt. What was I thinking? Of course I fancy men! I'm not averse to women either, but I don't prefer them the most.

He grins and raises his eyebrows.

'No, erm, that's not what I meant. I mean I'm not really looking for a guy.'

*Wrong again, Manon, you'd better shut up.*

'Oh?' He looks me deep in the eyes. 'Who says I'm looking for someone?'

'I didn't say that.'

Before I can make a fool of myself even more I grab the bottle of whisky and fill his glass.

Too much of course.

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome. I need to...'

I desperately look around looking for a waiting customer, but they have all been served.

'You definitely need to go out with me,' he adds.

Damn it, he certainly doesn't beat about the bush.

'I don't need to do anything, except eating from time to time and enjoy an uninterrupted night.'

It sounds tough, but my knees are shaking. If they would have been built of metal, I could have played the xylophone with them.

'Can I tell you something personal, please?' He leans over the bar to me.

'It depends.'

I want to hold still, but I can feel my feet moving closer to him.

'I don't want the entire pub to hear it.'

He beckons me with his forefinger.

Nah well, what could go wrong in a pub, right? I slowly move closer to him.

'What?'

'A bit closer.'

'Okay.'

Did I just say 'okay'? And do I lean completely to him now, so our faces almost touch?

He looks at me so intensely the entire environment disappears and I can only see his eyes, without body, as if they're hanging in the air. They turn into a deep red color, but I don't

realize it. Not really. I smell his breathing; a mixture of mint and whisky. His body odor a sultry mix of clove and peeled oranges. It seems as if I'm out of my body, every sound is put out and I can only just hear his voice as soft as silk.

'From the first time I saw you I wanted you so bad.'

I can hear myself say: 'Than take me with you now. Please.'

His lips touch mine briefly.

'Manon.'

I can hear it, but I can't react to it.

'Manon!'

It's a different voice. Unimportant.

'Just look at me, Manon.' Lucas's voice. Deliciously warm.

'Manon!!!'

I seem to wake from a wild daydream and look around astonished. What has happened? Lucas sits on his bar stool and takes a sip from his glass. He doesn't seem to notice me, but is just looking around.

*'For fuck's sake! Manon!'*

It's Oded calling out to me with vehement gestures. I walk towards him. Dizzy.

'What?'

'Didn't you notice?'

'Notice what?' I seems as if I've had a fucking snooze.

'He's definitely a bloodsucker now. He was fucking hypnotizing you!'

'No, he didn't.'

I look back, but Lucas has left the pub.

'Yes, he did and you were already far gone. You only didn't drool yet. It's a miracle you even responded to my voice. Didn't you see his goddamn eyes?'

'Fuck!' I cry out much too loud through which some customers startle. 'If I see him again, I'll kick his balls.'

'Make sure you're wearing shoes,' Oded advises me. 'With metal tips.'



12.

That night I have feverish dreams. Images that come to me in between waking and sleeping. The penetrating red gaze of Lucas won't let me go. His voice repeats my name, not in an inviting way, but more authoritatively, commanding. Then I see Selena again ridiculing me and looking sneeringly at me.

When I wake up in the morning, way too early in my view, I'm soaking wet in sweat and my mind feels as if a bulldozer steamrollered it. I keep lying down for a while, staring at the ceiling, but under no circumstances planning to fall asleep again.

Eventually I get up and take a cold shower. I put on a jeans and a purple blouse, put on a bit of mascara, pin up my hair and feel myself coming alive a little. In order to calm down my heaviest emotions I clean my pistol without thinking. I strip it down entirely and clean every little piece and detail before putting them together again. It almost helps as much as meditating.

When I go to the kitchen, I don't meet anyone. A look at my watch explains everything. Diedie is watching one of her soaps and I suspect Jabar is combing all the newspaper reports upstairs or working in his herb garden. I make a pot of coffee and butter a sandwich while I'm waiting for the coffee to perk.

On the one hand I hope Lucas doesn't appear in the pub again tomorrow evening. After that wild dream from last night I feel a bit fear and disgust for him. On the other hand I want to give him hell for his manipulating behavior. And a tiny part of me longs for him. A part I'd rather ignore and keep off.

I eat the sandwich standing up and walk into the garden with my cup of coffee. When I look up I can see a light blue sky with ominously dark clouds here and there. It can still go both ways today; stay dry or rain. It's colder than yesterday and I pity the fact I didn't put a warm sweater or coat on.

I find Jabar in the garden shed where he's putting seeds in flowerpots. Up to the ceiling are plastic pots and cups on shelves and in glazed cabinets. It smells of potting compost and fertilizer in there. Jabar repots the little plants with love several times, so they can optimally grow. I find it gorgeous to follow the growth of the seeds starting from their littlest germination. Jabar's hands are covered with earth, up to his cuticles.

'Hi,' I greet.

'Good morning Manon.' He looks at me from the corners of his eyes. 'Will you join me to the

auction this afternoon?’

‘Sure.’

Jabar takes a watering can and fills it with water. ‘Oded is coming too, since the bar is closed today.’

‘Cool.’

‘I hung a ventilator from every ceiling in the attic. It will bring at least a little bit of refreshment.’

‘Sweet, thanks!’

‘Here.’ Jabar hands over the watering can to me. ‘A little bit on each plant in that greenhouse over there.’

I put my cup of coffee on the table in the middle, in between all the mess. ‘Do you trust me?’

He raises his eyebrows interrogatively.

‘I mean with your plants, your children,’ I chuckle.

‘Yes, of course.’

He continues with the seeds and I open the greenhouse. The heat from the hothouse rises and I can smell that wonderful fresh scent of growing greenery. I carefully water each plant with a few drops.

‘And if I fuck up you’ll just do your mojo, right?’ I say.

‘Where did you pick up that word?’

‘I just think it sounds neat.’

‘Hm, at moments like this I feel old.’

‘Because of the word?’

Jabar's grins a crooked grin. ‘Because of the fact that everything changes, even words and expressions.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ I give him a soft slap. ‘You’re still young at heart.’

He makes a grumbling sound.

‘Is Diedie coming to the auction too?’ I ask.

‘No. She wants to give the first floor a decent cleanup.’

‘Do you have set your sights on something there?’

Jabar is going to wash his hands. ‘Two paintings from the Italian school. Oil paint on metal.’

Jabar almost weakly goes to the auctioneering firm. Collecting art is a great passion for him. But unlike most of the stinking rich art collectors, he won’t let himself get led by the value, but by the beauty and emotions a certain item sets free.

'I'm curious,' I say and I mean it.

It wasn't for nothing I'd studied Plastic Arts at St. Lucas in Ghent the last three years of my high school education. Not that I'm an art expert now, not at all, but I know something about it. After my high school education I actually have thought about refining my art knowledge through a higher study, but I didn't go through with it. Jabar was growing older and seriously wanted to begin with my training. He started late with my fight training, when I was about fifteen years old, because he wanted to give me a carefree childhood. After my graduating and a few months of holiday I began to work halftime in Oded's pub and Jabar's training got more intensive.

Jabar dries his hands and continues: 'Especially that one painting is wonderful. It's called 'Man with harp and young girl'. It reminds me a little bit of us.'

'Now you're really making me curious,' I grin.

'The scene is really charming. Like a father giving good advice to his daughter.'

On the spur of the moment I run to him and kiss him on the cheek. 'You are my father.'

Jabar smiles and continues a bit unaccustomed with his activities.

Although I never call him daddy or father, he really is to me. I was only a few months old when he found me in front of his door. He still lived in London back then, but he was on the verge of relocating to his house in Belgium. He didn't need to think about it for a moment to take me in and to adopt me and he raised me as his own daughter. Together with Diedie for that matter, who I consider to be my mother.

'I'm done!' I put the watering can back in its usual place. 'Then I'll go and ask Diedie whether she needs my help until we're off to the auction.' I take the cup with me and walk inside.

The air has become darker all of a sudden, which makes me extremely longing for sun and the summer. Since I feel like a fridge after transforming the summer temperature is far more pleasant than the winter for me. Therefore I give preference to orders in hot, exotic places.

Jabar promised me that, when it's time to move again, I can pick a residency myself, anywhere I want. Since then I've been regularly browsing around the internet looking for far away sunny locations and their habits, culture, temperature and so on. At this moment I doubt between Southern France and the Bahamas. But this can also be packed in again next week.

Diedie can be found in the kitchen, where she's peeling potatoes.

She looks up at me, radiant with joy: 'Brooke and Ridge are an item again.'

'Eh?'

‘Brooke and Ridge,’ she repeats. ‘You know.’

‘Oh, of course, from your soap series.’

She holds a potato as if it’s a handsome guy and has a faraway look. ‘Hm, they fit perfectly together.’

‘Diedie, they’re actors!’

‘Even I know that,’ she answers indignant.

‘Can I help you with something?’

She glances backward. ‘If you don’t mind, you may clean the sprouts over there.’

I take the bag with sprouts and a paring knife out of the drawer, get a seat next to Diedie at the table and start to remove the outer leaves.

‘Sharon called,’ Diedie says.

‘Sharon! How nice. When?’

‘Just a minute ago. I thought you were still asleep, sorry.’

‘I’ll call her back later on.’

Because of my otherkindness I deliberately kept people at a distance during my school-going years and never had that much friends. Sharon is an exception to that rule and she’s still my best friend. Unfortunately, because her parents already lived too long in Belgium, she moved to Canada. We didn’t see each other much in the last few years, but we call and e-mail each other regularly.

It was by accident that I discovered she was an angel. Gifts only find expression during puberty, so we already were in the same grade for a few years before I knew.

We still have to laugh when we think back to that day at school. We were both fourteen years old then. I was sitting on the toilet with the lid closed, my feet held up high and left the door ajar when Sharon walked into the room. I wanted to be alone because I was really fed up. I had just heard that I scored a D for history instead of the expected B. Since the toilets were desolated at that period and I wanted to sulk without being seen, I was sitting over there. Sharon was convinced she was alone in the room, because all the doors were open, when she took the toilet next to mine. Apparently she ran out of toilet paper and she decided to get my roll to her with her telekinetic powers. I was able to see the joke of scaring the living daylight out of her and stopped the roll. With my other hand over my mouth I tried hard not to laugh. She swore like a ruddy docker. Naturally she had heard me chuckling and she told me later on that she had nervously hold her breath and barely dared to move. Her parents

would have been furious if a human being had discovered her gift, so she could just see the punishment.

Very carefully I saw her head appear under the partition wall. I can still see that desperate look in her eyes, not sure how to react. And afterwards the relief when she heard I was an otherkind too. Since then we share all life's joys and sorrows with each other and we cried a lot at our goodbye. I miss her so fucking hard.

Diedie brings me back to the now. 'I think she's in love.'

'Sharon is in love every day. Every day with someone else.'

Diedie chuckles. 'That girl got through boyfriends faster than I through panties.'

'Ah well, she's right to do so,' I say. 'I wish I could live so openly. Every day is a party to her.'

'You're not an angel, Manon. Angels fall in love very easily and at the same time dump someone as easily. You're not like that.'

I shrug. 'A vamp tried to seduce me yesterday.'

'A vamp? Be careful with those. They're not always to be trusted.'

She means well, but sometimes I just can't stand the patronizing. 'I know that myself,' I say way too harsh.

I can see her literally writhe.

'I'm sorry, Diedie, you're right.'

'And I have to accept you're a big girl now.'

We smile at each other sheepishly and go on with our vegetables in silence.

'You know,' I say a bit later. 'That jerk even tried to hypnotize me.'

Diedie heaves a deep sigh. 'You would think that they don't get a partner in any other way. What has come over them?'

Jabar enters the kitchen. 'I'm going to take a shower. The auction starts in an hour.'

'Okay,' I answer. 'You really don't want to join us, Diedie?'

'No, honey, a big house like this requires a great deal of maintenance.'

'Jabar would understand and the dust won't go anywhere.'

Diedie puts a hand on my arm. 'You two just go. I'll have fun in here with the cobwebs and the clouds of dust.'

'Okay.' I stand up to throw the waste of the sprouts in the appropriate litterbin.

If I would be in her shoes I would use magic to clean the house. Luckily, I'm not a witch.

With the power of magic I would certainly abuse my gift more often, I suspect. But who knows what she does when we're not around. But then again, I can't really imagine it. Diedie is very strict with regard to use and abuse of gifts.

'Is there anything I can still help you with?'

'No, sweetie. Thanks for the sprouts.'

'De nada. I'm still gonna read for a while than.'

'Alright, girl.'

13.

At one-thirty Jabar and I leave to the auctioneering firm in his Porsche. Every time I sit in this luxury car I strongly doubt about giving in to Jabar's offer to buy me a new car. The leather seats sit wonderful and we glide over the street like skaters over ice. I can feel the powerful engine throb under my bottom and it gives a mighty feeling.

Jabar never talks much while driving. He especially wants to focus on the car and the road, so I put a CD in the player. Massive Attack. Sharon has once put forward that she suspects them to be otherkinds. It wouldn't surprise me.

Jabar pulls a disapproving grin, but doesn't say anything.

We drive in Ostend. A drizzly rain falls down on the windshield. Shit, I didn't bring an umbrella with me and with my hair, which curls up easily when it's wet outside, it's really a requisite.

'Can't you just change the weather?' I ask. 'Blow away the clouds or something?'

'No,' Jabar reacts utmost seriously. 'You know elves don't just do that. Only when it's highly necessary. It would cause a great uproar if every elf would create his or her own weather when it doesn't please him or her.'

'Than why do you have a gift,' I pout.

'We're being followed,' Jabar says in a gentle tone.

'What?' I turn around and watch through the back window. Behind us is a grey Audi with dark windows.

Jabar turns left at the following traffic lights. The Audi too.

'Are you sure?'

'No.'

We drive through a traffic circle with the Audi still following in our tracks.

'I can't see who's in it,' I say.

A few minutes later we arrive at Auctioneering Firm White. The Audi slows down and drives strikingly slow past us. Jabar parks the car.

'Maybe it was a coincidence,' Jabar suggests.

'With everything going on recently, I don't dare to claim that,' I say.

We both get out of the car and I hurry towards the entrance to avoid the rain. Oded, in a stylish, dark blue Hawaiian shirt with white flowers, is grinningly awaiting us in the doorway. Squeaky, the rat, is sitting on his shoulder instead of in his breast pocket.

'I don't know if he can enter.' I point at Squeaky and give Oded a kiss.

'It only says that dogs aren't allowed.' He winks. 'But well, damn. Squeaky, pocket,' he commands and the rat immediately dashes in the breast pocket. 'Stay still,' he then says and the little head disappears completely so there's only a motionless bulge to be seen, which for that matter could also be a hanky. I wonder if Oded uses thought manipulation to do this, so I ask him.

'No, I don't have an influence on animals. That's reserved for the elves. By the way, rats are very clever animals of themselves, just little doggies.'

'What are just little doggies?' Jabar hugs Oded. Of course in a male manner accompanied by a pat on the back.

'Rats.'

'As far as their intelligence goes, yes, but their train of thought is completely different.'

'Thank you for your wise advice, oh rat whisperer,' Oded jokes.

We go inside. Through a hall we directly enter the medium-sized room in which a small podium is located at the front. On the podium stand a table, on which an art object is already displayed, and a platform for the auctioneer. In front of the podium are about a hundred chairs. Several posters of earlier auction days and other publicity are displayed on the walls.

It's quite busy in there already and we immediately take a seat in the last row. In no time almost every chair is occupied and the auctioneer appears. The buzzing drops dead.

Statues, jewels, silver ware, furniture, glassware and china are auctioned one by one. I don't really listen to the descriptions, nor to the amount of money for which the items are sold. I particularly like to look at the beautiful items and I make up my own story about them. A candlestick that was used to commit a murder, a statue that stood in a haunted mansion and still spreads death and destructions among its new owners, a ring that stands for an engagement of which the fiancé melted into thin air above the Bermuda triangle, and so on. My imagination knows no limits.

At a sudden moment, quite late, a young, blond lady enters. She looks around uncertain for a while and takes a seat on the only remaining empty chair. She frenetically claps her purse on her lap.

I know Jabar is patiently waiting for the two painting he's interested in, but meanwhile also following all the offered objects accurately in case there's something beautiful among them.

Oded is particularly joining us because he finds it pleasant to be with us, he says himself. Art does fascinate him, but not to buy it. He especially collects items from the Second World



War, of which he has a priceless, elaborated collection at home.

Next are the two painting of the Italian masters Jabar has set his heart on. I have to admit they are impressive.

‘Girl at the well’ is a fascinating reproduction of a girl combing her hair and gazing dreamily. It’s very sensitively and realistically represented and bordered by a beautiful worked frame.

‘Man with harp and young girl’ is even more beautiful. An old man with grey hair and a long beard plays a harp that rests on his lap and looks at the girl that sits next to him. Their mutual look contains so much love and respect it’s almost perceptible. This oil painting also has a curly golden worked frame.

They start with ‘Girl at the well’ and I find the start bid ridiculously low: five hundred and fifty Euros. I may recognize the great masters or the period in which they painted, but I don’t know the first thing about the value of suchlike works of art. It again shows that Jabar doesn’t give a damn about whether the paintings are a good investment or not.

Jabar lays claim on the bid.

The lady with blond hair that entered lately goes above it with one hundred Euros and hastily looks at Jabar, probing her concurrence. Just wait, I think. She doesn’t know yet that when Jabar has set his sights on something he won’t give up that easily. After all he has got plenty of money and can go on for a while.

Jabar bids one hundred Euros above, which brings the painting to seven hundred and fifty Euros. Of course the blond lady doesn’t give up and goes above with again one hundred Euros. And also know she glances backward, probably searching for Jabar’s reaction.

I can see she’s holding a cell phone in her right hand that she’s continuously pressing against her ear.

I poke Jabar and whisper: ‘She isn’t the actual bidder. That one’s stuck on the telephone.’

Jabar leans forward and now sees the lady is stuck on the telephone.

He nods. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

The bidding continues and they quickly reach fifteen hundred Euros. Oded, who’s sitting on Jabar’s other side, whispers: ‘This isn’t normal. The painting isn’t worth that much.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ Jabar only answers and raises his hand in the air again.

Oded gives a sign he wants to talk to me. I turn around and lean behind Jabar’s back.

‘To Jabar it’s valuable because he thinks it’s beautiful. I can’t imagine someone else thinks in the same way.’

‘I agree with you and...’ I cut off my words. I almost said: *and certainly because of the past*

*events I don't trust it.*

'I know what you're thinking, Manon,' Jabar says in a gentle tone. 'But it seems too far-fetched to me.'

'And what, Manon?' Oded looks at us one by one. 'And what, Jabar? Is something else going on?'

I shrug.

'Later,' Jabar says.

The bidding goes on. The painting that probably is about one thousand Euros worth at the most, is now brought to the amount of two thousand Euros. Jabar starts to look angrily, but, knowing him, he won't give up.

I notice the lady is getting nervous too. She doesn't look so confident anymore and the conversation with her telephone partner is a lot more heated than before.

'Wouldn't you better quit,' Oded suggests. 'Apparently the other bidder is a fucking great fan.'

The audience becomes restless. There's whispering and pointing. They look at the event as if they're watching a tennis game.

'No,' Jabar answers. 'Not yet.'

The tension in the room is seriously perceptible, it hangs shakily above our heads. Of course everyone wonders what's so special about that painting.

When the lady's bid comes to three thousand Euros, Jabar passes up his chance. I breathe relieved, this was getting too serious. Also the lady lowers her stressed shoulders and her facial expressions immediately soften. I think Jabar has finally given up because he's more interested in the following painting 'Man with harp and young girl.'

Here too the opening bid starts with five hundred and fifty Euros. And damned, as if it isn't true. That blond lady joins in again!

Jabar's hands become clenched fists. I've never seen him this way before.

'I think they're playing a game with us,' I whisper to Jabar.

He rapidly looks at me. 'Maybe.'

'Ah, come on, really. She bids on nothing but the two painting you're interested in.'

The bidding again takes an enormous speed and height. In no time the amount reaches four thousand Euros, five thousand Euros, eight thousand Euros.

I can see Oded is blinking surprised. He knows his friend thinks money is unimportant, but he has never seen him give so many for something that clearly isn't worth that much.

The lady makes an offer that skips a bunch of steps and the entire room to become silent.

‘Twenty thousand Euros!’

‘Twenty five!’ Jabar yells.

For a while the room is as quiet as a mouse. The audience waits with close attention, almost nobody dares to even sigh.

The lady listens to the telephone and then nods. ‘Fifty thousand Euros!’

It seems as if the audience is mutually holding its breath. Even the auctioneer is totally upset.

He looks at the lady as if suddenly she has horns and a tail.

Jabar lets it go, his look a mixture of anger and disappointment.

When we go outside with the rest like a herd of sheep, I can’t help to address the lady.

‘Excuse me,’ I say and lay my hand on her arm.

She turns around. She’s a beautiful woman, but the stress is still to be seen on her face.

‘Yes?’

‘May I know in whose name you did the bidding?’

The lady heaves a deep sigh. ‘He already told me someone from the audience would ask that.’

‘Oh?’ I look at her, sincerely surprised. ‘And? Were you allowed to answer?’

‘Yes. I could tell his name, but it sounds rather odd.’

With my look I urge her to tell it.

‘His name is Lex. I. Con.’

‘Lexicon. Well, what do you know. Thanks.’

I want to turn around, but the lady stops me.

‘Do you know him?’

‘No and yes,’ I answer truthfully.

‘He seems a bit weird to me, doesn’t he?’

‘You’ve never seen him?’

‘Never. I got, through the lawyer’s office I work for as a secretary, the offer to do the bidding. I had to be prepared daily and would be warned when I had to come to this auction. Until an hour ago I didn’t know it. Even the lawyers I work for have never seen the client. Only talked to him.’

‘You don’t, by any chance, know the language he speaks?’

‘Yes. He spoke Dutch, but with an English accent.’

‘Thanks.’ I smile at her gratefully. ‘You know you’ve done well.’

She sighs as if there’s a ton of cement on her shoulders. ‘Yes. Luckily, it’s over. I really hate

this.'

I walk outside, where Jabar and Oded are awaiting me at the Porsche. With a self-satisfied grin I walk towards them.

'I suspect you came to know something,' Jabar says.

'Sure I did.'

'Let's have a drink,' Oded suggests. 'My throat feels as if a fucking lucifer has been hold against it. And then you guys can tell me everything about what the hell is going on. Even Squeaky feels the mysteriousness hanging around you guys.'

'Alright,' Jabar says.

'Will you follow me?' Oded asks. 'I want to make a stop at a store on the way, 'The Four Seasons', it's on our route. I want to buy a packet of those smoking sticks and say 'hi' to that lovely lady.'

14.

Soon after we cozily sit together in 'The Piper's Pub' in Westend, Oded's favorite bar and restaurant. It probably has to do with the great whisky collection they have, although it isn't as great as the one in his pub. It's pleasantly busy and on hearing the different accents it becomes clear a lot of tourists are also present.

Oded orders a whisky for him and water for Squeaky, I order a glass of wine and Jabar a green tea.

'Alright, talk,' Oded urges us. He lights a cigarette. 'Unless it's none of my business, of course.'

I look aside at Jabar.

'If I tell you it might endanger you,' Jabar says.

'I laugh in the face of danger. I've fucking fought... Nah well, you guys know,' he grins and pours a bit of water in a bottle cap he always carries with him. Squeaky laps it up greedily.

'I still have my Brengun at home,' Oded adds while the cigarette smoke comes out of his mouth.

'Alright.' Jabar informs Oded about New York, Selena, the burglary and the book that has been stolen. He tells about our suspicions that we were being followed, but especially the book impresses Oded.

'Not that clever to keep something like that, my old friend.' Oded slowly blows out the smoke.

Jabar pulls a face. 'I already gave myself hell enough.'

'Manon, why don't you first tell about what that peroxide cow had to say,' Oded asks. 'We might get a total image than.'

I tell it. It isn't much, but it confirms my suspicions.

'He really wants to make it so clear we know who he is,' Jabar says. 'Lex. I. Con. He laughs at us outright.'

'He surely wants us to know he got the book stolen from us and above that he's teasing you by buying those painting right before your eyes,' I say.

'I could have made a higher bid,' Jabar says angrily.

'We don't doubt about that, ol' pal,' Oded grins.

Oded takes a big gulp of his whisky and puts his cigarette out in the ashtray. 'But I think that Lex, let's just call him that way, would always have gone higher than you. I don't think he's

poor, Jabar.'

'Yes, I noticed that.'

'What does he want?' I furiously hit the table. 'First setting Selena on me, than robbery, afterwards a little game at that auction. What's his intention?'

'English accent, eh,' Oded says. 'No old enemies from the time you still lived in London?'

'No.' Jabar sighs and nips from his tea. 'Believe me, I've recently beaten my brains out. I have no idea who could be responsible for all of this.'

Squeaky begs for a nut and I give one to him. I get a lick back.

'It doesn't appear to me he wants to bring the book into the open because he wouldn't have killed those two fucking brothers then,' Oded puts forward.

Jabar also orders a whisky. 'We don't know for sure whether it was suicide or not.'

'Seems clear to me it was murder through thought manipulation by one of my kind.'

'We're thinking about blackmailing, but haven't heard anything about that yet,' I say.

'That won't last long anymore,' Oded thinks. 'Mark my well-mannered words.'

'Unless he likes playing games with us too much,' I say furiously.

'Have you guys already checked that bloodsucker Selena?' Oded asks.

'Yes. Diedie didn't find anything about her. Not even an address. She isn't on a list anywhere,' Jabar answers. 'She doesn't live in New York and doesn't work for a taxi company.'

'Than there's nothing to do for you guys but wait.'

That's what I also fear.

'But,' Oded still adds. 'At least you know something. First, it's probably an otherkind, since Lex works together with otherkinds. And second, he's filthy rich. Maybe this was his intention so far. Making these things clear to you. Giving you a fright.'

'I can't wait to meet him personally,' I conclude. 'I've already thought about different scenarios on what I want to do to him.'

'Always think through your actions, Manon,' Jabar warns me.

'Listen to your father's wise words,' Oded winks at me.

I grumble. 'Yeah yeah, a fight has a better chance of succeeding when you use your brain. You two have made that clear to me more than once already.'

'I doubt about changing my pub's interior,' Oded than says.

'Don't do it,' I say. 'Your pub's charm is just that it looks like the old cozy days and because of that it's more exclusive than other pubs.'

'I think Manon is right,' Jabar adds.

'Okay, two against one is convincing enough.'

We keep chattering for a while about this and that and Oded exchanges a few tips with the bar owner about good whiskies and special brands of mineral water with which you can dilute them. For a while we forget the danger that's above our heads, as if our lives are perfectly normal. And that feels really good.

15.

Oded decides to drive behind us to Jabbeke. He wants to have a taste from Jabar's famous whisky now. The sky has meanwhile become clearer and looks azure and blue.

When we get home, we find Diedie in tears and shock in the living room. She looks ashamed at us and can barely tell us something in between the crying.

I quickly get her a glass of water from the kitchen and give it to her. We all sit around her in the Chesterfield in front of the hearth and patiently and worriedly wait until she's somewhat calmed down.

Finally she looks at us with tears in her eyes. I feel a hate from the bottom of my heart boiling inside of me for that Lex or whatever his name is. I certainly know he has something to do with it.

'What happened?' Jabar asks. I can hear his restrained anger in every word.

'Manon,' she says and points at me with a trembling finger. 'I thought it was Manon.'

'Oh?' What does she mean? I don't understand.

The others neither, because Oded silently asks: 'What do you mean, Diedie?'

'I...I was busy cleaning. Vacuuming.' She takes a sip of her water.

'Yes,' I urge her. 'And then what?'

'The noise of the vacuum cleaner drowns out most of the other sounds. So I didn't hear a thing. Until you stood in front of me.' She points at me.

'I? But I left together with Jabar and Oded.'

'It wasn't you.'

We look at her as if she's crazy.

'Was it me or wasn't it?' I ask. 'Wait a second...'

Diedie nods. 'It was a transformer in your figure.'

'Yuck,' I utter while pulling a face.

'Because he looked like you, he could, of course, sneak in through the window. The protective shield around the house is set up in such a way yours, mine, Jabar's and Oded's outlook can come in effortless. And suddenly you were in front of me, nah well, he was in front of me.'

With shaking fingers she takes a gulp of her water and sighs.

'Did he do anything to you?' Jabar asks.

'No.'



We all heave a sigh of relief.

‘But I was scared silly, you can imagine. First I really thought it was you, Manon, and I asked why you came back without Jabar. But I still didn’t thought... How stupid of me.’

I comfortingly caress her shoulder. ‘Not at all, Diedie. If it was a talented transformer you couldn’t see the difference between the real me and him. Just believe me.’

‘I should have known. After all those years...’ She takes another gulp of her water. ‘But transformers are rare. They are the least numerous among the otherkinds.’

‘And then?’ Oded asks.

‘He again acted somewhat normal and asked whether I had something to eat for him. So for Manon. I even made him some fucking sandwiches!’

According to my memory this is the first time I hear Diedie curse.

‘About what did you two talk?’ Oded asks.

Jabar has stand up in the meantime to take the whisky. He pours down four glasses and gives them to us. Diedie almost swallows her whisky in one draught down.

‘Initially about this and that,’ Diedie answers. ‘But after that he began interrogating me. I had already abandoned my distrust, because believe me, he acted just like Manon, talked like she does. He wore the same clothes as she did when you left this afternoon. He even smelled like you, Manon, your perfume, everything.’

Diedie shakes her head as if she is scarcely able to grasp it.

‘He asked if I had still discovered something. I answered: “What do you mean? I’ve been cleaning the entire afternoon and I haven’t been checking the computers.” He even knew you guys were at the auction and told me Jabar didn’t get a hold on the paintings. That’s why I didn’t become suspicious.’

‘Of course not,’ I say. ‘Anyone would have believed him.’

‘But still.’

‘No, not but still,’ I say firmly.

‘How did you eventually knew it wasn’t Manon?’ Jabar asks.

‘We, the transformer and I, just had had a conversation about Sharon. Besides, Manon, she called again.’

‘Shit, I still have to call her back.’

‘Go on,’ Jabar urges her.

‘I was talking about Sharon and all of a sudden he began to ask a lot of questions about her. What I thought about her and so on, but I found it a normal conversation like we have so often.

The same as ever. And also about you, Oded, he asked a few things. In a way as if Manon was interested in your past. I should have been more suspicious, certainly with what's going on lately, with the burglary and so.' She's frightened by her own words and looks at Oded and then at Jabar.

'Oded knows everything,' Jabar reassures her.

'But I don't think I told anything wrong now.'

'Doesn't matter,' Jabar pacifies.

'After an hour or so, he stood up – we were in the kitchen – and transformed right before my eyes. I jumped out of my skin! All of a sudden there was a man in front of me, not that big with ginger hair and freckles.'

'That proves nothing,' I bring forward. 'He probably didn't show his true outlook.'

'I also don't think so. Anyhow. He just stood there with his self-satisfied grin. I was so bewildered I couldn't speak a word at first, let alone cast a spell. Then all of a sudden his cell phone began ringing, but he didn't answer it and ran away.'

'When was that?' Oded asks. He stands up to open a window so Squeaky can answer nature's call in the garden.

'About fifteen minutes before you arrived home.'

'Then he probably got warned we were coming,' I think.

'I didn't see the Audi,' Jabar says.

'Oded was driving behind us at a sudden moment. Was there an Audi driving behind you?' I ask Oded who's waiting at the window until Squeaky is done.

'Damn, I didn't notice, to be honest. Brainlessly stupid of me.'

I can feel new anger coming up. 'So they're still keeping an eye on us. They knew we were gone and Diedie was home alone. The bastards!'

'He just said one other thing before he left.' Diedie bites her lower lip.

We all look at her expectantly.

'He said: "tell that elf it isn't over yet".'

It all makes us speechless. It's one thing to know it isn't over, but being confronted with it once again is something different.

'It sounds kinda fucking personal,' Oded says in a soft tone. 'Meaning: personal orientated towards you, Jabar.'

'Yes, but I still don't know who it could be.'

'Until now they didn't do harm to any of you guys,' Oded continues. 'Luckily.'

He opens the window and Squeaky enters. Time and time again it surprises me that that rat doesn't run away when he can run around in the garden on its own.

'It seems as if that Lex guy wants to bother you through us,' I add. 'Playing a game with us, showing how much power and money he has.'

'I suspect it isn't just that simple.' Jabar stares into the distance, absorbed in thought.

'No, the big bang still has to follow,' I say.

'Diedie, can you track bugging devices or cameras with magic?' Jabar asks.

'Yes, I can and I'll do it right away!' She sounds combative.

While Diedie does her thing in every room of the house, starting at the library upstairs, we finish our whiskies.

'I want to do something!' I suddenly cry out. 'Something! Anything! I just can't stand to wait totally powerless.'

'Me neither, Manon. But what can we do? We don't have any real names or addresses,' Jabar says.

'We do know that a devil, vamp and transformer are working together with Lex. So we're a bit better prepared. Dumb of that Lex not to think about that.'

'I think it's an arrogant shithead,' Oded thinks. 'He gets a kick out of showing his power, despite that fact that we have been warned. Apparently that's of no importance in his plan.'

Diedie comes back with deep purple eyes and confirms our suspicion. She holds a few little technical devices in her hands.

'Beneath the desk lamp at the attic, the Buddha statue in the meditation room, behind Jabar's television set and on a few other places. I'll go and check the living room and the kitchen now.'

She places the devices on the coffee table and walks towards the kitchen. Oded snatches them from the table, throws them to the ground and starts crushing them like a madman.

'There, there and there!' he yells. 'You bunch of fucking bloody peeping Toms!'

'I should have thought about it earlier.' Jabar's words sound punctuated with grief.

I notice he's being weighed down with feelings of guilt. His look is somber and his forehead is deeply frowned.

'It isn't so you get confronted with things like these very often,' I comfort him. 'We've never come around anything like this before.'

Diedie again throws two devices on the table, which Oded knocks off with as much enthusiasm and rage.

She now takes the living room on task. She mumbling keeps her hands in front of her. Of course I can't see what she's doing, but all of a sudden she resolutely walks towards the piano and raises the big lid. According to what Diedie once told me I think she now sees a purple haze on the places where the devices are hidden. Without hesitation she grabs in the piano and gets something out. The same happens when she turns the painting around.

When these last ones know their definitive end, Diedie exhaustedly drops down on the couch.

'I'll have a look in the garden right away,' she sighs. 'First I have to cook.'

'Now it's clear why they knew so much about us,' I say, looking at the shattered pieces on the floor.

'You're eating with us, Oded?' Diedie asks.

'Yummy, I'd love to.'

Diedie stands up, but Jabar stops her.

'Let's order something and get it delivered home, Diedie, you've already done enough today.'

She looks at him with a mixture of doubt and relief. 'But I had sprouts and...'

'They're still fine tomorrow,' I say quickly.

Finally she gives in. 'Alright, yes. Looks nicer to me.'

'I'll order the pizza.' I jump up. 'After that I'll call Sharon back.'

I go to my room where I have more privacy to chatter with Sharon. The conversations with her aren't rarely about sex and boyfriends, so not suitable for anyone else's ears. I'm curious about how much experience she has with vamps. Maybe she can give me some advice.

16.

I lie on the bed, leaning against the wall with pillows and teddy bears behind my back. After I ordered the pizzas I call Sharon. She almost immediately answers the call, as if she was waiting next to the telephone. We used to have that often, it seems as if we have a telepathic connection that even keeps persisting overseas.

'Hi Manon,' she says with her small voice that always makes me think of a wind organ.

'How did you know it was me?'

'You're still asking? After all those years?'

I chuckle. 'You're right.'

'You have to open more to miracles that aren't visible, Manon, that makes life a lot more interesting.'

I consider that my life is interesting enough, but I don't tell that to her. Sharon doesn't know about my double life. The fact that I could never tell her about my education and field tasks with otherkinds always rankled in my mind.

'I'll try,' I answer.

'Good girl.'

I can see how she holds her heart shaped face aslant and how her fragile, pearl white hairs fall in front of her big, blue deer eyes.

'How are you?' I ask.

'Oh, wonderful!' She moans. 'I'm sooooo in love.'

I grin. 'With whom now?'

'You don't have to take it that way, Manon.'

'Hm? How?'

'I can hear the mockery in your voice and I know you, you're having a big grin on your face right now.'

'Okay, okay, sorry.'

'When I'm in love it's always very serious.'

*Yeah, for a few months.* 'Ah, come on, Sharon, how long did your longest relation last?'

'Relation? Manon! Don't ever say that word! They are unifications. Unifications are under the influence of great universal powers and aren't products of their age.'

Sometimes she sounds so woolly I can barely grasp what she means.

'And love is?' I ask.

‘Love stays, but the physical interest disappears. That’s why I have to look for a new unification every time. After all we live in this planet and not in the universe. We consist of flesh and blood and that needs to be fed too.’

‘Okay, I get it.’ *Do I really?* ‘But go on and tell me who he is?’

‘An angel. I met him about two months ago. He’s extremely cute. And his telekinetic powers... Wowie! Recently he made a feather caress my skin from head till toe, without using his hands. Ooooooh, it was so wonderful. I think I never came that way ever before.’

‘You say that every time.’

‘But each time exceeds the preceding,’ she says.

‘Yeah, could be.’

‘It is! Do you know he can even steer the wind? We were making love outside and it was pretty sunny, but there was a chilly wind. And you want to know what that hunny bunny did? He takes care of the wind so it wouldn’t touch us. Can you imagine? Few angels are that strong, you know.’

‘Sounds like a keeper,’ I think. All the more since he’s also an angel and therefore they can have children together.

‘Nah. We aren’t made to stick with one partner, although I have to admit it lasts longer than usual. But probably a new fascinating person will cross my path.’

‘But you’re so in love.’ I suppress a grin, knowing she probably senses it.

‘Yeah, so what?’

I give up. ‘Why didn’t you tell me earlier about him?’

‘Oh, because I was seeing someone else then and it wasn’t that serious in the beginning. And how are you, Manon? Do you have someone special in your life?’

‘Not really.’

‘You want to break the record or what?’

‘Which record?’

‘Of not-nun-being person that gets screwed the least in her life.’

‘Ha ha,’ I snarl. ‘I met someone.’

‘Oh, who? Tell, tell.’

‘A vamp.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘Yeah. Recently he was in Oded’s pub and hypnotized me. I don’t really know whether that’s a good sign.’

‘Listen, Manon. You know I’m an expert in everything that has got to do with love of otherkinds, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’ And not only in love with otherkinds, I think after that.

‘Well. Than let me say this: do it!’

‘Do it?’

‘Yeah, do it! Vampires are extremely hot pieces of ass in bed. They are... how shall I say. Woohooee!’

‘Woohoo?’

When Sharon can’t put something into words, she intensely expresses it with a cry or sound.

‘Most rewarding. Enormously yummy, sizzling and boiling.’

‘Okay.’ I chuckle. ‘But that hypnotizing feels wrong. It feels like mental rape, you know?’

‘Manon, honey, that hypnotizing is so normal to vampires as the giving of flowers to humans. It’s part of their seduction tactics and you should take it as a compliment.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘For a million percent!’

‘Any tips or tricks?’

‘Yes. Allow him to bite you, but only on your conditions.’

I pull a face. ‘I don’t know about that, Sharon, seems painful.’

‘Not at all! First it’s like a little prick and then... hm hm hm hm, you have to experience yourself, it can’t be put into words.’

‘Okay, I take you at your word.’

‘Good girl.’

‘Say, I hear the ding-dong. Pizza’s here.’

‘Tasty, bon appétit!’

‘Thanks. And Sharon?’

I think about the transformer that interrogated Diedie and now knows about Sharon’s existence.

‘Yeah?’

‘Be careful,’ I say silently.

‘Always.’

‘No. Listen, Sharon.’

I don’t know how to put it into words without betraying too much and then find the solution. I take a chance on the spiritual side.

‘I had a dream. A very lively dream about someone wanting to hurt you. It felt very realistic, as if I got an intuitive warning I definitely had to tell you.’

Sharon is silent for a while on the other side of the line. And believe me, that rarely happens.

‘Okay,’ she finally says. ‘I’ll be extra careful.’

‘I miss you,’ I say.

‘I miss you too.’

We still give greets from both sides to family members and then say goodbye.

Meanwhile the pizza has arrived and lies steaming and deliciously smelling on the dining table. Diedie, who gave the garden a thorough inspection, but didn’t find anything, pulls open a bottle of red wine and fills our glasses. Oded cuts the two gigantic pizzas in little parts. Jabar cozily lights the hearth and I the candles standing on the table.

It seems as if we collectively resolved not to let the situation touch us, to live as usual as much as possible and not to let the threat domineer over the sociability. At least, that’s how I feel it.

We talk about everyday things and enjoy our delicious pizza. Squeaky is beside himself with joy. Everyone gives him a little piece, which he then takes in his little mouth and after which he patters away quickly. In a most cute way he then takes the piece between his two front legs and continuously keeps an eye on us when he gladly nibbles on it.

The pizzas are finished quickly, but we still stay and talk at the table with red wine. The evening twilight falls in and I stand up to close the curtains. Jabar’s helicopter glistens in the last rays of light. Because of that we inevitably end up at our tight spot.

‘Diedie, can you check whether someone messed with the helicopter?’ I ask while I take a seat again.

‘Yes, of course, I’ll immediately check it tomorrow morning.’

‘And also the cars,’ Jabar adds.

‘From tomorrow onwards I’ll do a daily inspection and immediately protect every vehicle.’

‘That seems wise to me,’ Jabar says.

‘Could it be that Selena had to visit Manon in New York to take a closer look at her, so the transformer could put down a truthful Manon?’ Oded asks.

‘Then they could have send the transformer himself, couldn’t they?’ Diedie thinks.

‘Unless it was that transformer in Selena’s form,’ I suggest.

‘Seems far-fetched,’ Jabar says.



I think Jabar looks extremely old and tired recently. He can handle a lot of stress, I know that, because he's mentally very strong. But the situation is naturally different now. The persons he loves and cares about are taken under fire and it will be gnawing at him. All the more since he probably feels responsible and has no idea about who is doing this to us.

The evening finishes with a drink and then we're all off to bed. I hope we can sleep uninterrupted tonight. I really hope so.

17.

Towards the end of the morning I wake up with a burning feeling in my abdomen. The dream about Lucas still shimmers in my head and makes me crave for more. Maybe I should follow Sharon's advice. After all it's been a while since I've had sex and I don't think I can hold it that much longer. Unlike yesterday I now hope Lucas does appear in the pub this evening. Although I'm still planning to confront him with his hypnosis tactic I don't longer experience it as an unwanted activity.

I put on a low-cut, brightly green shirt above my jeans today. A wonderbra still gives me a little, but at least a more attractive bosom. I blow-dry my hair so it somewhat falls like I want it to and put on a bit more of mascara than usual.

Relatively satisfied I look at myself in the mirror. I'm still not a cover girl, but it will do.

Diedie isn't in the kitchen, but she has covered the table. There's a pot of coffee, all kinds of currant buns, jam and marmalade and a glass of fresh orange juice. I'm starving and tuck away a chocolate bun, one with raisins and one filled with pudding, which I wash down with buckets of coffee.

The intense feelings of the dream still linger around me, I can't shake them off of me. I realize it has to come to a release.

Today I want to go to the shooting club to practice before I go to the pub. Because the shooting club is in Ostend, I'm planning to ride to work directly from there on. For this time I totally ignore the fact that it is strongly forbidden to keep a weapon in the car.

I go and say goodbye to Diedie, who is watching a soap. She assures me that the Citroën is in good order and that no one else, except me, has put his or her hands on it.

Afterwards I go to the attic. Jabar, who is still trying to get to know something about Selena or the other otherkinds, mumbles his search still hasn't produced any results. I kiss him goodbye, but in my opinion he doesn't even notice.

There's a cool wind, so I put on my green leather jacket. I get the bullets out of the pistol and put them, together with another box of bullets, in the jacket's side pocket. I put the pistol in my inside pocket. The two of them need to be transported separately, because otherwise I'm punishable. And actually the pistol still needs to be in its holster, but well, not everything needs to be followed that strictly.

On my way to the sport-shooting club I continuously look for pursuers in my rearview mirror. Halfway the highway my heart skips a beat. The Audi! He neatly keeps a car in-between us,

but it's unmistakably the same car. I begin to slow down. The car behind me drives past me. Great, that was the intention. I hope to have a better look on the Audi right now and more specifically on his number plate. But he also slows down and in such a way another car comes to drive in-between us. Shit, he knows what I'm trying to do.

I'm not planning to keep on driving around and continue my way to the shooting club. When I arrive at the industrial zone the Audi keeps following me. Only when I drive into the parking lot of the club, he goes straight ahead. I still try to catch a glimpse of the driver, but he drives too fast and the windows are too dark.

I call Jabar.

'Everything alright?' he immediately asks.

'Fine.'

'Have you, by any chance, seen his number plate?'

'No. I tried to, but this time he was so smart to keep a car in-between us.'

'Be careful, Manon.'

'I've got my best friend, Glock, with me, Jabar, so don't worry.'

'Hm.'

'See you tonight.'

'Say 'hi' to Oded.'

'I will.'

An entire hour I pleasantly let off steam on the targets. Despite the recent events I'm highly concentrated and rarely miss the target I keep in mind.

The muscles in my upper arms are shaking from the lasting tension and so I'm through with it. Satisfied I put the pistol in the trunk, the bullets in the glove compartment and drive off to the pub.

It's quite busy the entire evening so I have little time to worry. But I keep looking for suspicious behavior or persons, but I can't discover anything. Every time someone enters, I feel like a cat on a hot tin roof, expecting it is Lucas. It gets eight 'o'clock and nine 'o'clock and still no Lucas. I begin to suspect he didn't like my previous reaction and has given up hope. Ah, I comfort myself, then he wasn't worth your time.

A quarter to eleven, when I'm about to leave, he still enters. I don't know what to do with myself and I can feel myself getting warm. Oded sees my sudden clumsy behavior and comes towards me.

'Do you want me to send that canny fucker away?'

‘Erm, no, you see, I... erm.’ I shyly look to the ground.

‘You like him?’ The surprise in his voice is clearly noticeable.

‘Actually, I do, yes.’

‘Oh, okay.’

Oded turns around and gets to serve a customer. He has a roguish look in his eyes that doesn’t hide his confusion.

Lucas meanwhile took a seat at the bar and follows my actions continuously. I begin to feel uneasy about it and decide to take the bull by the horns.

‘Hi. Whisky?’ I ask.

The smile, on which he treats me, immediately blows my socks off. ‘As long as you choose it.’

I can’t think, I just can’t manage to do so. So I take a random bottle of the shelf and give him a glass.

‘The whisky?’ He scornfully looks at me.

Then I see I have given him an empty glass.

‘Oh, erm, how stupid of me.’

I still fill his glass.

‘You want to go out with me?’ he asks after taking a nip. ‘Or will you immediately accompany me to my flat?’

‘What?’

‘You’ve heard me.’ He looks at me and I can’t interpret his look any different than from a naughty boy.

‘Why did you hypnotize me?’

‘How do you know that?’

I nod at Oded. ‘He saw it. Did you think you wouldn’t get me otherwise?’

He seems to be off his stroke, but he recovers fast. ‘No, I thought you were interesting and then my hormones run off with me.’

‘With hypnosis as result?’

‘Something like that.’

‘I know you’re a vamp, Lucas.’

Now I’ve totally got him. His eyes become big and stuttering he says: ‘So what are you?’

‘That could still become a surprise,’ I say in a mysterious tone.

Now I can have a go at him for his unmasked hypnotizing.

He narrows his eyes and licks his lips. 'Now I really can't wait any longer.'

'I'm done.'

'Let's go then.'

I've never left the pub so quickly before. I give Oded a rapid kiss and know he's following me outside with a worried look.

I want to ride behind him with my own car, that way I stay independent and I can leave when I want to. We drive along the coast way and turn into Queen Avenue where he parks. There aren't any cheap flats in this neighborhood, so close to the beach. I follow him into an apartment complex and I feel a bit clumsy when we walk towards the elevator. Nevertheless he looks self-assured and not nervous at all.

In the elevator he starts to kiss me, demanding and hard. I answer his kiss with as much devotion and let him take the lead. He pushes me against the mirror, his one hand behind my neck and the other wriggling to get my shirt out off my jeans. His mere smell dazes me and totally overwhelms me. His tongue caresses my palate and slowly brushes my teeth. I feel his vamp teeth with the tip of my tongue, the sharpness of their tips and moan. The shirt is out off my pants and right at the moment his hand touches my skin the lift opens.

I sigh and dizzily get out of the elevator. He quickly opens the door to his flat. He coaxes me along to his bedroom and continues with what he was doing.

I help him taking off my shirt, while he opens the zipper of my jeans. In no time I've got my jeans kicked out and he has taken off all of his clothes. I don't even have the time to admire his beautiful, shimmering body because he goes sitting on the edge of the bed and pulls me towards him. With his face against my stomach, he sniffs up my scent, licks me and gently bites me. My entire body trembles and I crave for him so much I can't think about anything else.

Suddenly he grasps my waist with both hands, lifts me up and puts me on his lap. I can feel his penis throb hardly against my mount of Venus, but he doesn't put it in me. Warm, soft hands caress my back while he takes a nipple in his mouth and softly sucks on it. My fingers claw in his shoulders and I moan in pleasure. Then he lays me down on the bed with my legs dangling over the edge.

He brushes every piece of skin of my breast and stomach with his tongue. Then he lowers himself to the ground and kneels. There isn't a single place on my body that doesn't tremble and tingles when his tongue plays on my most sensitive spot tauntingly slow. I take his head between my hands and don't even realize how hard I'm pulling his hair. He doesn't complain

about it and goes on.

In the heat of the moment my feelings take over. My left foot transforms into a hand and I bend my leg in a way so I can hold his penis. I can hear him hold his breath. For a while I see him look surprised, but then he continues as if there's nothing the matter.

I'm about to come when he stops, puts on a condom quickly and slides over me. Finally he's inside me. He looks at me with a penetrating gaze and seems to ask me something with his look. But my brain doesn't seem to function, so I look at him, questioning.

'Can I bite you?' he hoarsely says.

I nod strongly. For all I care he can do anything he wants. Really anything!

His lips quickly brush my mouth and then drop to my neck. I don't even realize what's about to happen, too much occupied by the enjoyment. Then I feel two sharp pricks and instead of pain there's an overwhelming, delicious shock going through my body. I cry out in pleasure! A cry that's probably audible in two flats further on.

While he sucks up the drips of blood, he keeps thrusting inside of me. My eyes turn away and I'm afraid I'll faint with so much enjoyment. At the moment the room turns black I come with the force of a hurricane. Now he also moans softly, shakes and then lies completely still on me.

It takes a while before I can control my breath again and I am capable of speaking again. He rolls aside and looks at me.

'Transformer, hey,' he says with a slanted smile.

I smile back. 'Now you know.'

'It was a very pleasant surprise.'

'Thought the same about your little trick.'

He kisses me. The entering moonlight throws a damp shine on his white marble skin and I melt again. *Sigh, he's so gorgeous!*

'I didn't know that a vamp's bite was so delicious,' I sigh.

'That's to make sure the bitten one don't think it's unpleasant and so don't mind to make it happen again.'

I grin. 'From now on I'm a junkie.'

He smiles and kisses me again.

'Thanks,' I say.

'No, thank you.'

'Damn, we're doing this really official.'

'I can change that.' His eyes look promising at me.

'Already?'

'Vampire power,' he declares and suits the action to the word.

18.

When I arrive back home at three 'o'clock I sneak inside. With a grin from ear to ear on my face, I walk on my socks to the bedroom. The two little wounds in my neck have disappeared in the meantime thanks to the special healing enzymes in a vamp's saliva. Only thinking about how delicious that bite was... *Yummy*.

I'm scared silly when hearing Jabar's voice. He looks down on me from the landing of his bedroom.

'Everything alright?' he asks with a frowned forehead.

'Yeah, of course.'

I barely dare to look at him. Of course he knows I'm having sex, I'm twenty-four already. But I keep feeling like a child in his neighborhood and I don't want him to tell by the look of my face.

'Alright then. Sleep tight.'

'Sleep tight.'

I rush giggling into my room, put away my pistol and plop down on the bed. Staring dreamily to the ceiling on my back I can see the past few hours going by again. Until I, with all my clothes on, fall asleep on top of the sheets.

And again my sleep is interrupted. This time by Jabar who's banging on my room door. I look aside at the alarm clock and see it's only ten a.m.. Way too early to get up after such a short night.

'What?' I moan irritated.

'Manon, get up! Oded's pub burned down!'

'What!'

I'm wide-awake immediately and rush towards the door. Jabar looks at me and puts so much sadness and guilt in that look I hug him spontaneously.

'Is everything alright with Oded?' I ask against his chest.

'Yes. He was in his flat on the first floor. The fire was discovered in time and hadn't reached his house yet.'

I let go of Jabar. 'Luckily.'

'You're still wearing your clothes?'

'Erm, I fell asleep.'



‘Oded is on his way. Fresh yourself up a bit and then come to the kitchen.’

I take a quick shower and put on a simple light blue sweatshirt above my jeans. I put my hair in a tight tail and without make-up I hurry myself to the kitchen. Oded is apparently already there. ‘The fire brigade is now checking whether the fire was started deliberately. Fuck!’

‘I’m afraid it is,’ I hear Jabar answer.

I enter the kitchen and give Oded a warm hug, observing I don’t squash Squeaky who’s in his breast pocket.

‘I find it so horrible for you,’ I say. The smell of smoke still lingers around him.

‘Me too, damn it,’ he says in a sad tone.

‘We think we know who might have done it, but we can’t even tell it to the police.’ I take a seat at the table and fill myself a cup of coffee. ‘Where’s Diedie?’

‘Left early this morning already to do some shopping. She borrowed your car for a while,’ Jabar answers.

‘Okay.’

‘All my bottles of whisky,’ Oded moans.

‘The ones in the cellar too?’

‘The few bottles that didn’t burst because of the fire, have lost their label through the quenching.’

It’s so typical for Oded to think his whisky is more important than other stuff and even his entire house and pub.

‘Luckily the City of Ostend gave free smoke detectors recently. I woke up in time, got Squeaky out of his cage immediately and ran as quick as a cannonball outside.’

‘What time did it happen?’ Jabar asks.

‘Around 5 a.m.. The fire brigade was quickly on the spot, the station not far away, in Wellington Street. The Blue Meanies interrogated me but I could only assure I took care and couldn’t remember because of what the fire started.’

With ‘Blue Meanies’ he means the police. Oded takes a drink of his coffee and looks doubtful.

‘The Blue Meanies still asked me whether I had enemies, knew people who wanted to do me harm.’

‘And what did you answer?’ I’m hungry, but I’m sure I can’t eat.

‘Nothing of course. I don’t fucking know anyone who wants to do me harm.’

‘No.’ Jabar sounds furious. ‘You don’t. Unfortunately my enemy, whoever he may be, is

trying to do me harm through people I know.'

Oded shrugs. 'I don't blame you, old friend. I blame those smelling fuckers! If I ever meet them!'

'Maybe we should move,' I suggest. 'All of us.'

Jabar shakes his head. 'No, that isn't a solution, Manon. Besides, I think my enemy will follow me and find me, wherever we may go.'

'You don't have to get yourself chased away by someone else,' Oded says in a hard voice.

'They aren't worth it! If we would have allowed that during the war, then...'

'But now we're an easy prey!' I angrily say.

Oded sighs and Jabar refills his cup of coffee. We don't know what to say for a while and stare defeated into space.

'You can live here for a while,' Jabar then suggests. 'We've got enough rooms. You can take the guest room on the ground floor. That one has a separate bathroom with shower.'

'Thanks. I'd love to use that one, mate. I think I'm going back in a minute to get the stuff that still can be saved.'

'What will you do with the house?' I ask.

'I'll probably let it break down. Unless the damage can still be repaired.'

'I'll go with you to help you,' Jabar suggests.

'Me too,' I say resolutely. 'I'll leave a note for Diedie. I'll bet she'll prepare a feast for you this evening to comfort you.'

Oded faintly smiles. 'Ah, it's just fucking stuff, things. No lives have been ruined.'

After we get permission of the fire brigade to enter the first floor we're busy for the entire afternoon to get out Oded's still reasonable looking belongings. We came with two cars so we can take as much as possible with us because Oded's car is teeny-weeny. He totally adores his Fiat 500. However, the little car needed to be converted first so he would fit in with his height of two meter. The back seats had been broken down and the front seats put in the back. It's a real comical sight to see a gigantic bloke coming out of the car as if it's his toy car. Luckily he also has a truck we can stuff full.

The havoc in the pub is enormous. Everything is destroyed and blackened. I look at it with deep grief. I'll miss the pub and even when it gets totally restored, it will never be the same again. It feels as a finished period and I'm always having difficulties with that.

In the cellar are some bottles still intact but, as Oded already pointed out, they became

unrecognizable. Only on the basis of the bottle's shape he can name some, but not all of them. Most of the bottles have burst through the heat and the alcohol spread the fire much faster than normally.

On the first floor, Oded's home, is a piercing smell of burning. Luckily the fire didn't have the time to affect everything and we can still use a lot of it. He leaves the furniture and other big pieces. He only takes the objects of emotional value with him and his clothes that all need to be rewashed, although he'll probably never get out the smell of burning out of them.

The fire officer walks towards us. A huge, balding guy with big hands that can grab my waist without effort.

'We can't prove the fire started deliberately,' he starts in a heavy voice. 'Until now the reason of the fire is uncertain. The only thing we can prove is the careless removal of smoking materials.'

'Sir.' Oded sounds enraged. 'I fucking check if every cigarette is put out properly every night before I close.'

The officer shrugs. 'I believe you. We don't accuse you of deliberate arson. One moment of inattentiveness can be enough.'

'Are you sure there aren't any other evidences?' I ask.

'We checked all other possible sources and inflammatory methods and eliminated them. We're sorry for your loss.' And with those last words the fire officer turns around and walks away.

Dejected we roam about the mess. Through the broken window I can see a lot of people looking at the partially burned down building. Disaster tourists, I think accusingly.

'Jabar! Manon! Have a look at what I've fucking found in Squeaky's cage underneath the sawdust!'

We rush towards him. Oded holds up a piece of paper. The edges have already been gnawed by Squeaky, but the text is still readable.

*Jabar,*

*One by one I take away something from you and your friends.*

*Until you're left alone and broken.*

*My ways and revenge are endless.*

*N.*

‘It’s indeed the same cunt,’ I hiss. The handwriting looks as if a drunken goose danced on the paper with its legs sopped in ink.

‘N?’ Oded looks questioning at Jabar.

‘Just an “N” doesn’t ring a bell. I’ve known a lot of people whose name started with an “N”.’

‘We don’t even know for sure whether it’s a man or woman,’ I add.

‘If I get it right from this note it’s a whining wretch who was left broken and alone after something you did to him,’ Odes says. ‘At least, that’s how he experienced it; it doesn’t have to be that way of course. Don’t you think?’

‘I wouldn’t know what or whom!’ Jabar’s voice cracks and that rarely happens.

‘Besides, how could he know you would find the note? Also strange,’ I say.

‘Maybe he hoped this floor would stay intact and what would I naturally take with me? Squeaky’s cage of course. I change it every two days, so there was a great chance I would find it.’

‘Than the note must have been put in the cage yesterday,’ I think.

‘Indeed. The stair to this floor is next to the pub’s toilets and I never close the flat’s door. So anyone can sneak upstairs. I’m such a stupid scabby sow bug!’

I cudgel my brains, looking for strange customers or people acting sneaky yesterday, but I can’t really call someone special to mind. Lucas? No, he wasn’t here very long and I didn’t see him go to the toilets.

‘Try to see the customers in front of you,’ Jabar suggests to Oded. ‘Someone who behaved suspiciously.’

‘No.’ Oded sadly looks around his flat. ‘Not really. And almost everyone one goes to the toilet at a sudden moment.’

‘Don’t you recognize the handwriting?’ I ask Jabar and put the letter in his hands.

He looks comprehensively and long at it, but then shakes his head. ‘Not immediately.’

‘Let’s get everything in the cars and leave. I’m becoming fucking depressive in here,’ Oded decides.

At home I help unloading. We store most of the stuff in his room and the rest in the attic. Right after that I call Sharon. I need to be sure everything's alright with her and luckily that seems to be the case. I impress her on her mind again to stay away from strangers, again with the excuse I dreamt about it. She swallows my story and promises me to be careful.

Diedie has indeed leaned over backwards and prepared a delicious meal of potato slices with onion and herbs, steak with pepper sauce and a Grace Kelly Caesar Salad. We eat at six 'o'clock, which is a lot earlier than usual. The atmosphere at the table is artificially happy.

After dinner Jabar and I head to the attic to check the messages from the contact persons. There's one urgent message among them, coming from Kingston from Montreal, Quebec. My heart immediately skips a beat and I anxiously hold my breath. Sharon lives in Montreal! Jabar hastily looks at me and quickly opens the message.

**Skype for a moment, please. Troubles!**

We immediately open the Skype program and call Kingston. Happily smiling, as if nothing serious has happened, his face appears with tow-colored hair and freckles. He was probably impatiently waiting for us until we would call.

'Jabar, finally!' he says in a friendly tone. 'Hi Manon.'

'Hi Kingston, how are you?' I ask.

Kingston is a vamp who invented a new term to describe himself, namely 'arising', which means as much as: I drink blood, but only animal blood. I think you can compare it to vegetarians who only eat vegetable products. He claims he wants to bring the 'vamp-being' to a new evolutionary level this way.

'I'm all good, but I got a strange message.'

'What?' Jabar asks.

'A strange double murder in a company, here in Quebec. It was an article from a month ago.'

'Who has sent that message to you?'

'The sender stays anonymous. The strange thing is that I followed the same fact for a while. A month ago a manager and his secretary were killed quite brutally. No one saw a thing. Apparently they were drilled through and hit by objects from the manager's office. You name it: a stapler, a chair, pens and paperknives, even the heavy filing cabinet. So I suspected the culprit was an otherkind. That filing cabinet seemed not to be shifted, no tracks were found of that and it was really on top of the two victims. Maybe a vampire, because that one has

physical power or an angel who used his telekinetic gift.’

‘Why?’ Jabar thinks. ‘Two people could also have lifted that cabinet. Although that seems more unlikely indeed.’

‘All the more because murderers work alone more often than together,’ Kingston adds.

‘So there were more indications,’ Jabar concludes.

‘Yes. No fingerprints were found. Maybe this isn’t so strange because the murderer or murderers could have worn gloves. Even if it was a vampire. Nevertheless, an angel just has to use his mind and eyes to move things, even very heavy things he can’t lift with physical power.’

‘That’s right. Than why didn’t you tell us earlier?’

‘Because I wanted to wait and see whether the police would catch the murderer and whether it turned out to be two of them. But, honestly speaking.’ Kingston bites his lower lip. ‘Don’t be angry.’

‘I’m never angry,’ Jabar laconically answers. And that’s the truth.

‘I didn’t keep an eye on it. Troubles with the wifey. It’s no excuse, I know it, but nonetheless it’s the case.’

‘Don’t mind. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes.’

*And especially I do lately.*

‘Well, so I got a message of an article about those murders. Seems the police hasn’t arrested anyone yet. They had a suspect and here it comes: according to our information it’s an angel who works in that company.’

‘Let me guess: they didn’t find evidences.’

‘Nothing at all. That angel, named Joseph Jones, worked in the office next to that manager’s one. The offices have those glazed dividing walls and plates. The guy that has his office next to the one of that angel confirms that Joseph didn’t leave his office for the entire morning.’

‘Than why was he a suspect?’ I ask.

‘Because he apparently had had an affair with that secretary and she had a relationship with that manager when they were murdered.’

‘I see.’ I still think it’s too far-fetched, but I get the police had to be desperate.

‘That angel was interrogated the next day and released that same day, so I thought nothing was going on and that it really was a human culprit.’

Jabar coughs. ‘But than that angel surely must have seen who did it.’

‘No, that’s still another story. Joseph claimed that the plates were half-closed and therefore

saw nothing. Besides he was discussing documents through the telephone. His colleague next to him confirmed it and couldn't see through Joseph's office what was going on in the manager's office, because Joseph was blocking the view. Not a single person saw anyone enter the manager's and his secretary's office and I find that especially strange.'

'If the plates were only half-closed, then Joseph probably could just have seen enough to move the objects,' I suggest.

'I think so, yes,' Kingston agrees.

'So to me it seems rather the work of an angel than specifically that Joseph. Does he still work for that company?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't he hear anything?' Jabar asks. 'It must have made an enormous noise.'

'He claimed to have indeed heard some racket, but presumed they were redecorating the office. Apparently the manager often did that.'

'That anonymous message bothers me,' Jabar says thoughtfully.

'Me too, but on the other hand it isn't negative, is it? I mean, you can still punish that angel if it was him. The message was only a little article about the fact that still no suspects have been arrested and no evidences have been found yet.'

'I'm totally ready,' I say combatively. 'Awesome, finally I can let some steam off on something tangible.'

'How are you going to do it? What do you need?' Kingston asks.

'Picking up Manon at the airport and taking her to the home address of Joseph Jones. Manon's usual weapons. The rest you can leave to us. I'll still contact you when you may expect Manon.'

'Great, and Jabar?'

'It doesn't matter, Kingston, like I said: to err is human.'

'Okay, thanks. Manon, I'll see you later!'

We close Skype.

'How are we going to deal with it?' I ask.

'I'd like to see that guy in prison.'

'Me too.'

'But I've got a plan.'

'Okay, bring it on.'

'Still one thing, Manon.' Jabar looks at me in a worried way. 'I hope you realize this might be

a trap?’

‘A trap of that mysterious N?’

Jabar nods. ‘Yes. Those murders have been committed, no doubt about that. But why and from whom did Kingston get that message?’

‘Yeah, I was thinking about that too. Don’t worry, Jabar, I’ll be very careful and with the slightest suspicious fact I’ll call you or I’ll immediately leave back homewards.’

‘Okay. First I still have to do some work on the computer. Hack into different systems, a few calls and then I’ll explain the plan to you.’

‘I’m going to bed,’ I say at the same moment someone rings.

We have a videophone in every room, so I run to the one on the attic. My heart skips a beat when I see Lucas’s intense look on the screen.

‘Who is it?’ Jabar asks without looking away from the computer screen.

‘A friend, I’ll go.’

I hurry downstairs before he can ask further questions. Almost running down Oded, I run into my room. In the bathroom I quickly comb my hair and put on lip-gloss. The ding-dong rings again and I can hear Oded on the videophone in the hall.

‘It’s for me!’ I yell. ‘Coming!’

Now I don’t have to come across too eager, so I take a few deep breaths, hoping to get my heartbeat under control. In the hall I see Oded who’s looking questioning at me.

‘It’s Lucas.’

‘Yeah, I saw that. Everything alright?’

‘Sure.’

I step outside and walk as calmly as possible to the wrought iron gate where Lucas is standing. Dusk has fallen and the scent of the night hangs around the house like an aureole. Nonchalantly with his hands in his pockets and a slanted smile he looks at me. I smile back faltering.

‘Hi,’ I say and open the gate.

He immediately grabs me by my shoulders and pushes me against the gate. His lips touch mine softly and teasingly. Slowly his mouth goes to my neck, kissing every spot on its way. I shiver and moan when he lets his tongue glide over my neck and I feel his breath warmly against my skin.

‘I crave for you. I miss you,’ he whispers against my neck.

His hardness pushes through his pants against my stomach. I really need to keep myself in



hand not to pull open his zipper so he can take me here and now.

‘Not here,’ I say sighing. ‘Not now.’

He looks at me with so much passion my own lust goes skyrocketing.

‘Then where?’ He kisses me, long.

‘I can’t tonight,’ I say with regret.

The disappointment in his look is very clear. ‘Why not?’

Yeah, why not? Oh yeah, I’m at home and I need to get up early tomorrow, an order in Canada.

‘I need my sleep tonight.’

His hand glides under my shirt and I can feel the lust in the heat of his skin. His fingers circle caressing around my navel and then towards my breasts. I moan and get a hold of his hair. What follows is a passionate kiss by which I lose my mind and control. Then I push him away softly.

‘No, I really can’t.’ I close my eyes so I don’t see his hurt look. ‘And don’t try to hypnotize me.’

‘Are you mine?’ he asks.

I open my eyes and look deeply in his. ‘Yes,’ I whisper hoarsely. ‘Yes.’

His hand grasps my breast by which I shiver over my entire body.

‘Let me sleep at your place tonight.’

‘No, not tonight. I need to go tomorrow.’

‘To where?’ He places kisses in my neck and then slowly opens his mouth. I can feel the sharp endings of his teeth softly penetrating my skin and hold my breath. It feels as if my heart is about to explode every moment.

‘I...’ The lust is almost unbearable. ‘I...’

‘What?’ He licks the wound and I can hear his breathing fasten.

‘Don’t...’

Nothing still functions, except my longing for him. Every cell in my body screams for his touch, for the feeling of his skin on mine, covering every centimeter.

‘Lucas,’ I whisper. ‘They can see us.’

He keeps on going and tucks up my shirt and bra. He tenderly kisses my nipples. My legs lose their strength and I’m about to be knocked off my feet. Still I know how to push him off of me.

‘Monday evening,’ I know to say. I put my shirt with trembling fingers back in my pants.

He doesn't say a thing, only looks at me. And then his eyes change colors and become blood red. Oh no, he wants to hypnotize me. My muscles tense up.

'Lucas,' I suddenly say firmly. 'Don't.'

A deeper red circle appears around his irises.

'Lucas, please,' I beg.

He turns his head away, his breathing heavy and irregular.

'Monday evening,' he finally says after what seems forever. When he looks at me again the red gaze in his eyes has disappeared. I dare to somewhat relax again. I see him take a step away from me, disappointed.

'Can you tell me what it's about?' he asks.

'No, I'm sorry.'

He nods and turns around.

'Lucas.'

He stops.

'It's nothing personal.'

He nods again and then walks towards his car.

Long after he drove off I still lean against the gate. I suddenly feel extremely miserable. I hope I didn't chase him away because of that, if I just... But what's done is done. What I have to do tomorrow is too important to fulfill sleepy-headed. While I walk inside I curse the situation that dominates my life right now. If only I had met Lucas at another moment.

It's ten 'o'clock the next morning when I leave reluctantly for my order. In the Falcon I call Sharon and agree to see her the next day. First I want to deal with that angel, get some sleep in Jabar's ultramodern villa and then have breakfast with Sharon. She goes absolutely wild when she hears I'm on my way. Still in love with the angel she'll try to take him along so I can meet him. I'm really amazed. Sharon has never before thought it worth the effort for me to meet a boyfriend or sexbuddy of hers. It has to be more serious than ever.

Strangely enough I can concentrate on the book I brought with me, although the order that's ahead of me is much more difficult than the last one and Lucas keeps stirring in my mind.

I realize I can't do much with a pistol or any other weapons when facing an angel. Especially when the speed with which he uses his telekinetic gift is equal to his strength. I stand more chance when I transform, but I didn't think about into what or how. That's my part of the job. Jabar already took care of the other part and Diedie still has to chip in. Still another difference with the last order: Diedie can't protect me against telekinetic powers in contrast to the protection of my mind against telepathical influences. If she protects my entire body I can't do much with it and I can't transform. Besides, Jabar is right: the risk of getting trapped is extremely big.

I take a nap, have a little chat with Tony and his copilot, read for a while in the book *Hunting Moon*, which is extremely thrilling, and eat something. The almost ten-hour flight is over quickly and before I realize it, I get the command to fasten my seatbelt.

Montreal lies beneath us and looks as amazing as always. I think it's a beautiful city and the people are friendly and kind. French is my second language, so that doesn't cause a problem. Besides they also speak English in an excellent way.

We don't land on the busy hypermodern Montreal-Trudeau Airport, but on a smaller airport that's almost exclusively used for cargo transport: Mirabel Airport. Tony can't wait to win the feminine population over and my transport, in the shape of a Renault, is already awaiting me at the exit.

It's two p.m., local time, the same day when I hug Kingston and get in his car. Time zones, sometimes they really bug me.

We chatter about his wifey, the weather, the latest political changes in Canada. He recommends me a delicious restaurant, but I've already decided to order a pizza or something like that this evening and get it delivered at home. I already know I'll be worn out, at least, if I

survive.

The drive to the centre of Montreal luckily is short. At three 'o'clock I'm dropped in the neighborhood of the angel's house. We agree I'll take a cab afterwards to Jabar's house and Kingston only has to expect a call the next day in the late morning to bring me back to the airport.

The Glock and the blackjack, which I got from Kingston, are in the meanwhile well hidden and out of sight in my leather jacket. At this time of the year, the spring, it can be quite hot already in Montreal and so it is now. I can only welcome it, because with the transformations I'm planning to do, I expect a serious cold front afterwards.

It could have been a great deal worse, it's Saturday and the company Joseph works for is closed. Hopefully he decided to stay home today. The house I'm standing in front of has Victorian influences with the typical balcony that runs over the entire storey. The garden looks wild, but the house itself got a new layer of white paint not so long ago.

In Kingston's car I transformed myself into a little man who delivers parcels, in the right uniform for this area. When I ring at the wrought-iron gate I'm let in immediately. While I walk to the front door I begin to feel uncomfortable. I've picked up devils before and also some vamps and elves and a single witch, but never before an angel. Their telekinetic powers can sometimes measure up to those of Superman, if he would exist. Nah well, it has to be the first time once and I gain experience this way.

The front door swings open and a man with white hair and a sharp hooknose stands in the opening. His brown eyes, which almost have a beige color, look cautious at me.

'I don't expect an order,' he calmly says.

'Joseph Jones?' I ask, making my voice as heavy as possible.

'Yes, that's me,' he answers in a nasal tone.

'A delivery from Moonwalking company.'

'The company I work for?'

I shrug. 'I have no idea, sir.'

He holds out his hand to take the package, but I can't let that happen of course, because it's a part of myself. I change so the package turns into muscles and I still look like a little man, except one that does weightlifting regularly.

Joseph blinks his eyes in surprise and wants to smack the door shut in front of me. I was prepared for that one. I transform my right arm into a crowbar and put it quick as a flash between the door. *Autch!* It hurts for a while and I'll probably be able to add a new bruise to

my collection.

I walk past him, into the hall and suddenly feel how the ground withdraws itself from me. Now it's my time to look surprised. He holds me into the air with his power at, at least, four meters above the ground.

'What are you doing here? Who are you?' he yells at me, his eyes completely white as a sheet.

'Put me down again!'

I'm not afraid anymore, but enraged and I'm only glad about that.

'Not a chance!'

*Okay, have it your way, cunt.* I transform into an eagle and not a little one. Because of that I can tear loose from his mental grip. Luckily it's an immensely big hall with a high ceiling. Only for a second he seems to be off his stroke, but that gives me enough time to dove for him. I still know to peck in one of his eyes with my beak. Fairly hard. *Yuck!* It's doesn't taste like anything, but just the mere thought!

He screams out loud and covers his eyes with his hands.

I transform into a black panther and land flexible and softly on my four paws. He has recovered in the meantime and looks at me with a mixture of disdain and rage. I hope I made the right bet and he has quite less power with one eye than when he would use both of them, but I'm still feeling anxious. See, if Jabar would only have let me read in his *Lexicon of Species* earlier, I would have probably known.

I'm thrown aside, but I can indeed feel – hooray – his strength isn't of the same level anymore. Being a panther I land on my side, but I'm immediately on my paws again and change in a boa constrictor. Sneaking over the floor I wrap myself around his calves. He tumbles, falls down and knows how to throw me off of him. I end up in a corner of the hall.

He jumps to his feet. 'Who the fuck are you? What do you want from me?'

I can't talk in the form of an animal, so I change in an average girl, but not in myself.

'We have a strong suspicion you murdered your boss and his secretary,' I say.

'Fuck off. How you can prove that? Besides, who are you?' It almost sounds moaning.

'Your angel of revenge.'

'Ha ha, how funny.'

'If you're innocent, nothing will happen.'

'And else?'

'Else you get punished.'

‘Especially by you.’

‘Among others. If you harm me, a next one will come after you.’

‘Mind your own business!’

‘Misuse of your gift is not tolerated. You surely know it’s an unwritten law among otherkinds.’

He mumbles something unintelligible but I don’t go on about it.

‘It wasn’t my fault, honestly! Tell me how I can prove my innocence to you?’ His eyes have a normal color again, but I don’t think they look honest. The eye I attacked looks nasty red and waters.

I take my mobile phone from my inside pocket and call Diedie while I rip off a big piece from the underside of my shirt.

‘What are you doing?’ he still asks, his look on my torn shirt.

‘It’s quite hot in here.’ To Diedie I say: ‘Truth mojo.’

‘Okay, bring me to his ear.’

I put a few steps in his direction and hold out my hand with the mobile phone to him.

‘What are you planning to do?’ His eyes shift back and forth from the mobile to me.

‘A truth spell,’ I smilingly say.

‘Oh no, you don’t. I don’t trust witches.’

‘How handy! We don’t trust you. Well? What’s it gonna be?’

I still go closer until I’m on half a meter away from him.

With his mental power he swings the mobile phone out of my hands, so it falls on the stone floor. Luckily it isn’t broken.

‘No,’ Joseph says firmly.

‘Then I declare you’re guilty.’

Although I know a bunch of jiu-jitsu-grips and – techniques, the next thing I do is still the most effective for men. With all of my strength I kick him in his balls. He leans down moaning. I don’t hesitate a second and wrap the piece of cloth around his head so it covers his eyes. Then I hit his head with the blackjack. Not too hard, he can’t be out for too long.

I put out the belt that’s in my jeans and is used for emergencies and bind his hands on his back. He tumbles aside. I leave him where he drops.

I pick up my mobile phone, get a seat on the ground about two meters away from him with my Glock in one hand and call Diedie.

‘Diedie?’

‘Oh, my gosh, Manon, I thought he killed you. Everything alright?’

‘Sure, everything’s fine. I just have to wait until he recovers. Whoops, that doesn’t look good, I can see blood trickling out of his head.’

‘Rather his head than yours, love.’

‘I’ll call you back right away.’

‘Alright. Be careful.’

‘Always.’

It takes about ten more minutes before he moves moaning.

‘Wake up!’ I yell. ‘It’s time to get up!’

He moans a bit harder. Oh, what a wonderful sound if it doesn’t come out of your own mouth.

‘I’m holding a pistol on you.’ I unlock the Glock clearly audible. ‘If you refuse to sign the document I’ll give to you, I’ll get a finger cramp.’

‘What kind of document?’ he asks in a sharp voice.

‘A letter of resignation. With immediate effect and without bonus.’

He seems to take my offer in account.

‘Alright, if that’s all I need to do.’

*For now, mate, but there’s more to follow.*

‘That’s all,’ I say. A white lie.

I stand up and take the paper, which Jabar drew up, out of my trousers pocket, together with a pen. After that I help him to get up, cut loose his hands and guide a hand to the document.

‘Here.’

He puts a scribble on it. Because he’s still blindfolded it’s a bit topsy-turvy, but clear enough.

‘And your name,’ I demand.

He does what I ask him to do. After that I tie up his hands again.

‘I’ll still send your resignation today for you. Isn’t that sweet of me.’

He grumbles an answer which sounds like a curse. I put the document away and call Diedie back.

‘Second round, Diedie.’

‘Alright, give me his ear.’

I lay the mobile phone next to his ear and let Diedie do her thing. When he realizes what’s happening and want to turn his head away, it’s too late already. Diedie has already got him under her mojo-influence. I know what it means, we talked elaborately about it before I flew to Montreal.

First she blots out his memory just until the point where he started working for Moonwalking. He won't remember a thing about this period. If he has done some financial investments this year or other important deals, he's out of luck. He won't remember. If he met the love of his love, he's double out of luck. He can start looking again then. Second he'll be a dishwasher for the rest of his life in a restaurant. From a high manager function to dishwasher. The difference could be bigger, but not that much.

It seems to be a gentle punishment compared to a life imprisonment. But, as I explained before already, the risk is too big. He could misuse his gift in prison against other prisoners who challenge him. Besides, the slow aging process will strike the guards after tens of years. The importance of the mass of otherkinds is more important than that of one single individual. Nevertheless we still have a little surprise in reserve for him. It was my idea and I'm still proud of it. Diedie puts a false desire in his memory. Namely the desire to spend each and every moment of his spare time to volunteer work and that for the rest of his working days. At least he's doing something to make it up. It doesn't compensate the two murders, but it's better than nothing.

'Okay,' Joseph says and that's the sign Diedie is ready.

'See you tomorrow,' I say and shut the mobile phone.

I cut loose his hands and take off his blindfold. In the meantime I got extremely cold because of the many transformations and my teeth rattle. It seems as if I'm standing in a freezer.

Joseph looks surprised at me, he clearly doesn't recognize me.

'Come on, I'll help you. You fell down.'

I support him under his armpits and he struggles to his feet.

'Joseph Jones, we're very happy you want to work in our restaurant. We urgently need dishwashers.'

'Oh?' He now looks even more surprised and especially at my torn shirt.

'Yes, that's why I came to you in personal to sign the contract. We know you'll earn precious little money, but that can change in the future.'

'Did I apply for a job?'

'Don't you remember? You did just yesterday. But you seemed a bit confused. You said you were having a headache, maybe that's why you don't remember.'

'Probably.'

'However. Welcome in our team. You told the owner of the restaurant you were tired to do paperwork jobs and you wanted to work with your hands. Well, you'll get that chance now.'



‘Oh, nice.’

He doesn’t seem convinced, but that will still come.

‘Here is the contract. You want to sign?’

I give him the pen and he signs his new work contract. A job as dishwasher in one of the busiest restaurant in Montreal. One of Jabar’s friends is the owner and he still owed Jabar something. Besides, after that friend heard how little he would have to pay his new dishwasher, he agreed immediately.

‘Here’s a card of the restaurant.’

Joseph hesitatingly takes it.

‘Then I’ll be going. See you tomorrow!’

I shake his hand. With the doorknob in my hand he stops me. *Oh, oh.*

‘Ma’am?’

I turn around carefully. ‘Yes?’

‘I’d love to do some volunteer work. Do you know some place where they could use me?’

*Yes!!!*

21.

After I posted the letter of resignation, I immediately call Jabar in the house to tell him the good news. After that I order pizza and watch reruns of 'Law and Order' the entire evening. It has been a while since I felt this relaxed. Okay, with the exception of the sex with Lucas.

Apparently Joseph's punishment isn't a trap of N. Nevertheless the question of which good Samaritan sent us the message remains.

In the morning I wake up shrewdly and don't experience any problems with the time difference. That could of course change when I'm going back home.

In the ginormic house with eight bedrooms everything is on hand. A wardrobe with clothes, underwear and full dresses. I take a long bath in the Jacuzzi with a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice. I've earned that, haven't I? My right arm, which was jammed between the angel's door, has an enormous bruise that even turns purple and green and fucking hurts. But I survived! *Hooray for Manon!*

I pick a jeans – yeah, I'm sorry, I just love jeans – and a green top with trimmings on the sleeves, which I find quite funny, from the wardrobe. I leave my Glock and blackjack. If they catch me with them, I'll have a hard time explaining. Besides I'm only going to have a breakfast with Sharon and her new boyfriend, whom I'm extremely curious about.

I take a cab to the address Sharon gave me and in less than ten minutes I'm where I need to be. I can see Sharon waving at me through the window and immediately notice something is wrong.

The breakfast joint's interior is cozy with too much flower motives, as if you're entering an old English cottage. There's a sweet scent of strawberries and freshly baked bread.

We hug each other long and tight.

'I've missed you so much,' Sharon says.

'I've missed you too.'

I hold her on a distance and look at her. 'You look great, but you don't seem so happy. Where's your boyfriend?'

We take a seat.

'Let's order first,' Sharon suggests.

We take baked eggs, potatoes, a big pot of coffee and fresh orange juice. The coffee is brought immediately and I fill our cups.

'You'll never believe it.' Sharon holds her face aslant and her big, light-blue eyes look sadly

at me. 'I can barely believe it. When I called him yesterday, he was very enthusiastic about the idea of meeting you. I already talked about you so much, so now he wanted to see you irl.' I nod and already feel it coming. He eventually saw a meeting with her best friend as a too serious step and dumped her.

'We call each other every morning, you know, before he goes jogging or he's off to work. Also this morning. But...' She shakes her head and compresses her lips, as if she can hardly hold her tears.

'Yes?' I urge her and put my hand comforting on hers.

She takes a nip from her coffee. 'He said he didn't know who I was!' She says it in such a fierce way a couple at the table next to us turns around to look at us.

'What?'

'What I tell you, he didn't know me anymore. Sharon who? he said. Can you believe it? That's really the most boneheaded excuse I've ever heard to dump someone. Even I didn't stoop to using something like that, ever.'

I barely dare to ask my next question. On the one hand I'm scared to hear the answer and on the other hand that Sharon might see the truth on my face.

'What's your friend called?'

'Joseph Jones. Why?'

I can feel myself getting cold, comparable to after the transformation. I want to answer, knowing it will come out in a stuttering way, but luckily our breakfast is put on the table right at that moment. Nevertheless, I've completely lost my appetite and have to force myself to take a bite. If I don't Sharon will know there's more than meets the eye, because she knows I'm a glutton.

'Bon appétit,' Sharon says and apparently forgetting her earlier question.

'Bon appétit.'

'You know, Manon?' she takes a bite from her omelet and swallows it down.

'No. What?'

'I thought he could be the one. It felt completely different compared to other boyfriends. More like a coming home and a kind of soulmateness. I really think I could have loved him. And now I will wonder for the rest of my life.'

I don't know what to say and only nod. It's naturally better for her that the 'being in love' didn't turn into 'real love', but still. Sharon doesn't know anything about this and I can't tell her. It will be a secret that will forever be between us and I hope I can cope with it. Why did

Sharon have to go for that Joseph?

‘Maybe he was unreliable,’ I suggest, hoping to comfort her.

‘No, he really wasn’t, believe me. He didn’t come around like that. He came around very timid and shy to me. Sweet and understanding.’

‘But how much did you really know about him? I mean about his past?’

‘Not that much yet, I admit that. But you know I’m good at reading people, Manon, and I could swear I was his first sexual partner.’

Sharon has indeed an almost unerring insight into human nature.

While I chew on a piece of potato I suddenly hit upon something again. Could it be that that mysterious N was behind all of this? Would he? It would be very far-fetched. On the other hand it would be logical. Further on he already took everyone Jabar knows in hand: Diedie, Oded and me. Apparently he knew about Sharon, otherwise that transformer wouldn’t have interrogated Diedie. Maybe he even planned the entire murder scene. Joseph getting influenced by a devil. Deceive him into thinking he was in love with that secretary and therefore jealous on his boss. A devil could have even made him commit the murders! Oh my gosh! I really don’t hope so! I’ll never get rid of that feeling of guilt. I make a mental note to tell it to Jabar. Far-fetched or not, we don’t know what that N is capable of and for how long he’s been making preparations to hurt us.

I try to get myself together and to convince myself I’m not the one to blame in this situation. Under the circumstances Sharon and I still have a quite cozy breakfast and we don’t go on about Joseph. I tell about the others at home, leaving out the problems we’re all dealing with. And she tells me about her interesting life in Montreal.

Around noon I’m again in the Falcon, on my way home. During the flight I receive two text messages. The first one is from Lucas.

**Tomorrow... I can’t wait.**

My heart makes a jump with joy. So he isn’t mad because of my rejection.

I text message him back: **me neither, xxx.**

Nevertheless, I can’t have my head in the clouds forever, because the second message I received, quite alarms me.

**This is just the beginning. N.B.**

I immediately call Jabar, pass through the message and my suspicions about Sharon’s angel.

‘He now gave two initials through. So he wants to speed up the game,’ Jabar says.

‘And in my opinion he shows he really has to do something with Joseph Jones, hasn’t he?’

‘Maybe.’

‘He already has played everyone a nasty trick and thus now Sharon.’

‘Far-fetched, Manon, but we indeed don’t know what kind of a sick person we’re dealing with.’

‘That’s what I mean. And apparently he has my new mobile number.’

‘Yes. That way he’s showing us how much power and influence he has.’

‘Apparently he wants contact, but not right now. Changing my number again won’t have much sense, has it?’

‘No. I’m going to get to work with those initials. I’ll be digging up my past searching for all N.B.’s, this should make the searching easier.’

Nevertheless, I can hear doubt in his voice. He naturally wants to reassure me, but because of his long past Jabar has known a lot of people. ‘Call me when you know more.’

‘I will. Be careful and watch out, Manon. This is just the beginning, he says and he sends it to you, not to me. Oded just tells me he will be awaiting you at the airport.’

‘That’s not necessary, really.’

‘He does it anyway. He will wait at your car.’

Jabar breaks off the connection. Actually I do feel relieved about Oded awaiting me. I’m unarmed and above that it will be the middle of the night when I arrive at Ostend Airport.

I couldn’t rest during the flight. My head is crammed with unanswered questions, tensions and feelings of guilt. That and the jetlag, which is taking its toll, make me look like a wreck when I arrive in Ostend. Tony stays, together with the copilot, behind in the airplane and I get out alone.

The airport of Ostend already has a deserted and lonely outlook during the day, but at night even more. When I walk through the empty halls and hear my footsteps ringing out loudly it feels as if I’m the only living person on this planet. I quickly walk to the exit. The glazed doors slide open and I can see Oded standing next to my car on a further almost empty parking lot. I smile relieved and wave. Oded waves back.

My mobile phone rings. Jabar.

I answer the call.

‘Manon, are you there yet?’

‘Yes. I’m on my way to the parking lot.’

'Watch out, I think I know who that N.B. is!'

I walk outside.

A droning sound comes closer.

I only realize what the sounds means at the moment I'm dragged into the panel truck. My mobile phone smacks to the paving bricks and the car drives off with screeching tires. I land painfully on the floor of the truck and still not gotten over the shock, I feel a fierce prick in my upper arm.

Then everything turns black.

I regain consciousness with a raging headache that seems to split my head in two. I open my eyes, moaning. I'm lying on a bed. My hands and feet aren't bound. Luckily.

I sit up slowly and look around. My look is still a bit blurry and my head aches even more now. In the meanwhile I prick up my ears, but there's nothing to be heard. The neighborhood is as quiet as a mouse. When my look finally sharpens, I can see that the bedroom is huge and decorated minimalistically. A bed without back or front with a plain, white bedcover on it. No night tables, only build-in cupboards and everything in shades of beige. I sway my legs over the edge of the bed. The ground is a light parquet floor with not even a little carpet on it.

The ones who kidnapped me, pulled out my boots and set them neatly next to the bed. I pull them on immediately.

On the left side of the room is a door and the right side is totally dominated by a picture window. The view is magnificent, I can't deny that. I look at a spacious garden behind which a forest begins. Because the window covers the entire wall it seems as if the room is in the garden itself. The sun is high, so I suspect it has to be Monday in the afternoon.

In line with the room, I now see, is a bathroom without dividing wall. A shower cabin that's big enough to fit two people, a spacious round bath, two washbasins and a hanging toilet. It all looks cool and new.

I walk to the washbasin and look in the mirror that's hanging above it. I look tired and wearied, which isn't a surprise. I quickly splash some water on my face and then see the glass with the box of aspirins next to it. Well, well, so my kidnappers do have some compassion. Although I don't totally trust it I decide to take the risk. That headache is unbearable and is even aching behind me eyeballs. I swallow down an aspirin and then walk to the door.

Of course it's locked. I pull and tug with the little power I've got left, but the door doesn't move an inch. I feel incredibly tired and washed-out, as if every sprinkle of energy has disappeared. The windows! I walk towards them and look at them thoroughly. No handle that suggests they can be opened. Shit!

I don't understand why I'm so exhausted and why my muscles are pricking painfully. Sighing I plop down on the bed. There's nothing else to do but to transform myself into fog, I conclude, to sneak out through the door cracks. I try it, but I don't manage to do so! At least, not totally! My hands transform into fog and just my underarms, but there it stops. That never occurred to me before. No, that's not entirely true. When I'm very tired or when my body is

physically exhausted, I sometimes also don't manage to transform. It makes me think about the first attempts I undertook to transform myself.

I was about fourteen years old when the potential gift manifested itself. With every otherkind it's at a different age, but always during puberty and with girls especially during their first period. During my first transformation Diedie and Jabar were there to guide me and comfort me. It's quite scary and requires a lot of concentration. I still remember well I wanted to transform into one of my favorite actresses: Naomi Watts. I found and still find her an incredibly beautiful woman.

'Concentrate on her, see her in front of you, even every detail,' Jabar said.

That's easier said than done, let that be clear. I did see her in front of me, but different thoughts were forced on me. It took me almost two hours before I had only formed her face and I bathed in sweat. Diedie suggested I should maybe take something that was easier, like a cupboard or closet. Jabar said it didn't matter, that the first times were always difficult and that it was part of it all. Nothing is simple and easy to learn, a gift of an otherkind isn't an exception to that rule. Eventually I became really angry with myself and especially ashamed of Jabar and Diedie because of the fact I didn't manage to transform. Although I have to say that they had an endless patience with me. A few months later I could transform into what I wanted and quite quickly. Still a few months later I could do so in two seconds at most. Jabar truthfully let me know that I didn't learn it quickly, but also not slowly. He took Diedie, Oded and me to an expensive restaurant to celebrate. It was my first visit to a real star restaurant and I felt as proud as a peacock. I could even drink champagne! The entire evening was about me and I thought it was a pity there were other costumers in the restaurant because I couldn't wait to do the transformation as much as possible.

And now I'm just sitting here, kidnapped and stripped from my powers!

I suspect not only the tiredness is playing tricks on me, but also that the narcotics they gave me are keeping my transformers-gift in a dormancy. *Damn it!* I feel so helpless and weakly knock with my fists on the quilt.

Where am I? It doesn't seem more than logical to me N.B. has kidnapped me. But why? Only to play a nasty trick on Jabar? And then what? What's he planning to do with me? He can't just knock me out with sedatives and keep me here forever against my own will? Or can he?

Luckily Oded saw what happened and hopefully he could read the number plate of the truck.



If he couldn't... then they'll never find me.

However, I can't wait for their rescue. I have to try to escape myself. Hopefully the anesthetics wear off quickly, before they can give me another one, otherwise I'm screwed.

And where are those kidnappers, damn it?

I lie flat on my back and stare at the ceiling. The headache drains away, so I'm happy it was indeed an aspirin I swallowed down.

The minutes, in which I can't do anything but look outside, pass tauntingly slow. There's no television or stereo in the room and of course no books either.

I try to transform into fog again, but still I don't manage to do it completely. Frustrated I think about the things I could do.

And then I get a brilliant idea!

I can transform myself into water and escape through the shower or bathtub drain. Change in water is somewhat easier than in fog, so maybe it will work out. It isn't really a hygienic escape route, but everything is better than waiting and maybe getting killed. Although I think, if they want to kill me, they would have done it already.

Cheerful about the idea of being too clever for them, I run to the bath. My heart immediately sinks into my boots. They blocked the drain! I quickly run to the shower. The same of course and also for the washbasins. I didn't notice earlier because you don't suspect something like that.

Vent dampers! They definitely need to be here, since the bathroom doesn't have windows that can open and above that is situated in the bedroom. I find a ventilation grid but it's screwed down with a metal plate. I look around, searching for a chair I can stand on, but already know I won't find one. Besides, with the little power I now have, I'm not even capable of lifting a television.

Dejected I take a seat on the bed again. I wonder why they specifically kidnapped me. Not because it was easier, I presume. Then they even could have kidnapped Diedie easier when that transformer pushed its way into our house. It would have hurt Jabar just as much if they had taken Diedie instead of me. Of course I don't want Diedie to sit here in my place, I'm just wondering.

Unfortunately my mobile phone fell when they dragged me into the truck. And still, they would probably have taken it from me.

I ponder, searching for solutions. *Think, Manon, think hard.*

Eventually I fall asleep from pure frustration and exhaustion.

23.

At night I have tormenting dreams in which Selena appears. She's leaning over me and pricks an injection needle in my arm. With a demonic grin she looks down on me. I want to pull her hair, but I can't move.

When I wake up with a sore head, I realize it maybe wasn't a nightmare. A very small wound in my upper arm confirms my suspicions. Somewhere in the course of the night Selena entered my room and probably gave me another dose. I notice it's still early in the morning when looking at the rising sun outside.

My arms feel heavy and although I slept the entire night, I feel weak. Damn it! The fact that I'm starving to death after not eating for an entire day only makes me feel more lifeless. Are they planning to murder me through starvation or what?

With great difficulty I struggle to my feet. It wasn't until now I noticed I'd fallen asleep with my boots on and pull them out. As a sleepwalker I drag myself to the bathroom. I undress myself, get under the shower and let the ice-cold water stream over me. My teeth chatter and I shiver like crazy, but I want to be as fresh as possible. I can't stand too long under the jet because the water is already reaching the edge of the tub.

Nah well, I couldn't care less. They have closed the drain and after all I need to have a wash. Luckily I find towels in the closet underneath the washbasin. The drying off takes a lot of effort. I'm disgusted by the thought, but I can't do anything else but to put on the same dirty clothes I've been wearing for a few days already.

At the moment I'm totally dressed the door opens. My heart immediately skips a beat and rages like crazy.

And old, stylish man enters the room. His grey hair is neatly combed backwards and he wears a perfectly ironed dark blue suit. His skin still looks flawless with only some slight wrinkles underneath his eyes that look intelligent to me.

He comes towards me with self-assured, elegant steps and meanwhile looks openly at me from head to toe. He's taller than I am, for sure about twenty centimeters. A slight smile plays about his lips.

'So, Manon, welcome to my house.' He looks at me like a python looks at its victim.

He gives me the creeps, but I don't let it show. I look back at him with a mixture of dread and anger, with my hands on my hips. I'm not planning to talk to him and press my lips tightly together. Just who does that old fart think he is?

‘You don’t look bad,’ the man continues. ‘But I’m being impolite. My apologies. My name is Noël Borgax.’

He extends his hand to me, which I’m not willing to shake. So that’s what N.B. means: Noël Borgax. Sounds as nasty as the guy himself.

He smiles and puts his hand in his pocket again.

‘You’re a pithy thing, aren’t you? But that couldn’t be otherwise. Jabar has probably trained you well.’

He demonstratively turns his back on me and walks to the window. I see my chance and get closer to him.

With his look on the outside he says: ‘Don’t you try to do anything, Manon, it’s no use.’

I abruptly stop in my movements.

‘If you turn around, you’ll see what I mean.’

With a tug I look behind me. There’s Selena, the bitch. She looks triumphantly at me and holds a pistol on me, which I think is a Beretta. She grins, exposing her fangs. Aha, so she really is a vamp and not a transformer in the shape of a vamp.

‘I think you two already met.’ Noël still hasn’t turned around yet. That guy is really sure about his power.

‘Selena is my loyal right hand,’ he continues. ‘A little bit like you are Jabar’s.’

*Except that we don’t kidnap people and don’t play dirty tricks, cunt!*

‘Do you know why you’re here?’

*For a game of Monopoly?* I’m still not planning to have a conversation with him, so I shut up.

Noël turns around and looks at me with his eyebrows raised. I fix my gaze back on him.

‘Hm, has the cat got your tongue? It doesn’t matter, it makes our job a lot easier.’

I really have to hold myself back not to fly at him and pull out all of his tidy hair.

Unfortunately I’m not immune to bullets.

‘I still have something to settle with your master. He isn’t as kind as you would think, Manon.’

*A likely story, just play your dirty psychological game. Just try to set him against me, shithead.*

‘How well do you think you know your pseudo-father? Well?’

Jabar really must be bothering him. As soon as he’s talking about him a furious expression comes around his lips and his eyes look fiercer.

‘He’s a busybody,’ he continues imperturbable.

I look at him as if I'm not at all interested in what he has to say. And that's actually the way I feel about it too.

'He has ruined my life,' he continues his monologue. 'Because of him I am who I am now!' Yeah yeah, it's always easy to blame someone else of things that went wrong in your life. Typical for psychopaths: lies and using manipulation.

I stay unmoved and that really starts to get on his nerves now. He clenches his hands to fists and looks sharply at me.

'You don't believe me? You still think that that elf is a saint? I'm the one who's the victim of his actions!' His voice cracks.

Still another feature of a psychopath: they play the poor wretch as well as the self-assured one who made something of their life. Depending on the person whom they're dealing with and are trying to manipulate. Reading those psychology books served a useful purpose.

Noël still withers me with his looks and then walks out of the room, with Selena in his tracks. With a loud hiss the door locks.

Shit, I should've asked for food. I'm not that proud that I want to die of hunger. I walk to the bed and right at that moment the door swings open.

I can't believe my eyes!

That same devil I ordered a week ago to bring the money back to the robbed shops is standing in the room. He's holding a tray on which are a jug of water and a plate with sandwiches. Without losing me out of his sight he walks to the bed and puts the tray on it.

Immediately it occurs to me that I don't have Diedie's mojo to protect me against his telepathical influence! That doesn't look so good for me.

'Do you recognize me?' he sneeringly asks.

He looks freshly washed and pedantic. Absolutely not like when I met him for the first time. Further on he wears expensive looking cotton trousers, a roll neck and leather slip-ons.

'I recognize your ugly conk, yes,' I answer. 'What was your name again? Rumpelstiltskin?'

He only grins.

I wither him with my looks. 'Is it your turn to interrogate me? Can't your little boss handle it anymore? Isn't he strong enough?'

In one step he's in front of me and he slaps me with the flat of his hand. *Autch! Goddamnit!* My head turns aside and my cheek already feels red and swollen.

'Don't you dare to besmirch Noël's name ever again, you stupid bag. The next time it won't stop with just a slap, but I'll use my fists.'

‘Oh, now you’re tough, aren’t you?’ I rub my painful cheek.

‘I surely could have handled you the first time, but I had to take part in the game.’

‘Oh, why? Did the game of goose become worn? Are your Barbie dolls broken?’

‘You think you’re smart, don’t you, stupid bitch. But who got caught? And who’s locked up now?’

‘I can only see one, or no, two that are locked up to me. Two otherkinds that are working for a human.’

‘Who says he’s human?’ He looks provocative at me. ‘Well?’

‘You follow his orders, seems slavish work to me,’ I ignore his question.

‘And what do you do for Jabar then?’ He says enraged.

‘Free choice. I’m not obliged to do so.’

‘We neither!’ His voice sounds convincing, but doubt appears in his look.

‘You murder because he asks you to do so. I know you let those two brother jump of their roof.’

‘So what? I’ve done what you also do. Protect our kinds so nobody hears about us.’

‘We’ve never murdered for that!’

Is he comparing my and Jabar’s behavior to what they’re doing? The filthy guts!

‘Is he human?’ I ask calmly.

I can’t lose my self-control right now.

‘That’s none of your bloody business.’

‘You don’t know yourself, do you?’

‘Of course I know. I can read his mind!’

‘And how does that look? A cesspool of vice?’

The conversation is starting to annoy me and above that the hunger is gnawing a hole in my stomach. Even if they strew poison on it, those sandwiches will disappear in my throat. But I don’t want that devil to see how greedy I am for that plate.

I can see his fist coming my way and can just duck away.

He stands in front of me, roaring. ‘It looks better than inside your head.’

‘Stay out of my head or you’ll be sorry,’ I hiss.

‘Oh, I’m so afraid of a transformer that can’t even change her fingers,’ he sneers.

I could just strangle him! Otherkinds are very sensitive when it comes to their gifts. It’s like a professor that suddenly has an I.Q. of forty-eight. Extremely humiliating.

‘Besides, I don’t need to read your mind. We know everything about you and your moronic

friends.'

We can call each other names until our throat hurts, but I'm not getting anywhere with that. If he's planning to keep standing over here, I can just interrogate him. Who knows what I can do with the information.

'What exactly is your name?' I ask politely. It really costs me a fucking effort.

'Just call me Ed.'

Hm, something tells me that isn't his real name. I wonder how that comes?

'Ed who?'

'Ed Doe.'

'Did you encourage Joseph Jones to kill his boss and that secretary?'

'Why you want to know?'

'Curiosity. A feature many women have. Or aren't you mentally strong enough to do something like that,' I draw him out.

'Yes, I did it and it wasn't even that hard.' He looks at me so fulfilled I feel like kicking his balls!

'What did that Joseph do wrong?'

'He was your friend's boyfriend, that was already enough.'

I see in his look he's provoking me.

He continues: 'And it was fun to do it. Only to show that I can do it. That we can play with your lives.'

'How old are you? Five?'

Now he's quicker. The punch rebounds off the side of my head. I see stars for a moment, but, unstable, I manage to keep standing. A second punch hits me in my stomach. Now I do double over. I try to breathe, but it comes out faltering and jerking. *Fuck, that hurts!* But I can also feel the adrenaline rushing through my body.

Great.

With a cry I fly at him and bang my head into his stomach by which we both fall to the ground. Lying on top of him, I transform my fingers into sharp knives and cut him, without hesitation, in his both sides. Immediately afterwards I jump up and take the necessary distance. It surprises me that the transformation works, but I don't have the time to give it a moment's thought. I transform my fingers back to normal. Ed starts to whine loudly. It's music to my ears.

The door swings open and Selena rushes in.

Okay, I'm in for a fight, bring it on. Ready for battle I defiantly look at her.

'Do you still manage?' she asks Ed. She looks down on him as if he's less worth than a tapeworm.

'Yes,' he says while moaning. 'But quickly. I can't hold it that much longer.'

I can feel my brains tingle. *Oh, no! Oh, no! Ed is doing his mojo!*

The next moment I can move, but I don't want to. The long for standing still is too dominant. Somewhere I do realize this isn't right and it conflicts with my will, but still I can't do anything about it. The brains are after all the conductor of the body.

Selena bends over and takes something from Ed's pocket. It's a digital photo camera. She comes to stand in front of me and looks triumphantly at me. Then she gives me a well-aimed left and right. I feel my lip splitting open and taste the blood.

'You're pretty like this,' Selena grins and takes a few photos.

She grabs in her pocket and pulls out an injection syringe of which she takes off the cap and throws it on the ground. I feel the prick in my upper arm and at the same time my strength trickle out of my body.

Then she walks to Ed and supporting him, they leave the room.

The tingle in my head disappears immediately and I start to stamp enraged on the ground. Okay, not really grown-up, but I don't have a punching bag to vent my displeasure on. I do feel satisfaction when I notice Ed's blood on the parquet.

Then I realize I didn't hear a hiss and rush towards the door. In her hurry to bring away Ed, that bitch forgot to close the door. Quickly I put on my boots.

I look into the hall and listen carefully. There's nothing to be seen or heard and I don't see cameras hanging. Still I don't totally trust it; it can still be a trap.

The hall is so white it hurts my eyes. The only things that break through this sea of white are two paintings. Of course, the paintings Jabar wanted to buy on the auction. That really doesn't surprise me. They're somewhat bad style here and I suspect Noël put them up here just in case I would spot them. Showing off his power a bit and nastily poking in the wound. *Little child!*

The ground in the hall is luckily covered with white cork so my footsteps are almost silent. With every step, I look backward, expecting Selena or someone else to stand behind me. But I get through the hall without busybodies and descend a marble stair.

In the distance I hear music. I look through the banister downstairs and see a spacious living room. Also here everything is white and tightly modern. I can't notice someone in the leather couches so I descend the stair cautiously.

The living room borders on an open kitchen and on both sides are windows from the floor to the ceiling. It feels like an enormous aquarium. Outside are only grassy plains and trees to be seen.

I need to be careful here, because the floor consists of marble that makes the sound of my footsteps reverberate loudly. I can't detect any smell, except some disinfectant. So there isn't much cooking going on in that ultramodern, spacious kitchen.

The entire interior actually looks as if there isn't much living going on. It rather looks like a showroom of a living store. No personal objects like photos or artworks. Ugh, cozy is not what I'd call it.

The music I heard a few minutes ago sounds harder now, but I still can't discover the origin. I also don't see a front door anywhere. Extremely bizarre. I walk to the windows and look detailed and quickly at them. Then I see a rectangular joint. Aha! But where is the doorknob? I do see a pole standing close with a kind of eye in it. Maybe a card reader? I put my hands on the glass and feel and push at different places. The window doesn't budge. I start to feel really nervous right now. My heart is raging like crazy when I realize that an escape is not that simple. And because of that fucking injection of Selena I feel that my powers are almost zero. There's nothing else to do but to leave the living room and search for another escape possibility. At least, if there is any.

Next to the kitchen, where still isn't any sign of cooking industry, I see stairs going to the



cellar. I hesitate. A cellar seldom has an exit, maybe a shutter to the garden, but I strongly doubt it. Still, I don't have another choice. Keep standing here or returning to my room is even more useless.

It's a wooden stair and I descend on the tips of my boots. The music gets louder and sounds Jazzy. The smell of disinfectant becomes more intense and some other smells also push forward. It makes me think of a pharmacist or a hospital.

The stair ends in an endless white-painted hall with glazed doors on both sides and a concrete ground. The first door on the right is open. Now I recognize the music that comes out of the room: John Coltrane. I pull a face: I don't like the fact they're playing one of my favorite Jazz musicians. It doesn't fit that my enemy has such a good taste in music.

I need to be careful now, because probably someone is present in one of the rooms. I put my head just for a second in the door opening for a review of the inside. With bated breath I hold myself tight to the wall and go through the things I saw in my mind.

A big desk and bookcases in Mahoney wood, brown leather chairs, an antique globe on a standard and an office chair that was turned with its back towards the door opening. Grey hair sticking out above the chair and I suspect it's Noël sitting there. I also saw built-in screens. Probably he's watching them and so now is the moment to sneak past him.

I quickly take a look in the room again. He's still sitting unmoved in his chair.

*Okay, now, Manon.* I take a deep breath and let the air escape slowly from my lungs. At the moment I rush past the door opening, I hear his voice.

'Manon, come and join me.'

Did he see me? Did he smell me or what?

As being petrified I keep standing. My look flashes from left to right, not knowing what to do.

'Manon, you can't go anywhere. Enter.'

The office chair turns and Noël looks at me with a sardonic smile, his manicured hands folded before his stomach.

I furiously walk into the room and keep standing in front of the desk. On the desktop are piles of bumph and in between the trash I can see the 'Lexicon of Species'!

'Take a seat.'

He points at a leather chair, but I refuse to sit down.

'Very well. Just keep standing then.'

We stare at each other for a while, as if we're playing the game of who looks away first. Ah yes, of course, Noël is a player on all fronts. But this time he'll lose. At least I want this little

victory to be mine. Eventually he smiles in a lame attempt to come across as being polite.

'I'm not the bogeyman, Manon,' he says softly.

'Well, you aren't my choice for 'man of the year' either.'

He chuckles hoarsely. 'But you are for woman of the year.'

'Glad you like me,' I say sharply.

'Have you been naughty? Your cheek is kind of red and you've got a bruise on the side of your face.'

'It's the new trend. Came right after the torn jeans and purple hair.'

He sighs deeply. 'You know, you've been informed totally wrong.'

'Hm, let me guess. You've got nothing to do with that angel that ruined his life, you didn't scare Diedie, you didn't burn Oded's house, you...'

'Indeed,' he interrupts me. 'All those things are Jabar's fault.'

'Yeah right, you can tell that to your mommy, but not to me. Although I doubt whether a creep like you has a mother. Got tired of you in hell?'

'You should know hell doesn't exist.'

'I know more than that, Cerberus.'

'Aha, you know your mythologies.'

'Why do you keep me captured here? If you want Jabar's money then the book was already sufficient.'

I point at the Lexicon. He bursts out laughing and waves his hands in the air.

'Does it look like I'm in need of money?'

My look now spots the television screens. About twenty in total. Five screens are turned off, but the other ones show the rooms in the house. Also my room. That bastard is keeping an eye on me for the entire time and has stuck closely to my feeble attempt to escape.

He follows my look and a slanting smile curls about the corners of his mouth. 'This house is completely computer-controlled. The house of the future, you've probably heard about that already.'

I don't answer, so he continues: 'The house consists largely of windows through which you can look outside, but not inside. Although I can change that with a simple button.'

'Where's the front door?'

Again he bursts out laughing. I will hear that sound re-echo for a long time in my mind, I already know that.

'Do you really think I'm going to blazon that abroad?'

I shrug.

‘Please, take a seat, Manon. I saw you still haven’t eaten.’

I completely forgot because of the excitement to escape, but now my stomach starts to rumble as if it’s an answer to Noël. Eventually I take a seat because I’m not that steady on my legs anymore. He opens the door at the side of the desk, which sounds heavy as if it’s of a fridge, and gets out a filled sandwich. I should be strong and refuse, but the hunger is too big to ignore so I snatch the sandwich out of his hands and put my teeth in it. I get grouchy when I’m hungry and I need to replenish my energy. I can’t do much when I’m feeble and with an empty stomach.

He looks at my gorging with a neutral look in his eyes and patiently waits until I’ve tucked away the sandwich completely.

‘Enjoyed your meal?’ he then asks.

‘It tasted a bit like betrayal and madness, but further on it wasn’t bad.’

I recognize the number ‘While my lady sleeps’ of John Coltrane, because I used to play it a lot.

‘I’m not mad, however, Jabar is,’ he says.

He looks relaxed, leaning back in his chair like that, but I notice a subdued tension with him.

‘So you don’t think it’s mad to keep me here against my own will?’

‘Captivity is always against the will of the captivated individual.’

‘Are we taking it the semantic way?’

‘If you want it to,’ he answers calmly.

‘What I want is to go home. That’s what I want.’

‘That’s not possible. But if you need something else. New clothes?’

I throw a devastating look in his direction as an answer.

‘That’s what you want, isn’t it? New clothes. How long are you wearing these? Two, three days?’

‘I’d rather stink than accept something from you.’

He grins, clearly being pleased as Punch. Yes, of course, I’m such a stupid cow. I’ll join in his game, according to his rules. That’s why he looks so pleased.

‘You know,’ I then say and smile really sweet. ‘You can just give me those clothes.’

‘They’re already on your bed.’

Damn it. In the time I came downstairs and landed up in his office, he thus took care of that? I didn’t see him call and no one else entered.

He sees my surprise and smiles. I really need to hide my facial expressions better. Sometimes I'm really an open book. Jabar pointed that out so many times before, but it's not easy to unlearn it.

'Why did you steal the Lexicon?' I ask.

'I didn't steal it.'

'Let it steal then. Just, shit, act normal.'

'Watch your language, young lady,' he reprimands in a strict tone.

'Go fuck yourself.'

'One more term of abuse and I'll send you back to your room.'

He's giving me the fucking feeling as if I'm a little child! *Cunt!* But I control myself, bite my lower lip and take a big breath.

'Well, the Lexicon?' I insist.

'It's, next to you and his friends, Jabar's most loved possession. Comparable to a diary. As long as he doesn't know where it is, he'll keep quiet.' Noël gently taps the leather cover.

'Besides it lists useful information. Kill a lot of birds with one stone. My favorite way of working.'

'Jabar knows you're behind all of this,' I say triumphantly.

He doesn't even blink his eyes. 'It became time he did. For a smart elf that lives for one hundred and fifty years already, he took a long time.'

'We'll get you after all,' I hiss. My self-control starts to disappear.

'Maybe, but it doesn't seem likely to me,' he says in such a self-assured tone I feel an urge to puke.

'And is Ed still alive?'

'Ed?'

'Oh, what's his name again?'

'You mean the devil?'

'Yes, his name eludes me...'

'Except for my name, you won't find out the other ones, Manon.'

'What about Selena?'

'Who told you that was her real name? But Ed is doing fine. I've employed some excellent doctors here.' He nods at the hall, as if they're standing in a row over there.

'What are you?'

He acts as if he doesn't understand me by raising his eyebrows interrogatively. 'A man of

almost eighty years old and you?’

‘You don’t look eighty.’ *Yuck!* I said it before I realized it. A compliment is really the least I want to grant him. Almost at the same level as him being alive.

‘I have enough money to keep me intact and that still for a very long time.’

‘Freak.’

‘Well well, what did I just say about terms of abuse. To your room.’

He points at the door. I look astonished at him. What is he thinking? That he’s my father or something!

‘I’ll go when I want to!’ I yell.

‘Of course, child, of course.’

That’s just too much. I jump up with stretched arms and glide over the desk towards him. As if I’m on a rubber, I get pulled back right before I can touch him. Selena of course!

Before I can punch her, she chains my hands on my back.

‘Is she being naughty?’ Selena asks Noël.

‘A little.’

‘No dessert this evening?’

Noël pretends he needs to think about it and then shakes his head. ‘No dessert.’

Selena drags me out of the room on my handcuffs and up the stairs.

‘Filthy bitch!’ I yell. ‘Let go off me! I can walk myself!’

She lets me go, but keeps walking next to me through the living room. Unfortunately she keeps a distance on the stair; otherwise I could have let her crash it down with a backward kick. Looks wonderful to me.

I’m thrown into the room and can just keep myself standing.

‘Hey, my cuffs.’

‘In an hour or so you can probably transform your hands,’ she says with a scornful smile and throws the door shut behind me.

Dejected I plop down on the bed. *What a marvelous escape attempt, wasn’t it! Three cheers for Manon, just take a seat on the front row.* I look angrily at the dress that’s lying on the bed, as if it’s all its fault. The dress doesn’t look bad, but absolutely isn’t practical. It’s long and clinging in broken white with and low-cut both in the front and the back. Nylons and pumps with small heels are in an open box next to it. There’s also a lingerie set that doesn’t leave much to the imagination and looks extremely expensive. What does that Noël think of me? That I’m going to a ball or what?

The tray with the sandwiches Ed brought earlier is taken away. But luckily the can of water is still there. I now see that the can is made of plastic instead of glass. They're probably scared I would smash it in their faces? Well, they're right.

It's getting dark and I feel miserable. I'm in the grasp of loneliness. Luckily I don't feel fear anymore for a long time already, it would only paralyze me. Nevertheless, I'm more worried about Diedie, Jabar and Oded. They'll be deadly worried about me and I can't bare the thought of that. Diedie probably goes desperately crying and that hurts me more than the fact I'm caught in here. In the meantime Lucas probably came around. I wonder what kind of excuse Jabar gave him.

I already got off the cuffs and I finished the can of water. The dress is next to me on the bed, but I haven't touched it with one finger yet.

Everything became such a mess! Little more than a week ago everything was still alright and I was nicely sitting in the Falcon and on my way to do my job. And now Oded has lost his pub, Jabar his Lexicon and I'm captive. But we're all still alive and that's what I lean on.

The door opens and Selena enters.

'Noël asks you to put the dress on,' she says.

'Tell him to put on the dress himself. It wouldn't look bad on him, the drag queen.'

'Have it your way. As long as you don't put on the dress, you won't leave the room. I like that better, so, thank you.'

She turns around and walks out of the room.

'I won't put on the dress, you hear me!' I yell at the door and hopefully at the hidden camera, although I can't still figure out where it is.

I look straight ahead, sulking. Slowly my anger disappears and I realize that when I want to know more about that Noël and his illegal affairs I'll have to leave the room. And if the only way to do so is to put on that dress... Well, alright, I'll join in his game. At least for now.

I walk to the bathroom and notice they took away the protective covers from the drains. Well yeah, now they of course know I can't transform into water or whatever with that stuff inside my body.

I decide to take a long bath and to let me soak. I want to wash off all of the psychological dirt from the contact with Selena, Ed and Noël.

The tub is quickly filled with warm water. I find a plastic bottle in a closet that, with opening it, smells lovely like vanilla. It surely wasn't there when I looked in the closet for the first time. I see in the mirror that my cheek is quite red and swollen and a bruise, which feels fucking painful, has formed itself on the side of my face. My body starts to look like a

coloring book by now.

I realize Noël will see me naked, but I can't worry about it now. I've never been prudish, a body is a body. Besides I don't know how long I'll be caught in here and it's impossible to never wash myself. He has already seen me naked when I took a shower this morning.

I let my dirty clothes drop on the floor and quickly get in the bath. The water is still too hot, but I let myself slide into it, fighting off the pain. I'm not going to parade for too long in my altogether in front of him. The foam reaches my chin and once my body adjusted itself to the temperature I can enjoy it.

With my eyes closed I go through the recent events. Noël hides a lot, I'm sure about that. It seems to be a self-made man with a psychotic side and that can only lead to hidden and dangerous affairs.

The cellar smelled hospitalish and thus is clearly kept clean and sterile. There were several rooms and I wonder what they're keeping hidden in there. Actually the entire house feels unreal, as if it's a set. The place where they really lived and worked is in the cellar. The fact that Noël's office is located there is to me already a proof I'm right.

While I'm soaping my hair with foam I'm seeing Selena's face again when she came to ask me to put on the dress. Looking back I would say that her look was jealous. Would she be in love with Noël? *Well, yuck!* He could be her gramps.

Besides, what is he planning to do with me? Why do I have to put on that haute couture dress? Doesn't really fit the profile of a kidnapper that wants to blackmail, I think.

I'm afraid the house isn't registered in Noël's name and if so, Jabar will never find me. The escape will thus depend on me, but I doubt whether I'll be creative enough to do so. However, I go with the flow, keep my eyes open and hope that somewhere an opportunity presents itself.

I wash out my hair carefully and then get out of the bath. While drying myself my thoughts go to Lucas. Would he have called me in the meantime? Is he thinking about me anyway? Despite that we don't know each other for a long time yet, I have to admit I miss him.

I don't have a clue about what time it is. I'm not wearing a watch and normally use my mobile phone to know the time. Looking at the light outside, it must be late in the afternoon.

The lingerie and the dress fit perfectly, as if they have been custom-made. Reluctantly I have to admit that Noël has chosen well and has an excellent taste, but don't you think I'll tell him.

I put on the nylons carefully, which isn't simple in my position. I rarely wear nylons because they are ripped within an hour with me. The stilettos also fit wonderfully well.



With my fingers I go through my wet hair and let them dry while loose. Then I go waiting on the bed. That's all I can do for now. I try to transform again, but just like before it's tough going and it stops with my underarms.

The waiting starts to annoy me. I get up and walk to the door on which I start to hammer with my fists. Unfortunately, it doesn't really mean a lot, a three-year-old child has even more strength.

'Let me out of this fucking room!' I yell.

I hear something and stop. The door opens. Selena stands before me with a Beretta in her hands.

'One wrong movement,' she threatens.

I smile as sweet as I can. 'And screw up the dress? Don't think so.'

'Walk before me.' She gestures with the pistol in the direction of the hall.

In the passing I take a look at the two paintings that look so out of place here. I can feel my sadness increase visibly. *I want to go home! To Jabar and Diedie! Pull yourself together, Manon, see it as an order, damn it.*

With my chin in the air I descend the stair, planning to not let my homesickness and sadness show to Selena or whoever in this glazed house. The living room and kitchen look the same as before and we take the stair to the cellar.

I smell garlic and baked meat and it makes my mouth water. I just love to eat, a big weakness of me. While descending the stair BB King welcomes us with his fantastic music, by which the homesickness only grows. Jabar and Diedie namely listened often to BB.

I'm taken into Noël's office. With a big smile he's sitting at his desk, as if we're having a date. The desk itself is covered with a white linen tablecloth, a candlestick with candles, crockery and filled wineglasses. Further on there's a bottle of red wine and big bowls filled with potatoes, vegetables and a dish of baked roast beef. Everything, except the food of course, is made of plastic. Does he really think you can only hurt someone with glass?

'Take a seat.' Noël lights the candles and says: 'Dip lights.'

Oh, so this is how he wants to do it. I'm curious and take a seat.

'Is that everything?' Selena keeps her face tightly into place, but I notice her subdued envy.

'Yes. Lock the door behind you.' Noël keeps looking at me while he answers.

Selena leaves the room and pulls the door shut just a bit too loud.

'Châteauneuf du Pape,' Noël says and raises his wineglass into the air.

I take my glass, but refuse to toast. The wine tastes deliciously aromatic.

‘What’s the meaning of all of this?’ I ask and put the glass down.

‘Just relax. And enjoy your meal.’

Noël fills our plates, gets from behind his desk and starts to cut the meat into pieces.

‘Say, I can do that myself!’ I say.

‘Sssh’ he shuts me up.

‘What...’

‘Can’t you wait for a minute? I like to cut the meat for you.’

I press my lips tightly together and let him even unfold my napkin and put it on my lap. He takes a seat and does the same with his napkin. With refined gestures he starts to eat and looks integrating at me.

‘Well, bon appétit,’ he says.

I eat a lot less refined than he does and gorge myself like a famished pig.

‘Can’t you do that a bit tidier?’ he asks with raised eyebrows.

My fork hangs between the plate and my mouth. The sauce drips off the piece of roast beef.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t Jabar teach you some good manners?’

‘I eat like I want to and if you’re having a problem with that, just don’t watch it.’

Noël sighs. ‘Make an effort. For me.’

I burst out laughing. ‘I’m not your wife and still. You don’t have anything to say to me.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Never! Skunk!’

He swallows down a piece of potato. ‘Now what did I tell you about terms of abuse?’

‘That you want to learn more of them?’

Noël sighs and shakes his head. ‘Oh, little girl. All of that will change.’

The way in which he says it gives me the creeps. I don’t think he ever says something without meaning it or without having a clear plan in mind. The food doesn’t taste good anymore, hungry or not. I put down my cutlery and take a big gulp of wine.

‘You drink wine like this, for which you pay at least one hundred Euros per bottle, with little nips,’ he says calmly as if he’s droning a lesson.

When will he stop with that patronized behavior?

‘It disappears in your stomach anyway, so what are you making such a fuss about?’

‘Let’s keep the conversation light-heartedly. What do you think about that?’

I shrug my shoulders and lean backwards in the leather chair.

‘Why is it you can’t stand Jabar?’ I ask.

‘You call that light-hearted?’

‘All things considered I do, yes.’

‘He took away the love of my life from me.’

‘Boohooohoo,’ I sneer. ‘How cliché.’

From one moment to the other he looks at me as if he wants to slit my throat. *Oh, oh, I’ve gone too far. Careful, Manon.*

‘Sorry,’ I mumble, not meaning it.

His facial expressions soften and he takes a bite from his meat.

‘Okay, just tell,’ I urge him. ‘I promise I won’t laugh anymore.’

I’m trying my best to look as serious as I can, which works well.

He sighs. ‘I’ll tell you because I want you to know what kind of person Jabar really is. And if you think I’m a monster, you’ll agree with me afterwards. I became this way because of him.’

I nod, but of course have my own ideas on it.

‘When I was thirty,’ he continues, ‘I lived in London. So that was thus in the sixties. I was a cheerful man with many ambitions, but didn’t have a clear direction in life. I enjoyed going out as much as I enjoyed working and I enjoyed the many women even more. I was a lady-killer and never had long-term relationships. Money was unimportant in the sense it disappeared just as quickly as I got it. Money needed to be spent, every day was one to live to the fullest and tomorrow didn’t exist. You don’t eat anymore?’

‘I’m full.’

‘You don’t say: I’m full. You say: I’ve had enough, thank you.’

I pull a face. ‘I’ve had enough.’ But refuse to add ‘thank you’.

‘Very good.’ He takes a bite and chews carefully. ‘My parents left me a not so unkind amount of money, but it was quickly used up on drugs, alcohol and the women. It was the time of the Beatles and the free sex and I have to admit that I’ve had my share of it. I worked in banking and thus earned a lot. But everything knows an end of course.’

I find it very hard to imagine Noël as an unleashed hippy. He takes a nip from his wine and I do the same. BB King still fills the room and I start to feel drowsy.

‘Actually that wasn’t so bad, because I got dragged too much in the decadent life of London back then. I threatened to collapse and met Morgan Tahon right on time.

Noël’s look gets something dreamy when he calls her name. He looks into the distance as if she’s standing before him and then there’s a sad haze around him.

‘Jabar’s sister?’ I ask to wake him.

He looks at me as if I’m only just sitting there. ‘Yes, Jabar’s sister. The love of my life.’

I know Jabar once lived in London, so now I understand how those two met each other.

‘She was a volatile beauty, unreal. She rose above every other woman through her finesse and elegance. And not only that. I was under the spell of her soft voice, she stunned me with her sweet scent. It was as if I was standing in a sea of flowers when I was with her. When she touched me, I forgot that I existed. She could join in any conversation and never raised her voice.’

Again a desperate look appears in his eyes. Noël pushes his plate away from him and pushes a button that is attached in the desk. Selena immediately enters. With a motion of his hand he gestures her to clean the desk. She doesn’t look at me, but I’m sure she’d rather shove the plastic cutlery through my throat. It must be humiliating for her to clean my mess, but she does it anyway. The quick glances she throws at Noël make indeed clear she’s feeling more for him than mere respect or friendship.

Noël doesn’t say a word until Selena leaves with everything, except for the wine. Luckily, because I can still use some more to get through this little trip throughout the past.

‘So she was perfect,’ I say. *Pff, isn’t everyone in the beginning?*

Noël nods. ‘We had a fantastic time together, although it only lasted for a few weeks. I thought it was odd I couldn’t meet her parents or brother, but I didn’t mind. As long as she was with me.’

‘But that didn’t last.’ And I can already guess why.

He gets a fierce glow in his eyes when he says: ‘No, indeed! And not because we didn’t love each other. We were mad about each other, made love as if we couldn’t get enough of each other, laughed and talked. We were happy!’ That last one comes out very hard.

After fifty years he still loves her and he apparently didn’t forget her, that message is clear.

‘Jabar intervened?’ I suggest, because it seems logical to me.

‘Yes, he intervened. One day he looked out for me at my place. I’ve never had seen him before and thought he came to introduce himself as Morgan’s brother. He pushed off immediately. I couldn’t see Morgan anymore. The family would never approve of it, he assured me in a cool tone. Morgan left abroad and I would never know where. Just like that, from one day to the other, my world fell apart. Jabar left me broken and heavily depressed. I’ve locked and neglected myself inside for months afterwards. I lived between the dirt, scarcely ate, drank buckets of alcohol and smoked like a chimney. I excluded friends and

when they were at my door, I didn't open. I was going under so badly I was able to smell hell and touch it with my fingertips.'

I can't help to feel a little bit of sympathy for him. I know, he doesn't deserve it, but sometimes I'm a real romantic. I wonder whether Jabar will intervene between Lucas and me. Would he also forbid our relationship? And even then! I won't allow that! I already know now I feel more for Lucas than just lust and I won't allow Jabar to meddle with it. Besides, I hope Lucas won't let him chase away that easily.

Noël goes on. 'One day I decided it had been enough. I showered and put on new clothes. What led to that change was the finding back of a picture of Morgan. She looked right into the lens and it was as if at that moment she, lying on a moldy mattress, looked at me and reprimanded me. There was so much love in that picture, love and compassion. I realized at that moment that if I ever wanted to have her back, I needed to undertake action. For the first in a very long time I walked outside. I still remember it was a cloudy day, but the light troubled me. My eyes got used to the dark. Already after a few steps my muscles started to protest. I was completely run-down. With my last strength I went to a supermarket and stock up all the necessary. I returned to the house and the weeks after I slowly built everything up. Room by room I cleaned the house. Of course I'd lost my job in the meantime and my friends had given up on me. That was fine with me. I wanted to wipe the slate clean and was determined to find Morgan. But not before I got rich. Filthy rich, so rich I couldn't spend the money in my entire life.'

'You hoped to be good enough for Morgan that way?'

Noël nods and refills our glasses. I'm quite tipsy already, but the wine is too good to leave it.

'I was then still thinking Jabar had given me the true reason, namely that I was too poor to marry his sister. I didn't know it was a lie. It didn't matter how much money I would have. Whatever I would do, I could never become her husband.'

'Because you're not an elf. So, what are you? Human?' I try.

He ignores my question and muses on. 'Of course I didn't know that back then. That Morgan was an elf and that otherkinds existed. I didn't know either that different kinds can't mutually propagate. And a human and an otherkind surely not.'

'That's the way it is, you know.' I need to give up the wine before I give him a hug out of pity.

'Yes yes, I do know that. But then Jabar could have explained it to me.'

'That's out of the...'

'I know you need to be kept secret and I understand. But I'm sure Morgan wanted to marry me, despite the fact that I'm not an elf. It didn't matter to her, I could see it in her eyes and I could feel it in her touches. We would have stayed childless, that's certain, but it would have been our choice and be happy. Not all couples need to have children.'

I can't add anything to that, so I nod.

'We really would have been happy,' he emphasizes again.

'If she really loved you, she would have opposed her brother, wouldn't she?'

'No!' Noël looks ice-cold at me. 'She really loved me. Jabar must have convinced her one way or another.'

'When did you discover otherkinds existed?' I ask quickly, trying not to affect his temper even more.

It doesn't seem my question hit him when he goes on. 'Jabar had my age in London. At least, he looked that way. And since Morgan claimed to be twenty-six, Jabar couldn't differ that much in age. The day I regained life again, I decided to follow Jabar and study him. He would once lead me to his sister, I was sure about that. I looked up everything I could find about him, which wasn't much because he fairly stayed out of the public life. I did discover that he and his sister had properties that were spread all over the entire world. But I'm wandering. You already know how rich Jabar is.'

The music stops and Noël says: 'Play CD two.'

'Have you become as rich as him?' I ask.

Noël smiles and sounds less demonic than before, but that could also be because of the wine.

'Not at all. I'm rich, extremely rich. Nevertheless, I'm not yet reaching the amount he has on his accounts.'

'You haven't told about how you discovered us yet.'

'You're interrogating me, but that doesn't matter.' He grins and for a second his falsity resurfaces. 'I lost him out of sight for a while, but through private detectives I tracked him down again in Belgium. Meanwhile, you came into sight, an extremely cute baby I have to say.'

'Thank you.' I blurt it out before I know it.

'I saw, as years passed by, that Jabar didn't age much. Easily two or three times slower than I did. I found it strange, but it could have been a coincidence. I never saw Morgan. I suspect he visited his sister, but that she never visited him in Belgium. Nevertheless, I kept hoping and kept an eye on Jabar. He often left in his private jet to other countries, which wasn't much of

a surprise, since he owned many properties everywhere. But one day I noticed something or better said, the detective that kept an eye on the house in Jabbeke, noticed something special.' Noël looks pleased at me, clearly being as pleased as Punch because of his discovery.

He continues: 'I think you were fourteen years old then, and you transformed in the garden into a little weeping willow. It still didn't look realistic, but the pictures didn't lie. Ten years ago, photo manipulation was of course already possible, but not as easily as it is now. Besides, the detective was beside himself. He was definitely speaking the truth, was too shocked and nervous to make something up like that. I quickly took it for the truth and killed the man.'

I have to look quite shocked at that moment, because he says: 'It was necessary to protect your kinds, I hope you're able to see that.'

I nod in order not to offend him, just now that he's so chatty and reasonable. Nevertheless, my suspicion is that he didn't want to share the secret with anyone and hoped that it would come in handy to play a nasty trick on Jabar. Which turns out to be.

'From then on I kept an eye on you myself as much as I could. In the meantime I had a great financial scope and enough assistance to look after my affairs.'

And plenty of time for his personal obsession goes through my head.

'I saw you transform a few times and discovered that Diedie was more than an average woman.' Noël smiles. 'And the icing on the cake. Oh, besides, you want dessert?'

I shake my head.

'Well, we do have delicious chocolate mousse.'

'No, thank you.'

'Well alright, so the icing on the cake. Jabar often got his Lexicon out of a safe and I saw him making notes in it. Of course I didn't know what it was, but I did know it had to be a special book. I had already heard several conversations between you two about otherkinds, your trainings, the orders you would get. All extremely interesting. Then the need to be surrounded by otherkinds grew.'

Noël pauses for a while. He takes a nip from his wine and I follow his example. Just getting drunk then.

'Surely,' he continues, 'if I wanted to be strong. Only money wouldn't be enough to embitter Jabar's life after he had ruined mine.'

'How did you come to them?' I ask, referring to Selena, Ed and the transformer that posed as me. I'm actually wondering where that last one is. I think I haven't met him yet.

‘Through the list I found on your computer of course. It’s true there were only names and addresses listed on it, but I could already guess it wasn’t a list of normal people. Believe me, if you have the necessary money, then even otherkinds can be persuaded to submit to someone.’

*Otherkinds of the lowest kind, yes.*

‘A few years ago I was completely ready for it. I wanted to execute my plan before you were strong enough to fulfill your orders. Nevertheless, my body had other plans with me. My heart became so weak and irregular I needed a heart transplantation. That gave you a few years of delay. But now I’m back.’

With a shock I realize he will never let me go, at least not alive. Not a single criminal tells so much without the certainty that the victim won’t pass it on. That much I have learned from movies and books. Does he only want to keep me here to pester Jabar? I suspect there’s more to it than meets the eye.

‘I’m tired,’ he then says. ‘My age is telling him alright. Good night, Manon.’

He turns around in his chair and lets the television screens turn on. On one of them I see our garden in Jabbeke and I hold my breath frightened.

‘Diedie really hasn’t discovered all of them,’ he says with his back towards me. ‘Now go.’

Not steady on my feet I stand up, not only because of the wine, but also because I’m seeing the image of home. The garden is dark and the lights burn cozily inside. My heart pinches and I can feel the tears coming. Quickly, before I see one of my inmates and feel even more miserable, I turn around and walk out of the room.

Selena is awaiting me with her little friend, the Beretta. First I wonder how she knows, but then I remember she’s a vamp with an excellent hearing. She has probably followed the entire conversation.

She guides me to my room.

‘Don’t you think it’s bad what he said about you?’ I ask.

If Noël tries to stir between Jabar and me, I can also do it between Noël and Selena.

‘What?’ she grumbles, but I hear in her voice she very well knows what I’m talking about.

‘Well, that you were easily submitted to his will, only because he had the necessary money.’

‘You think you’re so good, aren’t you, that everything in life can be divided into black and white. That everyone is born rich.’ She pushes me violently up the stair to the first floor. ‘You really don’t know me.’

I look at her and discover in just a second another person. For a second I think I see feelings



of guilt with her, but it disappeared so quickly because of her cool look, that I can easily have imagined it.

‘Than why do you work for him? He’s a murderer.’

We arrived at my room. She ignores my question, opens the door and violently pushes me inside.

‘Sweet dreams,’ she says before she slams the door shut.

A plan has formed itself inside of my head. Utmost stupid I didn't think about it earlier, but that's just the way it often goes.

I now know Noël or someone else is probably keeping an eye on me at this moment on the television screens and this makes the success of my plan difficult, but not inoperable. All I need is a good portion of luck and hopefully an observer that can't master his sleep.

I pull out the dress and put on my shirt that, in the meantime, lies washed and dried on my bed, after which I get in bed to supposedly go to sleep. I shouldn't have drunk that much wine, because it makes it harder to stay awake. I've got the feeling Selena will honor me with an injection visit again tonight and so I need to perform my plan beforehand, before I'm too weak to transform well.

I wait about two hours by counting the seconds and minutes as carefully as possible. Deadly dull, but a necessary evil. It's a guess, but I think that Selena's visit will be around midnight.

I pretend to grab a pillow to hug it, but slide it carefully underneath my blanket. Afterwards another pillow, the bed is after all covered with them.

Quickly I drop myself to the floor next to the bed and stay there for a while. My breathing is far too irregular so I close my eyes for a while and concentrate on it.

The plan isn't solid at all and the chance to be discovered is huge, but I can't think of something else to do for now. I hope that when my peeping Tom is looking on the screen he still thinks I'm underneath the blanket.

When my breathing runs smoother, I sneak on my hands and feet to the door. Also now they can see me, but that's a risk I just need to take.

Arriving at the door I transform my hands into tongs. A brace would be handier, but it would make too much noise.

Breaking the door handle is extremely hard and I puff like a madman, especially because it needs to be done quickly. The beads trickle down my forehead and my muscles cry out, but I don't give in and go all out. The pain becomes almost unbearable and at that moment I succeed to break off the door handle. Right on time, I threaten to lose consciousness through the effort and exhaustiveness.

I transform the tongs into fingers and sneak out of the room. I cautiously close the door behind me. I get cold because of the transformation, but also because I'm only dressed in panties and a shirt and not wearing shoes. Now let's hope the cameras in the hall and the rest

of the house aren't on, otherwise it's going to be very hard.

I take a closer look at the doors I walk past. The hall has on both sides three doors behind which, according to my suspicions, are all bedrooms. Selena, Ed and Noël probably rest in there.

I hurry downstairs, into the showroomish living room and to the windows. I don't hesitate for a second and transform my hands into little demolition hammers. The strength that still remains me is very little, but I still make a swing towards the window. Right before the hammer hits the glass, I shrink back frightened.

All of a sudden two Dobermans stand in front of the window, their fur as black as the night. The only clearly visible things are their sharp teeth and sparkling eyes. They snarl at me and let me unmistakably know what will happen if I dare to put a step into the garden.

*Goddamnit!* I know and feel that my body doesn't have the energy to transform into an even more dangerous dog. I know the body language dogs use to show who's boss and wouldn't have doubt about transforming into a wolf or Pit Bull, but it just doesn't work.

Out of pure frustration the tears well up in my eyes. *Shit, shit, shit!!!*

It doesn't seem I'm too sharp for them by trying it on the other side of the house. Also there they'll be awaiting me and the dogs are much faster than I am.

Now what?

I can return to the bedroom. And then what? Patiently wait for what is to come? No, damn it, by no means. Maybe the dogs go lie down and sleep at a sudden moment. *Wishful thinking, Manon, dogs are smarter than that.* And besides, the chance is big that Selena or someone else discovered I've left my room by then.

Suddenly I hear a soft cry, as if it comes from far or is being muffled. I listen more carefully, but don't hear a thing anymore. In my opinion the cry came from the cellar, I'm almost sure about that.

I can do two things right now. Go back to my room and be good or go out on a research. I choose option two, a lot more thrilling. The chance that someone is in the cellar is big, but I hope to find a computer before I get caught.

I run to the cellar stair and carefully descend.

The door of Noël's office is closed and I don't hear a movement. I softly touch the handle, but the door is shut.

Left across Noël's office is another door. I hold my ear against it and hear nothing. I grab the door handle and this one luckily gives in. First I still look quickly inside, but no one is in

there.

The room, about three by three meters, is full of filing cabinets. Unfortunately I can't detect a computer or a telephone. But curious as I am, I wonder what's inside of those filing cabinets and walk to the first cabinet.

N.V. Borgax is on the outside of it. I open a drawer and hastily look at the paperwork. Apparently Noël has especially earned his fortune by making CGI for roofs. His perpendicular sheets of corrugated iron were sold all over the world and he doesn't just have a company in Belgium, but also in Poland and a few other countries. Not interesting, so I close the drawer.

The second cabinet doesn't have a title with respect to the content. I open the drawer and find files that are in alphabetical order. The names don't ring a bell.

I open the first file, of a so-called Pat Hendler, and then it begins to dawn on me. Pat is an angel, apparently gets a level number of four and lives in Germany. Her details are detailed and fully scribbled down. Everything; where she was born, her age, whom she's married to and that she has a daughter. Even her strengths and weaknesses. A second file is the same, but then about a so-called Turid Hoekstra, an elf, level five.

How did he get his hands on these? Even Jabar doesn't own such information. Actually no one to my knowledge. We do have a list with names and addresses, but that's everything.

Of course I go to the M, where, indeed, my file is to be found. Next to my name stands: level three. That's all? I'm only level three? And what does that mean further on? What's the highest level? Five?

I skip the general details and immediately go to the for me interesting part.

- Strengths: Jiu-jitsu, shooting expert, doesn't give up easily (*just be sure about that*), inventive.
- Weaknesses (*now we'll get it*): absent-minded, bad memory, insecure (*well yeah*), high-spirited (*is that negative?*), gets lost easily, influential (*what gives that idiot that idea!*).

Still I can't totally disagree with what's listed and they seem to know me better than I know myself. It stings and certainly because the list of weaknesses is longer than the one of strengths.

I close the drawer and walk to the third cabinet on which stands nothing as well. Also here are

files in the drawer. I take out a folder on which stands an Arabic name. Nevertheless, in the folder itself is nothing, not a single piece of paper. The rest of the folders are empty, except for the names on the outside.

Again I hear a weak cry that seems to originate from someone who's in pain. I decide not to waste my time any longer in this room and leave it. The concrete floor is so cold it cuts through my skin. Stupid I didn't put on socks. Next to the smell of disinfectant, I think I smell vaguely something else. My eyes turn wide when I realize what it is.

Blood!

And it must be quite a lot, because otherwise I wouldn't smell it.

As I walk into the hall further on, the metal-like smell becomes stronger. I hold my hand before my nose and breathe superficially. On the left and the right are two other doors, but my intuition lets me go past them and walk directly towards the room at the end of the hall. The heavy metal door is ajar and I vaguely hear a movement. And more moaning.

I pop through the chink and can't believe my eyes! I think I saw it wrong and look again. But I did see it well. I seem to be ended up in a horror movie. This is clearly something I shouldn't have discovered. Well, then they should have locked the door.

By accident I bump against the door with my left shoulders by which it opens a little more. Frightened I suck in my breath, but there seems to be no one inside of the room. At least, no one isn't completely correct.

There are a lot of person in the room, only it doesn't seem they're conscious or even still alive. What I see before me is too horrible to be put in words.

In dozens of glazed tubes stand or hang naked people. The eyes are closed and their heads nod a bit forward. I walk closer to one of the tubes and see the person inside of it is still alive. The chest goes weakly up and down and the eyeballs move underneath their lids. They are both women and men and several wires disappear in and out their body. They're connected to a kind of support that's attached on the outside of their prison.

The support consists of a screen on which several values can be read: the EEG, EOG, EMG, EKG and resp. According to my limited medical knowledge (mainly from television series like House M.D.) the freakish lines next to it mean that their brain activity, eye movements, muscle tone, heart rhythm and breathing are measured. The heart rhythm of the man in front of me is slow and regular, but his breathing and eye movements show peaks and are irregular. Next to each tube is a drip standard with liquid that steadily trickles to the tube through a pipe. Probably a kind of food or anesthetic, I guess.

Full of disgust I run past the other tubes that bring forward a lightly buzzing sound, so subtle it's hardly audible. Some persons have the slightly pointed ears that elves have, on another man I see a birthmark that's especially typical for witches and on a woman I count six toes on her right foot. So they're all otherkinds. Why doesn't that surprise me? I count ten tubes of which one is empty. Are they planning to put me in it? I'm so shocked by what I see that I unwittingly skipped the most horrible part. Some of them are scalped! And I don't mean it in the strict sense of the word like in the past with the Indians, but the entire upper side of their skull! From the exposed brains run dozens of tiny wires. I turn my head away until I hear a loud moan. The woman I'm standing in front of, a chubby elderly woman with grey-turning hair made the sound!

Suddenly she opens her eyes and looks straight at me, as if she's expecting me there.

I shrink back frightened, right in time to suppress a cry. Her dark blue eyes look so sad at me I become nauseous. She clearly wants to tell me something, but maybe she can't move her lips. Nevertheless, her eyes speak volumes; they ask me for help, begging. A tear slowly runs down her cheek.

I can't bear to watch the misery any longer.

With my lips I silently form the words: 'I'll get help', put my right hand on the place of my heart and then turn around abruptly. It wasn't until now I realized the smell of blood doesn't come from this room. First the smell is less strong here and second I can't see stains anywhere.

I actually want to be out of here as quick as possible, but then discover a computer on a little table. I run quickly towards it and take a seat in front of it. A post-it note hangs above the screen with *Thurs. 20 May 20:00* on it. I save it in my memory; you never know what it's good for.

Please, let luck be on my side and make sure I can send an e-mail to Jabar!

I push on the on-button and the buzzing sound of the computer drowns out that of the tubes. I hope that no one else is in the cellar, although the walls seem to be fairly thick and because of that isolate the sounds from every room. You may call it a miracle that I heard the woman in the tube, at least if it was her I heard, but the door was also open. Or they forgot to close the door or it means someone can walk in any minute from now on. Of course they don't want the painful screaming of their victims to be audible outside, although that seems unlikely to me. The territory that's around the house is so wide you could even slaughter a pig in the garden without anyone hearing it.

What bugs me is the fact that I don't know much about the location in which I am right now. I was unconscious in the truck during the entire drive and still when they lay me on the bed. How long did the drive last? I've got no idea. The only thing I can say is that it's a glazed house and a wide territory surrounds it. That's awfully little.

What I was afraid for becomes reality.

A password is asked. *Shit!*

Still I want to give it a chance and try the most obvious; otherkind, elf, witch, vampire, angel, devil, transformer, human.

No result.

Next attempts: Noël, Selena, Ed, even Jabar and finally Morgan.

Nothing.

*Damn it!*

Then I hear a door go open and being shut again and footsteps! Tensed I keep sitting as quiet as a mouse and hold my breath. Shit, the sound of the computer!

The footsteps are coming closer, I'm sure about that.

Now what?

I don't see the possibility to hide in or behind something anywhere. The tubes are closely next to each other and against the wall. And besides they're made of glass and therefore transparent. I don't see a closet and underneath the table on which the computer stands isn't enough space and it's too visible.

There's nothing else to do but hope that the stuff they've been injecting in my body for days is starting to wear off and...

No time to think, just a little bit more and the panic will paralyze me completely.

I adjust all my energy to the transformation.

27.

The man who walks past me without seeing me, is someone I haven't seen before. He's enormously long, surely about two meters and extremely thin. He reminds me of the mast of a ship, only much more fragile. His hair is equally so; fine and thin. He's wearing a long, white coat, such a coat doctors and lab assistants wear. He checks the tubes with nervous and shaky movements, examines the wires and infuses.

He's continuously mumbling to himself, practically inaudible. I pick a few words: great, interesting. Something like that, but no full sentences. At least if the man is already talking coherently.

When he turns towards me with a frowned forehead and looks straight at me, I think I'm caught. That he can see me one way or another. *Damn it, no, please no.* His manic looking, cold eyes will always stay in my memory, I'm already sure about that.

Apparently he's thinking about something or he's very deep in thought because he's already getting ready to leave the room again.

I can hardly believe it, but he didn't notice the active computer. Speaking of an absent-minded professor! But then, right before he wants to leave the room, he turns around and looks surprised at the computer. He runs towards it with quick steps and takes a look at the screen. Then he sighs deeply and shuts down the computer. I hope he thinks he just forgot to shut that thing down. He looks around the room with half-closed eyes, shrugs, and finally leaves the room.

*Phew.*

I still wait for a while until the footsteps disappear and when I hear a door open and close again. Then I transform again from a piece of wall into myself. Change into a plant or chair would attract too much attention. The man will surely know which pieces of furniture are in the room and which are not and besides the room is so poorly decorated that every new piece would be extremely bad style. So there wasn't anything else to do but to transform into a piece of the wall in the same white tone as the real wall.

I suspect the man disappeared into an adjoining room, so I leave the room on the tips of my toes. I still throw a backward glance, but the woman has closed her eyes again.

I hope they get a lot of beautiful dreams, then they have at least that kind of escape from all of this.

It doesn't seem that the cellar has cracks through which I can move, so I decide to transform



into fog as soon as I'm in the living room. I only hope I still have enough energy to make the transformation work.

I'm frightened to death when all of a sudden Selena stands in front of me. Even before I can blink my eyes, I get a punch in my face.

'Bitch!' I scream, while I bow forward and hold my hands against my nose. I can feel the blood trips seep through my fingers and stabs of pain go through my forehead.

*Well, shit, that hurts.* And then I feel the well-known prick in my upper arm. Great, that on top of it.

'Come along, you,' she hisses through her teeth.

She gets a hold of me and of course right on the spot where she pricked me.

I look for a second at the door on my right where I thought that doctor went through, but don't hear any noise coming from the room.

I expect Selena is taking me to my room, but that doesn't seem to be the case. She opens the door to Noël's office and throws me inside. Stumbling I know to grab the desk. I turn around furiously, but Selena has already disappeared. I really swear, without her vampire power I would have already given her a facelift, such a facelift a bulldog would be jealous of.

The office is dark and quiet. I still vaguely smell the scents of the dinner Noël and I have consumed. A few television screens are on, but strangely enough there isn't one on which my bedroom is shown. I do see the room with tubes and the living room. I then hear a creaking sound of a turning office chair and Noël's voice that says: 'light'.

Was he sitting over there the entire evening? Did he hear me walk past him? Did he see me in the living room facing the Dobermans that were running in the garden? And in the room with the tubes? Then he saw me transform, I fear! But why did he let me do as I pleased? Why didn't he stop me earlier?

Noël looks straight at me, as if he isn't angry, but rather disappointed. Then he reaches for a drawer and gets out a paper napkin that he offers me. I pull it out of his hands, dab my bloody nose with it and wipe of my hands. Carelessly I drop the bloodstained napkin to the floor. I carefully feel my nose, but he luckily doesn't seem to be broken.

The entire time Noël is looking at me without saying a single word.

'What?' I say to break the annoying silence.

'I didn't say anything,' he says ice calm.

I suddenly feel uncomfortable in my panties and shirt by his penetrating gaze. I ardently try pulling my shirt down, but it's no use. And above that I also feel ice cold because of the

transforming and the cold lets my nipples pierce through my shirt.

‘You understand I can’t let you go anymore,’ he finally says.

‘As if you were planning to do that!’

He ignores my opinion. ‘You’ve already seen too much.’

‘What do you do with those poor otherkinds?’ The words come out a bit shaky.

‘Do you want a coat?’

‘I ask: what do you do with those poor otherkinds?’

His eyes follow the shape of my shivering body and he smiles as if he enjoys it. *Yuck!* I feel mentally raped!

‘You’re cold because of the transforming, aren’t you?’

‘You know everything so well, don’t you? Than why do you bother asking me?’

‘It was in Jabar’s Lexicon, you know.’

‘No, because I don’t nose around in someone else’s private books.’

‘Then what did you do in the archives?’

Did he see that too? Dzjee, can’t I do anything in here without him knowing about it?

‘Do you know what also stands in the Lexicon? It will probably interest you.’

I don’t pursue the matter, so he continues: ‘Do you know why an elf is called an elf and a vampire a vampire? How all otherkinds came to their names?’

Again I don’t answer, but I have to admit I’m curious about it.

‘It’s nothing more than a theory, but a plausible and simple theory. Suspicions are that the names are based on legends and myths. The otherkinds took up the invented names from the human beings. If somewhere a story or creature showed resemblances to an otherkind, the name was used to classify them from then on.’

‘Angels have wings and devils horns in those tales. Doesn’t seem to show any resemblance to reality,’ I bring forward.

‘Maybe because in biblical stories devils can manipulate people and angels can put forests on fire from a distance. Well, who will tell.’ Noël shrugs his shoulders.

‘Why do you keep files about otherkinds?’ I now ask him.

‘You’re very curious.’

‘No, I’m not, because it wasn’t on my list of positive points,’ I answer.

He grins. ‘Than we have to complete that one.’

I shrug as if I want to say: just do as you please.

‘If you’re not planning to let me go, than you can just as well answer my questions!’ To re-

enforce my words I put my hands on my hips and look furiously at him.

One corner of his mouth curls up, as if my behavior amuses him. It even makes me angrier, damn it!

‘Maybe,’ he then says. ‘But I need to get to know you better for that, something I’m already extremely looking forward to.’

‘You know me enough already. An entire file!’

‘Get to know you personally. As friends.’

‘Well, that won’t work.’

‘Yes, it will,’ he calmly answers.

‘Are you maybe planning to put me in a tube, just like those other otherkinds? And poke in my brains?’

‘Not at all. I won’t force you, you’ll do it out of your own will.’

‘Never! You hear me? Never!’

It attracts my attention he forgot to put the word ‘free’ before ‘will’, or didn’t he?

Actually I should kill him right here and right now. Transform my one hand into a knife should still work, I suspect. Or even into a pistol. I don’t mind losing a bone in my finger or more of them if I also help Selena to get to the other side.

If they don’t let me go, I won’t have anything else to do.

But somewhere I still have hope that Jabar and Diedie will find me and that’s of course better if I know what Noël is planning to do, now I’ve seen the room with tubes. And on the twentieth of may at eight p.m. maybe something important will be going on.

I can still kill them later on; it seems wiser to me to gather more information right now. Besides, I wouldn’t know how to save those otherkinds from the tubes and I’m afraid I’ll sign their death warrant when I rush into things. Let’s just hope Noël and Selena don’t kill me first or put me in a tube, but I’ve got the suspicion that Noël has other plans with me.

‘Never is an emotionally charged word, Manon. Be careful with the use of such words, very careful.’

‘You can’t say what I may and may not say!’

‘Manon, Manon.’ He sighs. ‘Within the next minute you’ll do everything I’ll ask you to do.’

I want to open my mouth to protest fiercely, but he makes a stop-gesture with his right hand.

‘I know who your parents are,’ he then says.

The cold I felt just a minute ago in the roots of my bones disappears immediately. With my mouth open I stare at him. I only realize I’m holding my breath when my lungs are screaming

for air.

Did I hear that well? Is he claiming to know my parents?

'I'm not lying,' he still adds.

Disbelief and confusion are probably readable from my face.

For a while I don't know what to say. Do I want to believe him? Oh yes, I'd love to. Can I believe him? No! He'll use every trick to submit myself to him. So I would follow him instead of Jabar. But still.

The last few years I made myself believe I don't need to know whom my parents are, that it doesn't matter. The love and care I receive from Jabar and Diedie are just as precious and maybe even more than those from my biological parents. The fact that my parents just left me without a moment's thought at a house has damped my curiosity.

Jabar and Diedie have never lied to me. As soon as I could understand it, they told me they weren't my biological parents. I would lie if I claimed that the pain and grief an abandoned child feels overshadowed my childhood years. The question why and what I'd done wrong, although I was still a baby, kept me busy for many nights and colored my dreams dark more than ever. I've spilled enough tears and made myself believe I needed to be inferior if even my very own father and mother didn't love me enough to raise me themselves.

But I left all of that behind me several years ago already, at least that's what I thought. I've learned to build a shield around my heart; a coldness that has been there ever since and that has suppressed the longing for my real parents. Until now. Until those last words from Noël. Suddenly I feel an immense hate boiling up for him. He has, just like that, without preparation, waked up sleeping dogs with me and it's making me enraged!

'You don't have the right!' I suddenly yell.

His first reaction is one of disbelief, but then he recovers. 'What do you mean, Manon?'

I can't help it. Call me weak, call me a blubbering cow, but at that moment something snaps inside of me. The last days and then this news he throws so emotionless in front of my feet. It's all too much for me and I burst out crying.

With a trembling finger I point at him. 'Not... the... right,' I say with effort in between the sobbing.

For a while I see a kind of compassion appear in his eyes. Or is it regret. Or maybe I just want to see it with him, but it isn't there.

I take a seat in the leather chair and hide my face in my hands. I don't know where all those tears keep coming from, it seems like a storm flood. But strangely enough it feels liberating,

as if the bottled up sadness from years is coming out. My shoulders shake continuously and I know I'll have swollen eyes tomorrow. But I don't care. Who sees me after all in this glazed prison?

A linen handkerchief is put on my lap. I grab at it, pat my eyes and blow my nose in it. Then I look up. Noël is back on his spot and looks understanding at me.

'I'm sorry I blurted it out like that,' he says softly and I even believe him.

I press my lips tightly together, scared that when I say one word a new crying fit will follow. My level will have decreased from three to two now, I think sarcastically.

'But I didn't lie. If you want to know it I can tell you who your parents are.'

'Well?' I hope I look combative again instead of like a damp rag.

He shakes his head. 'You can't expect something for nothing.'

'I already thought that. I don't immediately see you as a do-gooder either.'

'Oh, but I am at heart.'

'Do-gooder for your own businesses?'

'Do you want to know?'

'What? How Machiavellian you let no one stand in your way to stay rich?'

'Your parents, Manon. Don't play games right now,' he answers in a punishing tone.

'What's in it for you?'

'That you become my wife.'

I burst out laughing. Also this time I don't have it under control. The tears run down my face again, but they are of hysteria. Or even more of disbelief. He looks deadly serious at me, by which the laughing becomes even more intense and I need to put my hands on my painful stomach muscles. Just like with the crying, he waits patiently until I'm done laughing.

'You must be kidding?' I smilingly say. I wipe the tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand.

'I mean everything I say.'

'Why would I for god's sake marry you? I hate you! And besides, you could be my gramps! What I'm saying? My great-gramps probably.'

'Don't ever say that again.'

'What? Great-gramps?' I grin.

'To hate. That's the most horrible word existing. Too emotionally charged.'

'Oh, well, don't you hate Jabar?'

His look hardens. 'I'm disgusted by him and feel a deep-rooted lust of murdering him. But

hate? No. Hate absorbs all of your energy and that isn't good for yourself.'

'Well, then I don't want to know who my parents are.'

'I'd sleep on it if I were you.'

'I don't need...'

Before I can go on Selena appears in the room. Does that dirty old hag maybe smell it when she needs to come and get me?

I can't remember I've ever dreamt that much in one night. Dreams that balanced on the edge of nightmares and were so loaded with emotions they cut through my heart.

My parents appear in them. Of course I don't know what my parents look like, but in the dream I gave them an outlook myself so I know and feel that they are my parents. I walk in between them, extremely happy I found them, but suddenly they're gone. Time and time again they're abandoning me, even before I could talk to them. I wake up in the middle of the night with a ginormic feeling of guilt towards Jabar and Diedie. Although I know it's undeserved, after all you can't control your dreams, it hurts.

The rest of the dream is even more horrible.

I remember fragments of images. Noël and I standing in front of an altar and a priest that's keeping me covered, that's threatening me with death if I don't say 'Yes, I do'. The fear and disgust I'm feeling in that dream are extremely intense and realistic. At a sudden movement Noël's face changes and Lucas stands next to me in the church. A rollercoaster of feelings is the result: I'm happy and in love. More in love than in the actual life, but dreams just strengthen feelings. When I want to hug and kiss Lucas he changes back into Noël.

I'm now sitting on the edge of my bed, trying to recover. No matter how hard I try to get those nightmares out of my head, they keep beleaguering me like an army of bees.

My shirt is soaking wet with cold sweat and I feel so miserable I feel like getting under the blankets again. How did it come this far? And can it even become weirder? Getting kidnapped and then still being proposed by a walking piece of parchment. At this moment I just want to cut myself off from the world and give up.

And then I immediately call myself to order. Give up? Not a bit of it. Even if it's just because my list of strengths says I don't give up easily.

What I especially remember from the dreams is Lucas's voice. The words weren't clear, as if he talked to me from a far distance or through walls. But it was definitely his voice with those deep and warm tones. His presence and voice were the only events from my dreams that felt good. If only he was here with me, it would make this imprisonment more bearable. I chuckle. Then I wouldn't even mind being locked up in a bedroom. The bed would be the only thing Lucas and I need.

I get up and walk to the toilet. Washing and getting dressed under the eye of a camera is one

thing, but I fucking hope that the one who's spying on me has the decency to grant me my privacy during a toilet visit.

I already saw it tonight: they've already fixed the handle of the bedroom's door, unfortunately. But that was to be expected. Besides I think Selena gave me a double portion, I feel weaker than the days before. I suspect that even transforming my hand won't work and get a seat on the toilet, sighing.

I need to keep trying to find a computer or a telephone with which I can reach Jabar. Even with the few coordination points I have, Jabar would creatively get busy.

Would Noël have already informed Jabar on my condition? Would Jabar have warned the police when he got that picture Selena made of me? It's a possibility. Jabar could report it as a normal kidnapping. The police don't need any background information about our kinds or whatever. He's rich, so the police could assume it's about ransom money, although it isn't about that.

In the meantime Jabar will know there's more behind the kidnapping than merely the extraction of his money. And I know him, he's extremely careful. Maybe he hopes I can escape without having to involve the police. Or first they try to find me themselves. He knows I can stand rough handling and that I don't want him to take unnecessary risks or drum up people who could discover our 'secret'.

My stomach contracts of hunger. There's a lot of negative to tell about an imprisonment and not eating when you want to, is one of those negative things. I take a hot shower and can't do anything else after that but to put on the sweated shirt I was wearing tonight. The dress isn't immediately a garment you wear during the day and above that the thing limits, through his tight straitjacket, me somewhat in my freedom of movement.

I'm just dressed, my hair still wet from the shower, when the chamber's door opens. I expect Selena but, to my great amazement, it's the man that came in the tube room tonight. He's holding a pistol on me, just like the one from Selena; a Beretta 92F, but doesn't wear a white coat in comparison to tonight.

'Come along, you,' he says with a face on which no emotion is to be seen. Now that I've got a clearer look on his face, his bulging eyes attract even more attention.

If I don't get ready immediately he swings with his pistol. 'Now.'

'Couldn't Selena come? Is the poor little vampy sick?'

'No,' he answers abruptly.

'And little Ed still isn't cured?'



‘Little Ed?’

‘The devil.’

‘None of your business.’

‘Okay, but aren’t we going to introduce to each other?’ I ask grinningly.

He doesn’t answer and looks inscrutable at me.

‘Or do you want me to call you human executioner?’

Only for a second he twitches his mouth. ‘Than I’ll call you wall mould.’

It can’t be he saw me in my transformation, that seems impossible to me. Probably he has heard it from Noël or Selena later on. But it’s clear he isn’t off his stroke by what I say.

‘Fine with me, doesn’t sound bad. Or do you like it better if I call you Hitler junior?’

I try to draw him out again, hoping he’ll reveal something about his activities.

‘Call me whatever you want.’ He puts a threatening step closer.

‘Coming already, coming.’

On a distance of one meter he follows me to the hall. I think I hear moaning, but not in the same intonation as tonight. It rather sounds like an enjoying moan, which surprises me. As we move further through the hall I hear giggling and soft talking.

The last door on the right is open and I can put a face to the voice. Selena. So it’s her room. And she’s clearly having some company. Aha, that’s why madam couldn’t come and get me; it’s her day off from pestering and playing rascal.

I throw a backward glance to the doctor to probe his reaction, but again nothing is noticeable on him. I slow down my pace when we walk past the open door. ‘Doc’ doesn’t urge me to fasten up, so I take a sneak inside.

What I get to see takes my breath away and breaks my heart in a million of pieces.

Lucas is lying on the bed, naked and with a beatific smile about his lips. Selena, the slut, is sitting on top of him on a place that makes clear they’re not just chattering with each other. She moves her hips sensually up and down while her hands rest on his chest. Her long hair falls in front of her face when she leans to him and kisses him long and intimate.

I can’t move forward anymore, I just don’t manage to do so. The sight paralyzes me and even turning my head away seems to be an impossible task. The Doc seems to enjoy the events and doesn’t urge me to walk further.

The next thing Selena does makes me sick. She grabs his hands and leads them to her breasts. She then suddenly looks at me. I shrink back frightened as if I feel being caught. The smile she throws at me is full of satisfaction and victory.

I can't hold it any longer. I feel a belch coming up, lean forward and puke my bile out. The green stuff contrast sharply with the white cork floor and smells horribly sour.

'Manon?'

Lucas's voice sounds really surprised, but I don't look up. Then I hear Selena yell 'Hey!' and the next moment I feel warm hands on my shoulders.

'Manon? What are you doing here?'

I get up ashamed and nauseous and look at Lucas with tears in my eyes. I don't know what to say.

'Manon, what are you doing here?' he repeats.

I swallow saliva down my throat that's as dry as dust and turn the tables. 'What are you doing here?'

I hope my gaze looks as cold as I'm feeling.

'I...'. He looks into to room, at Selena.

Selena yells: 'Lucas, darling. Just come back.' Then she looks at me says: 'Oh, hi, Manon. Do you know him?' On which a mean smile follows that's clearly saying she knows it all too well and that it's her entire intention.

'Don't you know you're dealing with a murderer?' I don't feel sad anymore, but enraged! Fucking enraged!

'What are you saying, Manon?' Lucas looks confused at me. It doesn't seem he's part of the gang here. He seems to be as much off his stroke as I am.

'They're keeping me captured in here,' I hiss.

'Lucas?' Selena is now standing next to him and doesn't make the slightest effort to hide her nudity. She puts a hand on his upper arm and caresses it slowly while she's continuously keeping an eye on me. 'Come. Manon has to go. She needs to have breakfast with her husband-to-be,' she says tormenting.

'Husband-to-be?' Lucas looks hurt at me.

'What?' I yell in a moment of pure frustration. 'As if you're not fucking someone else!'

Lucas can't answer anymore. Selena pulls him into the room and smacks the door shut in my face, very childish, still sticking out her tongue at me.

Doc doesn't need to urge me, I want to get out of here myself and walk to the stair.

Then I'm caught by a horrible realization!

If Lucas isn't part of this all, which I really think, because no one can act that well, then he's doomed!

Selena enticed him to this place just to pester me. Of course she knew, by keeping an eye on me, I've slept with Lucas. The whole fuss just now was foul play and she has probably hypnotized him to get him into her bed. Can vamps apply it on each other? I haven't got the slightest idea.

And of course there's no way Lucas will leave this place alive, because she let him see me! She will kill him, it's as sure as death and taxes!

I want to turn around when I'm halfway on the stair to help or warn Lucas. Whatever. But Doc is poking me in my back with the Beretta I need to keep descending. Pistol or not, a human life is at stake! The panic and fear about losing Lucas, although he's sharing the bed with someone else, make my adrenaline level go up like crazy.

With my right arm I hit Doc's pistol holding hand away from me. He loses his grip on the pistol that falls off the stair with a loud noise, after which I immediately rotate my hand and get a hold of his wrist. All of this doesn't even take a second and before he realizes what's going on, I butt him with my head and give him a kick in the crotch. He cries out. As a final move, I push him down the stair. Unfortunately I don't see how he crashes down, because I rush up the stair again to Selena's room.

I batter furiously at her door and yell: 'Lucas, she's gonna kill you! Lucas!'

I pull and push the door handle, but she has locked the door! I keep battering at and kicking against the door, but with the little energy that's inside of my body, it hardly has any point. I drop down exhausted to the floor.

The pistol! Stupid cow!

I jump up and run downstairs. The Doc is lying unconscious on the ground at the bottom of the stair. The pistol is a meter away from him. I get a hold of it and run with two steps at the time up the stair again. My breathing goes with difficulty, as if have just run a marathon and my muscles protest heavily. But I don't ease off.

I unlock the pistol and aim at the door handle. I just have to put up with the fact that I could hit Lucas by accident, there's nothing else to do. If I hit Selena with it, it's only much to the good.

Two shots are enough to destroy the lock. I give a kick against the door and it swings open. With the pistol held in front of me I walk inside the room, carefully watching around me. It's alarmingly quiet. Something isn't right.

'Not one more move! Drop the gun!'

I see Selena standing in the left corner of my eye. She's holding the pistol on the side of my

face. I turn around abruptly. Now we're standing in front of each other with the pistols in between us and aimed at each other.

'Maybe you should drop the gun, bitch,' I say as calmly as possible, but my heart is raging like mad.

Her eyes flash hate at me. I consider my chances and possibilities. It's too dangerous if I try to attack her. She knows what I can do and keeps a careful eye on my every movement.

Then I hear a soft moan and a weak voice: 'Manon... here.'

Selena looks triumphantly at me. She knows that if I'm looking aside at Lucas, she can unarm me. From the way his voice sounds, he suffers and he's wounded. Now what? Even if I walk to him, Selena will never let me save him. She'd rather shoot me; her look unmistakably lets me know that.

'Lucas? Are you alright?' Stupid question, I know, but what else can I do?

'She... she has stabbed... me down,' he says with difficulty. 'My stomach...'

Oh, God, oh, God, what do I have to do?

Selena sees my doubt and takes advantage of it: 'If you want to save him, you've got to be quick. Drop the pistol and then the doctor will patch him up.'

'And I surely have to believe you? Why did you do this to him?'

'It's his only chance. We can keep standing here like this, I don't care, but he'll slowly bleed to death.'

Even if I succeed to escape with Lucas, I can't find a doctor or hospital in time. I don't even know where I am and whether the house is far away from a city or town. And now I know Lucas is as much a victim as I am, I can't leave him like this. Damn it, why do men always think with their private eye? If only he had known how to keep his hormones under control, he would have never been in this situation! Unless he got hypnotized of course.

I unwillingly drop my pistol to the ground.

Selena grins and then yells: 'John!'

'John is counting the floor tiles downstairs,' I say.

'You've doomed Lucas if John isn't here soon.'

'No, you've got that on your conscience.'

'Oh, I feel so guilty right now,' she sneers.

'Bitch!' *And pseudo-catholic!*

Selena picks up my pistol and rushes out of the room. I can hear her descend the stair and afterwards calling John's name a few times. I quickly go to Lucas and kneel next to him. He

doesn't look good, absolutely not. He has a gaping wound in his side that looks severe and deep. The blood is gushing out. His eyes are closed and he only breathes superficially.

I lay his head carefully on my lap and softly slap his cheek: 'Stay awake, Lucas, stay awake. They're coming to help you.'

I don't know whether he hears me or not, because there's no reaction at all. I fear the worst. Selena is back with a limping John. If looks could kill...

The two of them pick up Lucas and carry him out of the room. As in trance I look at the track of blood that stays behind on the ground. They leave me alone in the room because they know I have nowhere left to go. But I don't get it. Why does Selena hurt Lucas if they're going to patch him up afterwards?

I suck my breath at a following realization! The empty tube! They're going to patch him up, only so he can serve as whatever they're planning to do with those people in the tubes. With the image of a scalped Lucas in my mind I run through the hall, down the stair, through the living room, towards the cellar. I almost slip on a pool of blood, but still know how to keep standing. Even if I can't come out of my bed for a week from exhaustiveness, I need to see where they're taking Lucas.

Noël is blocking the passage in the cellar.

‘Let me through!’ I yell.

I’m worn out and my fists that are banging on his chest don’t have more strength than those of a baby. Noël grabs my hands and drops them.

‘Manon, they’re performing an operation on him. There’s nothing you can do.’

‘Why?’ My voice cracks and the tears roll over my cheeks. ‘Why?’

‘Come,’ Noël softly says.

He takes me to his office and puts me down on a chair, where he squats down in front of me.

‘It was his own choice, Manon.’

I look enraged at him. ‘No, it wasn’t! You guys have kidnapped him!’

‘No, we haven’t. He came with us voluntary and he was only too happy to be with Selena.’

‘Liar! She has hypnotized him!’

I want to raise my hand to slap him right in his face, but I can barely lift my arm.

‘Manon, vampires can’t hypnotize each other. It only works with other kinds and humans,’ he answers patiently. ‘He fully knew what he was doing.’

‘But...’

‘You thought he loved you? After only a few dates?’

Of course I didn’t think that! Nah well, I was somewhere hoping it.

‘No,’ I say.

‘He only wanted you for your blood. That’s just the way vampires are.’

No! I don’t want to believe that! Noël wasn’t there when we made love several times. He didn’t see how Lucas looked at me, how soft his hands touched my skin.

‘Someone will miss him and go looking for him,’ I say combatively.

‘No, Manon. We’ve checked whether he still has living family members or good friends. The few family members we found all live abroad and Lucas doesn’t have contact with them anymore.’

‘What are you going to do with him?’

‘Put him in a tube. There’s nothing else to do. Now he has seen you...’

‘But you did that on purpose!’ I cry out. ‘Selena left her door open so I had to see him!’

‘Yes, and with that you signed his death warrant. You should be thankful to me.’

‘Thankful? Thankful?! How dare you!’

‘Selena wanted to kill him, but I decided he was too important and thanks to me he’ll stay alive.’

Noël lays a hand on my upper leg. I’m horrified by it, but I don’t have the strength to hit him away.

‘Come, let’s have breakfast.’

Noël gets up and takes a seat at his desk. It wasn’t until now I saw the croissants, fresh orange juice and a pot of coffee. As if I can even eat right now! I can only think about poor Luc as who’ll disappear in a tube more dead than alive. Okay, he may have voluntarily chosen for Selena’s bed, but it wasn’t the case that we had a real relationship. It hurts me, of course it hurts me tremendously, but I still can’t lay claim on him or blame him for something. Besides, even if he would have cheated on me he still doesn’t deserve to end up in tube!

‘Help yourself,’ Noël says cheerfully, as if nothing has happened.

‘I’m not hungry,’ I say with clenched cheeks.

‘Tut-tut-tut, that isn’t healthy. You have to eat, surely if you want to be ready for the marriage tomorrow.’

Noël takes a croissant and butters the underside.

‘Even if you tie me up or keep me covered. I’ll never say the words ‘Yes, I do’. Never!’

‘Don’t be so sure about that.’ Then Noël looks so frightful at me I feel an ice-cold shiver run over my spine. ‘Unless you don’t want your little friend to survive.’

‘He’s dead when he’s put in a tube. His life is almost over then.’

‘The choice is up to you.’

He takes a tasteful bite from the croissant. ‘Hm, perfectly baked.’

I feel like pushing that croissant in his ass and empty out the pot of the coffee on the other side.

Call me naïve, but I don’t think they’re going to kill Lucas. I think he’s more precious in a tube, whatever they do with it. Lucas is an otherkind, just like the previous victims. Maybe Noël has some kind of sick hobby in the form of collecting otherkinds. But what’s the use of the scalped heads then?

As if he can read my mind, Noël says: ‘If you marry me, I’ll answer all your question and I promise we’ll release Lucas.’

I don’t believe a word he’s saying, his smile comes across too false.

‘You don’t believe me? Why not? Have I ever gone back on my words?’

With his little finger in the air, he takes a sip of his coffee.

‘Does a mouse trust a snake?’ I say.

Quasi surprised he pulls up his eyebrows. ‘Is that the way you see me?’

‘A cute, fluffy bunny doesn’t really suit with your actions.’

He roars with laughter, as if I have just told a funny joke.

‘Why don’t you tell me everything? I might marry you then.’

‘Manon, Manon, little girl. I did not become this powerful and rich by a lack of intelligence.’

‘You want to steal their gifts or something? Is that the reason why they’ve got scalped heads?’

Do you steal their brains?’

‘Just eat something.’

He already sounds less friendly. Apparently I’ve touched a nerve or I’m coming too close to the truth.

‘Do you maybe think you’re Frankenstein?’ I go on.

‘I’ll send you to your room without food,’ he threatens.

‘How old do you think I am? Six?’

‘Maybe you’d rather like to be put in a tube yourself, than to live a luxurious life by my side.’

In the meantime he calmly eats further and in such a refined way it gets on my nerves.

‘I want to now it first! Do you steal their brains? The part where their gift is located?’

‘Who told you something like that would be possible? Brain surgery is a very young science.’

I shrug. I really wouldn’t know. But with the necessary financial means you can get everything done.

‘Besides, who can guarantee that if you transplant someone else’s brain in your head, you don’t lose your own memories and personality?’

‘You want to bore me to death with this scientific discussion?’

‘Well? You aren’t stupid. Then answer. Or don’t you dare?’ Noël looks impassive at me.

‘I’m not a brain surgeon, neither a theosophist. But what do you think?’ I ask.

Maybe by talking to him he reveals more about the intention of those tubes.

‘I think it depends on which part of the brain you take away. Still not hungry?’

I shake my head. Certainly not now we’re talking about brains. *Yuck.*

‘Alright, to prove to you I’m only wanting the best for you and that all of this isn’t as bad as it looks, I’ll give a hint.’

I wait patiently. The smell of the croissants is really tempting me. But if I only think about putting something in my mouth, my gag reflex already starts to work.

‘I’m doing a study here. A doctor works for me and he gets an enormous amount of money



paid for it. Also for his oath of secrecy of course.’

‘Study, eh. Into otherkinds I presume?’

‘You’re right about that.’

‘And why?’

‘Because it hasn’t been investigated before and because I want to know why otherkinds developed as a side branch. Why don’t all human beings have those gifts?’

‘Why didn’t all apes develop to human beings?’

‘That’s the point. I want to know where those gifts are located in the brain.’

‘And then what?’

‘Then I know, that’s enough.’

I think he’s speaking the truth, but conceal just as much.

‘What do you inject in me every so many hours? Why can’t I transform?’

‘Good question.’

He wipes off his mouth, although I don’t see anything, crosses his hands in front of him and leans backward in the chair.

‘We’re already so far we discovered how to suppress the gifts. And that counts for all kinds. It’s actually quite simple.’

He pauses and tries my patience. Fine, I’ve got plenty of time. Like I have somewhere else to go?

Then Noël taps with his forefinger on the back of his head. ‘The hormone and neurotransmitter adrenaline.’

‘Which is released with stress, fear and anger?’

‘You’ve scored an A.’ He smiles happily, as if we’re in a classroom. ‘It’s released in the adrenal glands and the hypophysis and this last one lies near the brainstem. Adrenaline strengthens the gift of otherkind, but it doesn’t serve as a basis. With a light dose of benzodiazepine, a psychoactive drug, we suppress the adrenaline and norepinephrine.’

‘Let me guess. Our gift is arranged in the hypophysis?’

‘Almost.’ He’s clearly being pleased as Punch and grins from ear to ear.

‘The brainstem?’

‘And an A again. The brainstem is the oldest part of the brain. This part developed differently when comparing otherkinds to human beings.’

‘And you’re going to transplant that part in your head?’

Instead of giving an answer, he stands up.

'Enough for now. I want to have a rest and after that I've still got work to do. We'll see each other again this evening. A new dress is awaiting you.'

What, for fuck's sake, do I have to do the entire day in a room without any form of entertainment? The walls are gradually suffocating me and I feel like crying out. Above that I'm thoroughly complaining about the fact I haven't eaten anything. My sickness is over, but I've got a ginormic hole in my stomach instead that's grumbling to be filled.

I look at the dress that's on the bed. Again a piece that radiates wealth and exclusivity. The fabric is so soft it glides between my fingers.

I can't stay here for another day. Impossible! It doesn't seem likely to me that I'll be able to save everyone from those tubes and then all happily walk outside. I can't do it on my own; I got that in the meantime.

Staying here, only to get to know more about his intentions with the otherkinds, seems to be suicide right now. I don't trust Noël, to me he can change his personality and views like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. There's a constant layer of madness slumbering around his gallantry and control.

During our last conversation I was about to ask him about the twentieth of May, but now I'm happy I didn't do it. I feel intuitively it's better and that I still conceal a trump like that.

I get to stand in front of the window and look into the garden. The fencing of the territory is nowhere to be seen, so it must be far away from the house. The dogs are also nowhere to be found, but I suspect they'll appear out of nowhere at the slightest noise.

Let's test it to break my boredom. I might be on the first floor, but the dogs won't hear that difference, I suspect. Softly, because my muscular strength still isn't how it should be, I pat on the window. No movement. I try a bit harder, which takes a lot of effort.

Aha, the two black spots appear between the bushes and seem to glide over the garden, that's how fast they are. They don't make the slightest sound, but their flat ears and upright fur tell me enough about their mood.

If only I could transform right now, damn it. Or get a hold of a pistol. Frustrated I lean with my head against the window. I'm about to give up. Let everything go the way it goes. And then the marriage comes back to my mind.

No! I've got to get out of here and it has to be today. I have no idea about how Noël thinks he can make me marry him, but he's vicious enough to get his way. Maybe there's the possibility. In what way could he let me say yes to him? *Think, Manon, think.*

I take a seat on the bed and let myself fall flat on my back. Staring at the white ceiling I let

my brain rattle. Of course I would marry him if he threatens to cut Lucas to the quick. There's always a chance he would survive a stay in a tube, although he needs to be able to keep his brain then. Now I suspect Noël is getting out parts of brains from the others, I fear their lives can't be saved anymore, unless they want to live further on like a plant. I also think he rather likes to use Lucas as a guinea pig rather than murdering him. I also don't think there are so many otherkinds for the taking that can disappear to his cellar without further questions being raised.

And then the answer comes to my mind. The devil! Ed, or whatever he was called. He can of course manipulate my thoughts. Make me think I want to marry Noël. Damn it, he can even convince me I'm in love with Noël! *Gross*. After that I'm just a slave for Noël, turned over to his whims and demands. Ed can even renew it every day, make sure my brainwashing doesn't wear off. And I don't have Diedie to protect my head. Now I understand why the marriage is only planned tomorrow. Ed is still recovering from the stab I gave him.

The panic overwhelms me with a devastating power. I start to hyperventilate and my heart begins to beat faster. My fight- and flee reaction seems to take over and my brains go at full blast. At the same time I feel enraged. Enraged because of the fact that Noël would use a lame trick like that to commit myself to him and I can't do anything against it.

What happens next is something I should have foreseen. Because fear and anger take turns and intensify each other, the suppressed adrenaline escapes and runs through my entire body. In a few seconds I start to sweat and breathe faster.

Of course! I look at my hands that transform into leaves. *Yes, it's working! Stay angry, Manon, stay scared and angry*. Think about Lucas in Selena's bed and how she looked at you. Think about the poor people in the tubes, the wounded Lucas, Noël and his obsessive meanness, the inhuman Doc John.

I can feel how the sleeping drug is driven away by the adrenaline while I'm transforming. As if one army is marching over the other one and crushing them. I become soaking wet of the sweat, but I keep concentrating on the horrible and angry-making images. I visualize the vanishing of the sleeping drug, hoping I fasten the process like this.

I now let myself transform into fog. This is my only escape possibility. It works with my hands, arms and then my head.

Damn it, the cameras! The transformation stops. I realize Noël told me he was going for a nap and so probably no one is watching my room. But I actually find the thought about having to hurry up a very good one. That way I incite the adrenaline even more to victory. And indeed,

the transformation goes on and finally my feet transform into fog.

The crack underneath the door is big enough to let me go through and I'm quickly floating through the hall. Let's hope I'll find a crack downstairs that allows me to get through. I glidingly descend the stair downstairs, where no one is to be seen, directly towards the windows.

The first difficulty begins. The windows are all shut tight wherever I try and can't even be opened. Nowhere on both sides of the house is an opening in the windows that can let me go through.

Where's the front door? It seems to be a house from a nightmare. Would they have made a passage to the outside in the cellar? I wouldn't know any different. Nevertheless, the cellar seems to me a too big risk to escape through.

I look around and then see the kitchen. The cooker!

I rush towards it. They've also blocked the drain of the washbasin in here. Nah well, it seems the kitchen isn't used after all. And hooray! They didn't think about sealing the cooker. Highly strange, but I don't really care.

A few seconds later I'm hanging in the open air. I can barely believe it! Free!

Like a cloud I fly over the garden, the dogs far beneath me. Transforming into fog might be handy, but it takes a bunch of effort. This one is now faster gone because there are still bits of the sleeping drug streaming through my blood. So I need to get down quickly, but the territory is even bigger than I thought. A spacious field and after that a forest with especially spruces, which doesn't seem to have an ending.

In the distance I finally see the enclosure. Just like a sputtering engine my body starts to protest and grumble. *I'm not gonna make it! Shit, I'm not gonna make it!*

I let myself down on the ground five meters before the enclosure and that was right on time. Automatically my body starts to transform to its human state. I sit on my knees on top of a layer of stinging spruce needles, panting for breath. I stink to high heaven, my shirt and even my jeans are soaked in sweat. My hair sticks against my forehead and my heart pounds so fast it seems it will jump out of my chest any minute.

I look up after about a minute. The enclosure makes eyes at me and I need to hurry up. I put my index finger in my mouth and put it in the air afterwards. The wind is fairly good, the dogs won't smell my sweat immediately. I hope. I run as quickly as I can to the enclosure that consists of a concrete wall of about three meters high. Impossible to climb over it and the trees are just too far away from it.

I look angry at the wall and think about the things I could do. I can't give up, not now I'm already this far! It won't work the next time, they'll give me a double dose then to keep my adrenaline under control.

Walk past the wall and look for an opening seems to be too time-consuming. By then those dogs would have smelled me already. Then I hear them bark. *Oh no, oh no.* If the dogs have given the alarm, Selena will also be there soon.

*It has to happen now, Manon. You're stronger than you think you are,* I nerve myself. *Much stronger than you think you are.* With tightly shut eyes I concentrate and feel how my arms get longer and thinner. I open my eyes when I feel the top of the wall.

The barking gets louder, the dogs are getting closer.

With my last strengths I pull myself up and threaten to lose my consciousness any minute. But the hope for freedom gives my drive an extreme boost.

When I'm on the top of the wall I hear, next to the snarling dogs, a voice coming my way. Selena of course.

I don't jump down, but let me fall slowly. I land painfully in a ditch. It will add a few bruises to my collection. I hope I didn't break anything. There's only a little bit of water in the ditch, but it's extremely filthy through the garbage and indefinable mud.

The dogs and Selena sound very close, but I really haven't got anything left. It's too late. They'll find me here, empty and exhausted.

A tear runs down from my eye corner, I feel immensely miserable.

Then I hear a car coming closer. Realizing that the chance is small, but also that it's my last chance, I crawl out of the ditch. My hands grip into the mud. I slip and slide back into the ditch again. Hearing from the sound the car is only on a distance of ten meters. The dogs have arrived at the enclosure, I can hear them snarl closely, as if they're standing next to me.

I finally manage to crawl out of the ditch towards the road. There I keep lying in the middle of the road, with the risk of getting run over. It will just be that way. I lose consciousness.

I wake up with a terrible headache and feeling of sickness. I'm disorientated for a while and don't know where I am. I'm lying on a soft basis and hear music.

Noël's house! They've found me!

I open my eyes and don't see, as I expected, the bedroom, but cars zooming past. Surprised I look around me. I'm in a car and next to me is sitting a man.

'Hello, young lady,' he says politely smiling. He talks Dutch, but with a weird accent, a bit German-like.

‘Erm... hello,’ I say.

‘I see you’re feeling better again. But I’ll just bring you to a hospital.’

I rub my eyes and straighten up. ‘You found me on the street?’

‘Yes, you were lying there quite dangerously, so I picked you up. Okay?’

‘Of course, thanks so much!’

I can just kiss that man! There are after all still helpful people in the world!

*Halleluiah!*

I look behind me and see, to my great satisfaction, we have left the hilly country and drive into the built-up area.

‘You don’t have to take me to a hospital, I’m fine. I urgently need to get home.’

‘And where is your home?’ he asks.

‘Jabbeke.’

‘Jabbeke? Where’s that?’

‘Where are we here?’

‘Büllingen.’

Ah, there’s the German accent from. We’re still in Belgium, but in Eupen-Malmedy, the part where they talk German. That’s why Noël’s house was so isolated, that’s only possible in this part of Belgium. I think the man is about fifty years old, a balding head with grey hair and a beer belly. His look is most gentle and when he smiles, dimples appear in his cheeks, which give him a roguish outlook.

‘Jabbeke is in West-Flanders. If you can put me on a train I would be very thankful to you.’

‘Little girl,’ the man says. ‘It seems as if you’re coming from a war zone. To me you still aren’t able of taking a train all by yourself.’

I look at my clothes. They look dirty indeed and show some little rips here and there. In the mirror I see my worn-out face that’s covered with filthy smudges and my hands are full with scratches.

I sigh. ‘You’re right.’

‘And do you even have money with you?’

‘No, I also haven’t.’

‘What were you actually doing there so far away from home?’

‘I...’ I don’t know what to tell to the man. If I tell him the truth, he’ll certainly want to take me to a police office as quickly as possible. Then they’ll go to the house and although I’d love to see Noël and his sidekicks in prison, the police will discover the tubes with the otherkinds.

Only that isn't a disaster. No one can recognize them as otherkinds by only looking at them. What I'm really afraid of are the files about us in which all the information about us is listed. 'I don't remember,' I just lie. 'Sir, I promise you you'll be amply rewarded if you bring me home.'

The man shrugs. 'Of course I'll do that, girl. I have a daughter of my own and if something like this would happen to her, I'd love someone would be so kind.' He smiles warmly at me. 'Don't worry. Jabbeke, you said?'

'Yes, just follow the highway till Ostend. Between Ostend and Bruges you'll see a turning to Jabbeke.'

'Still rest for a while. You want to eat something?'

I'm hungry, surely, but I need my rest even more, so I shake my head.

'I'll wake you up when we have arrived in Jabbeke. In the meantime I'll call my wife, because she likes to know what I'm at.'

'Thanks,' I say and smile warmly at him.

He winks and then looks in front of him.

Although I don't know the man, I haven't felt so safe in days. He comes around reliable and I don't think he has bad intentions. Besides I wouldn't have the strength anymore to defend myself and can't do anything else but close my eyes. I doze off immediately.

'Lady.'

Someone pokes at my shoulder. I open my eyes slowly.

'We have arrived. Where is it you live exactly?'

We stand at the side of the road, not very far from my house. A shiver of relief goes through me. I blink with my eyes to let them get used to the bright daylight.

'The first street on the right and then right again.'

The man puts the car in first gear and joins the traffic.

'Are you feeling better?'

'Quite, yes, thanks for letting me sleep.'

He brushes aside my thank-you.

'Where was I when you found me?'

'You're talking about which street?'

'Yes.'

'Holzheim, Büllingen.'



I get the address into my head. 'Keep following here straight ahead, along with the curve.'

'Okay.'

The high trees on both sides of the road that barely let through the sunlight and the ginormic houses have never made me feel more welcome than today. My goodness, I'm so happy to be back home again! I can just shout with joy and dance!

'You can stop here before the gate,' I say while pointing.

The man turns in and stops the car.

I jump out of the car, all energy again and push on the videophone. This one clicks on immediately, as if Diedie was waiting next to it.

'Manon!' she cries.

I can't see her, but she can see me of course. I grin from ear to ear and hear the gate click open. Less than two seconds later Diedie is hugging me. She pinches so hard I can barely breathe and I can hear her sob softly.

'My little girl, my little girl,' she says continuously.

I don't pull myself loose from the embrace, enjoy it way too much. I sniff Diedie's flowery perfume deeply and I could just keep standing here like this for hours. Then I hear Jabar's voice.

'Manon!'

He's also hugging me and with the three of us we keep standing there for a while. Until I realize that that friendly man is still sitting in his car.

'Jabar, Diedie, someone is waiting there.'

They let go off me slowly and look at where I'm pointing. Then they see the man who found our little scene moving, because I can see tears sparkle on his cheeks.

'He has saved me, Jabar.'

'I understand.'

Jabar walks to the car and leans down at the window. They exchange a few words and Jabar then reaches for his pocket and gets out his wallet. The man shakes his head heavily and seemingly refuses to accept the money. Nevertheless, Jabar keeps insisting and the man takes it clearly unwillingly.

I walk towards them and in a spontaneous impulse I hug the man through the driver's window.

'I'll never forget you've saved me.'

The man chuckles. 'You're welcome, girl, take good care of yourself.'

‘You too. Come home safely.’

He winks and then drives backwards to the street.

I watch the car drive off until it has disappeared completely. People like him make the world a better place and make you forget what sorts of evil are creeping around.

I turn around and see Jabar and Diedie look at me as if I returned from the underworld.

‘I’ve got a lot to tell you,’ I say. ‘But first I want a delicious Diedie-meal.’

Diedie turns around immediately. ‘On my way!’ she shouts and runs into the house.

Jabar and I follow her with arms linked.

It feels so good to be back home again. I've been away for three entire days, but it seems like three months. I've just stuffed my stomach with so much food it's about to explode and told the story between times. Jabar and Diedie barely interrupted me.

'But, girl, that's all so terrible,' Diedie says while she takes away my plate. 'We're so proud of you! So incredibly proud.'

'It wasn't so bad. It's much worse for those otherkinds in those tubes.'

'I can't imagine he only wants to study them. There must be more to it than meets the eye,' Jabar says thoughtful.

'Just what I thought. When I began about brain transplantation I thought to have seen some reaction from his side.'

'We need to save them!' Diedie cries out. She opens the dishwasher and puts my plate in it.

'Don't rush things,' Jabar says. 'Of course we won't leave them to fend for themselves.'

'If Noël would have known he'd help me by telling about those adrenaline suppressers maybe I'd still be stuck in there,' I say.

'Everyone makes mistakes, that's how it is.' Diedie caresses my cheek and looks lovingly at me.

'Won't Noël move now I know where he lives?' I ask.

'Doesn't seem likely to me,' Jabar answers. 'It's not that simple to move an entire laboratory. It seems more plausible to me he will enforce the security or come after us.'

'Then we need to be prepared!' I already jump off my chair.

'The best defense is the attack,' Jabar says calmly. 'Oded will arrive in a minute. We're stronger with the four of us. If I got it right, Noël only has a devil and a vampire working for him?'

'And that transformer, but I didn't see him in the house. And then the Doc of course, although I don't think we'll have to fear much about him, except a pistol maybe.'

'Don't forget the dogs.'

'Leave them to me,' I say combatively. 'You know, if I wouldn't have wounded that devil I'd probably be married to Noël already.'

'I wonder what's behind that,' Diedie says. 'What does an old man like him want from such a young thing?' She pulls a face of disgust.

'To me it seems as if he saw it as a revenge. I took away his love from him, so he wanted to

take a beloved someone away from me,' Jabar says.

'Than why didn't he kill me. Simpler and faster.'

'Because you would strengthen his ego and position of power more as his wife and slave than if you were dead.'

'Luckily you didn't warn the police,' I say. 'If they would have found those files...'

'We were about to do so,' Jabar says. 'We thought you wouldn't manage to escape anymore. And as if Noël felt we would contact the police, we got a letter in the mail, together with that terrible picture, in which stood you were still alive and we would soon know what was expected of us. We already suspected Noël was keeping you numb. And above that they taped up the number plate of that truck so Oded couldn't pass it on. We looked up which companies are Noël's and started to investigate them subtly. Oded read their minds, but they couldn't tell us anything. We didn't find a home address anywhere.'

'But I still have the feeling there's more to it than meets the eye. I mean those tubes. Noël talked as if he already knew how to steal the gifts of otherkinds. If we aren't quick he'll undergo the operation himself.'

'I don't think so. He knows we can storm into his house any moment,' Jabar says. 'He's too vulnerable during and after an operation.'

'Jabar, that last filing cabinet Manon opened, with those names on the further empty folders. Shouldn't we just check them?' Diedie suggests. She takes a seat at the table again.

'Do you remember a name?' Jabar asks me.

'It were strange names on the average. Foreign and therefore hard to remember.'

I'm doing my best to see the files in front of me, but I can't call a name to mind. Damn it, if only I paid more attention, but I have a bad memory after all.

'I can't remember. One looked Arabic, another one Russian, another Spanish or something like that. I really can't remember, sorry.'

'Oded can find it out,' Jabar then says.

'What can I... Good God Almighty! Manon!'

Before I even notice Oded has entered, he's already hugging me.

'Oded,' I giggle. 'You'll squash me.'

'Rather a squashed Manon than no Manon,' he says with a cracked voice. He lets go off me and looks guiltily at me. 'I've never hated myself so much before as in the last couple of days, cursed myself so badly. You were taken along right under my nose and I didn't do anything.'

I lay my hand on his upper arm. 'You couldn't do anything, Oded, it was all going too fast.'

‘And still... damn, and still...’

Now it’s me who’s hugging him and caressing his back. I need to pay attention, because Squeaky is sitting on his shoulder and the little creature seems to have a rough time keeping its balance. ‘It’s alright, Oded, really. I don’t blame you at all.’

He keeps me at a distance and looks carefully at me. ‘What did those plucked sons of bitches do to you?’

‘Diedie and I will tell you, Oded. Maybe Manon wants to take a shower first?’

‘Oh, don’t you like my new tramp look then?’ I joke. ‘But I have indeed a great need for a good, long, hot shower and that without priers this time.’

‘Priers?’ Oded asks.

I get to stand on the tip of my toes, give him a kiss on the cheek and then walk to my room, yelling: ‘I’ve missed you all so much!’

A few minutes later I feel like a new person or the usual Manon again. All physical, but also mental dirt washed off of me. A freshly washed blouse, clean underwear and spotless jeans. I feel up to it again.

When I walk to the kitchen I hear Oded say: ‘What an incredible musty monster!’

‘Manon thinks the foreign names are important. I agree with that. The file folders were empty and not like those of the otherkinds full with information of those persons,’ Jabar says.

I enter the kitchen where they’re all still sitting together around the table and pull up a chair.

‘Can you look into my thoughts and single out the names?’ I ask. ‘I can’t remember one of them.’

‘I can do that,’ Oded says doubtfully. ‘But I don’t like it. It’s an incursion on your privacy and I can also see other data you’d rather keep to yourself.’

‘That doesn’t matter right now. We need to know what Noël is still planning to do and free those people as soon as possible.’

Oded nods, he gets that I’m quite determined.

‘Keep sitting relaxed and I’ll do the rest.’

I close my eyes, not that it matters, but to me it just seems to fit more. I feel the well-known tingling, as if ants are crawling over my brain. It certainly lasts a few minutes before Oded says: ‘Okay, it worked.’

I open my eyes again. ‘What did you see?’

‘A lot.’ Oded grins.

I poke him. 'Come on, I mean, did you see the files, the names?'

'Of course!' He throws a proud look at us. 'I'm good! I'm even the bomb!'

'Enough blowing your own trumpet,' Diedie smilingly says. 'Give us the names.'

'How many do you want of them?'

'Lets go to the attic at once,' Jabar suggests. 'Then we can google those names.'

Soon after we're all sitting around the computers.

'Start with Nikita Dimitrief,' Oded says.

'Sounds Russian,' I find.

Jabar types in the name. Immediately on the top of the page stands: 'List of richest people in the world – Wikipedia.'

'Well, well, look at that,' Oded sniffs.

Nikita Dimitrief seems to be number twelve on the list of the forty richest people in the world. He didn't do badly.

'Hey,' Oded says and points at number twenty. 'That's that Arab. Ghalid Nabilsii.'

'Doesn't really sound Arabic,' I think.

'It does, it is,' Oded says. 'And thus again a stinking rich one.' Oded grins sheepishly at Jabar. 'Not meant personally, ol' friend.'

'Do you recognize more names on the list?' Jabar asks.

Oded goes through the list. 'Yes, number thirty-nine, Johanna De La Torre. But further on nothing. I saw another name in your memory: Jack Jefferson.'

'Hey, Jabar, you're also on the list,' I cry out and point eagerly.

Then I whistle. 'Number seven. Well yeah, say, boaster.'

Jabar looks surprised at me.

'Kidding,' I say while shrugging.

'So, Jack Jefferson,' Jabar says and types in his name.

'That drawer was full of file folders, for sure about fifty,' I remember.

'Yes, but you didn't look at them and therefore I also couldn't see them,' Oded declares.

In the meantime Jabar has googled Jack and apparently he doesn't belong to the top forty, but he didn't do badly. A big Wall Street man who above that deals in diamonds.

'I'm starting to get the impression that the other names also have a lot of zeroes on their bank accounts,' Oded says.

'All fabulously wealthy people,' Diedie concludes. 'What's he planning to do with them?'

'I think I know.'

They all look interrogative at me.

'It seems logical to me he wants to sell the gifts or rather the brains to those rich people.'

'I can't imagine that, Manon,' Jabar thinks. 'Then there is no way out. A lot of people would know about our kinds and that can't stay a secret for long.'

'What else could it be?' I say. 'Only very rich people could afford that.'

'I don't think brain surgery is that well advanced already, Manon,' Jabar keeps insisting.

'Everything goes super-fast, you know,' I object.

'What if Manon would keep an eye on the house? Transformed into for example a bird or something?' Oded suggests.

'Than it would have to be a very big bird to correspond with my mass and that would attract too much attention.'

We all fall silent, thinking about the shape in which I could keep an eye on the house nondescriptly.

'A Doberman!' I cry out. 'It won't differ that much in mass and maybe they won't notice that one dog got a little big bigger.'

'I don't know,' Jabar puts forward. 'It seems quite dangerous.'

'I agree with Jabar,' Diedie adds. 'You've only just escaped from them. They'll kill you the second time.'

'Ah, come on! It's what I do!' I cry out much too loud. I lower my voice and say: 'That's what you've trained me for, Jabar. And you know just as well as I do we stand less chance with the four of us if we attack. Noël has optimized his defense and he suspects we will rush in. But it isn't the case I will risk it on my own. Hopefully he doesn't realize I saw that date, the twentieth of May. That's tomorrow and maybe it's extremely important.'

I can see him doubt, so I quickly add: 'You guys stay around, close. You now know where the house is located, so. And maybe we can use in-ear microphones, so we stay connected with each other.'

'Okay, suppose we anaesthetize a dog and you take its place. Won't the other dog attack you?'

'Nope, he'll try. But I don't think he will because I'll be a female dog. I now how to handle a male dog, be sure about that.'

'And then? Those dogs don't enter the house,' Diedie says. I see the worried look in her eyes. She'd rather keep me here.

'I'm only keeping an eye on the house. Just check what they're doing that day and especially at night at eight p.m.. Maybe they'll give themselves away one way or another. I only can't see the cellar, unfortunately.' I deliberately keep to myself I hope the windows aren't blacked out, otherwise I can't see from the outside at all.

Jabar opens his mouth, but I'm ahead: 'If there's nothing to be seen after that day I'll come back immediately.'

'I don't think you can still stop her, Jabar,' Oded says softly.

'I've left out one thing in my story.' Contritely I bow and look at the ground.

'What, honey?' Diedie asks. She understandingly lays her hand on my knee.

'Noël claimed to know who my biological parents are.'

Although I don't look at them I can hear how they suck in their breath in surprise. When I look up nobody says a thing, but they all look sympathetic at me as if I've just told them I suffer from a deadly disease.

'How can he know that?' Diedie finally asks. 'We don't even know it.'

'It doesn't matter to me,' I say. 'You're my own and real parents.'

Jabar looks doubtfully at me. 'Eventually every child wants to know who their biological parents are.'

'I don't!' I cry out fiercely and then softer: 'I really don't, Jabar. I love you both and you've raised me. That's the only thing that matters.'

Diedie hugs me and puts a kiss on my crown. 'You're a sweet girl.'

'And now we need to get things moving,' I say firmly and get up. 'Can we still get a hold of in-ear microphones today?'

Jabar can. He's immediately sets to work and calls a few connections that can help him further. In the meantime I draw a sketch of the territory and the house, at least as well as I can remember it. Oded looks with Google Earth at the territory, searching for a hiding place where they can stay connected with me, but not too far away from Noël's house. Diedie is making sandwiches and takes care of the drinks. The intention is they get through the day, but Diedie exaggerates as always and seems to stock up for an entire week.

Next to his Mini, Oded also has a delivery van with which he gets his drinking supplies for his pub. It's perfect for making it as comfortable as possible for them on the mission. All possible worst case scenarios are run through and we look for the best solutions if they'll present themselves unexpectedly. We've probably overlooked something, you can't plan everything after all, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Diedie still dug up and



destroyed the last cameras in the garden.

I feel stronger than ever. I think it's just the fact that the others are coming with me. This time I don't need to do it on my own and I'm really planning to give Selena and Ed hell.

*Payback time! With interest!*

At night we're all mentally washed-out. Nevertheless, Diedie still knows how to work magic with a delicious meal. Not literally of course.

During the eating we're stressed and especially minding our own thoughts. Mine are especially with Lucas. Actually it's all my fault. If I hadn't slept with him Selena would have never used him as live bait to hurt me. But I need to stop with those feelings of guilt, they don't contribute anything and only hinder me. I repeat a few times to myself it wasn't me who stabbed down Lucas and I wasn't the one who put him in a tube.

After supper we all go to bed early. We need to get enough sleep, because who knows how long we'll stay awake tomorrow. Before I turn on the television to fall asleep with, I first call Sharon.

Unlike usual she's still at a loss about the vicious way Joseph has put her aside. I find it horrible I can't inform her about it and try to comfort her as much as I can.

'But,' she says, 'I'm going to a concert of Placebo tomorrow evening and it will take my mind off of Joseph.'

'Placebo! How incredibly neat!'

'It is, isn't it! I'm really looking forward to it. They've got a new album. It's just superb!'

'I'll look it up on the internet.'

'You really should! I find the lead singer, Brian Molko, so handsome.'

'And sexy!' I add to that.

'You know,' she says in a mysterious tone. 'I suspect he's a vampire.'

'Brian Molko?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

I try to see him in front of me and need to agree with Sharon. The chance is big.

'You could be right,' I then also say.

'Just be sure I'll find out. I'm gonna try to get backstage.'

'What if it doesn't work?'

'Then I can always bring him to me with my telekinetic gift.'

'Sharon!'

She chuckles. 'No, silly, of course I won't do that.'

'It doesn't sound like you mean it.'

'I must and will sleep with him, that's for sure.'

'Knowing you, you'll even succeed. Just let me know whether he's a vampire.'

'Will do.'

'I'm gonna go to bed. Lots of fun tomorrow.'

I'm convinced she's grinning right now. 'I'll manage. Sleep tight.'

I put on the television and try to find a movie I've already seen before. To me it's the perfect soporific, because I already get it soon sleeping won't be easy.

Early in the morning we all get up at five 'o'clock. By amazing good fortune I've slept like a top. Back home again and sweetly in my own bed has its advantages of course. I jump eagerly and full of energy out of bed.

By way of test I try to transform while I'm in the bathroom. Within two seconds I'm a cheetah, fully and without faults. That means my adrenaline level is on a normal level again. *Hooray!*

I shower amply and pay attention to not use any smells, just water. Then I put on my favorite and most comfy jeans, with a sweater with V-neck on top of it. Of course my clothes smell of washing powder and the dogs can pick up the scent, but there's nothing else to do. Instead of boots, I put on easy gimp shoes. I put my hair in a tail and only out of sheer habit I put on a bit of mascara.

I hear the hustle-bustle in the house. So they're all getting ready. I don't feel nervous, not yet, but I know for sure it will come that far as soon as we're in the neighborhood of Noël's house. When I enter the kitchen Diedie is already making sandwiches with cheese, ham, slices of tomato, lettuce and large dollops of mayonnaise. She knows I love that.

'Good morning, sweetie,' she says in a forced happy tone. The tension and turmoil she's feeling are clearly visible in her clumsy movements. A slice of tomato falls to the ground and she picks it up while sighing.

'Good morning, Diedie.' I give her a kiss. 'Everything's going to be alright. I'll be very careful.'

She sighs again. 'The coffee's ready.'

Unlike usual I put a few sugar cubes in my coffee. Anything to stay awake.

When Jabar and Oded join us the breakfast passes off in a pregnant pause. With me especially because I want to prepare mentally and go through every step in my mind. Oded seems to have dressed for this dark day. Instead of his usual brightly colored blouses he now wears a grey one with black roses on it. He leaves Squeaky in the house in his new glazed cage.

Before we leave Diedie still does a mojo. She makes the house look as if we've moved in great haste. If one of Noël's chaps comes and has a look we hope they'll think we've left to keep me in safety. It's a considerably strong illusion that will last for a day at the most. But we don't want to run the risk that if they find an empty house in which still are all the furniture and stuff, they'll suspect we're on our way to them.

Soon after we're sitting in the delivery van, on our way to the Belgian Ardennes. Jabar drives with Oded next to him and Diedie and I are in the back. It's a drive of about three hours, so we've still got plenty of time to go through the plans again.

It seems the weather will be on our side. The sky is brightly blue with only a stretched cloud here and there that looks like cotton candy. Great, because I namely dislike to smell of wet dog.

Diedie is especially sighing a lot, a sign it's still bothering her I'm going back to that house. Also Jabar shows for him nervous features; he drives more absent-mindedly than usual and he even forgets to indicate direction. Oded is the only one who's seemingly relaxed, but the looks he throws in my direction when he turns around, tell another story. It's of course sweet of them they're so concerned, but it only raises my insecurity. I wish they would show more confidence in me. On the other hand they might do that and it's just me.

I feel it in my tensed muscles we're almost there. Everyone falls silent and fiddles nervously on his or her clothes or coughs more than usual. When Jabar drives into a street I recognize it immediately. And that doesn't only have to do with my heart that's starting to rage like crazy. 'It's here, a bit further on,' I say, relieved my voice doesn't sound cracked.

I look at my mobile phone and see it's 9:30 a.m.. Jabar drives slowly further until I cry out: 'Here, just pull over here!'

I get out and look at the wall I've pulled myself over with great effort yesterday. It seems much longer ago, even an eternity. Now I see the mud and thrown-away garbage in the ditch again I don't find it not surprising I was so dirty. *Yuck*. The others got out in the meantime and look with me at the wall, as if all solutions are to be found there.

'Are you sure about this?' Jabar asks me.

I nod and smile bravely. 'Positive.'

'Here.' He slips an earplug to me. 'State-of-the-art, they're called 'good ear boys'. Designed by a Japanese company.'

I put the plug in my right ear, tuck away the wire as well as possible and attach the device underneath my clothes. 'And can I talk to you with this?'

Jabar nods. 'That's the intention. Let's test.'

We all have our earplugs in. I say grinningly: 'Testing, testing, one two three.'

'I hear you,' Diedie says.

'Hear you too,' I confirm.

Also Oded and Jabar have an excellent reception.

‘Being a dog the device won’t work,’ I say again just to be perfectly clear. ‘Because this one will be transformed.’

‘But you’ll be vulnerable for so long,’ Diedie says and shakes her head with a sad look in her eyes.

‘I’ll have sharp teeth.’

I show my teeth to Diedie and make a grumbling sound that elicits a wavering smile from her. Then Oded slips a plastic bag to me in which is a bloody chunk of meat with a strong anesthetic in it.

‘Be sure only one dog eats it,’ Jabar warns me unnecessarily.

I take a deep breath and then nod. I’m ready. After a last look at the others, Oded gives me a leg-up so I’m sitting on the top of the wall.

‘Be careful, girl,’ Oded says and then lets go off me.

I wink at them and then jump down at the other side. I land flexible on my feet. Almost immediately I hear the dogs. They’re coming closer with a raging speed. I need to be fast now.

After I put down the piece of meat I transform into a Doberman and go lying on my back as a sign of submissiveness. One of the dogs is now standing a meter away from me and snarls dangerously at me, until he smells the meat. He gobbles the piece in one bite. In the meantime the second dog has arrived, with his ears flat and his tail between its legs. With his distorted muzzle so a grotesque range of teeth appear, he looks grumbling at me, ignoring his partner. Slowly he comes closer and sniffs my behind. Pff, the things you need to do for a mission.

Apparently I’m seen and approved, because the Doberman takes a few steps backwards, his tail wagging to and fro like a crazy flag. His mate is already in the land of Nod. Phase one accomplished.

I turn around and jump up. The still awakened Doberman sees me at the same time as its new mate and seems to have forgotten about his earlier brother. The fact that I’m a female dog will probably have to do with it. We both run between the trees towards the house. I need to say that running like a quadruped feels magnificent. So low to the ground you seem to float by the speed those four legs give you. It gives a free feeling that can hardly be equaled to anything. A bit comparable to when I fly in the shape of a bird, and still.

Soon my tongue hangs out of my muzzle and the wind tickles through my fur. I enjoy! The glazed house looks different, I find, when we arrive at it. But that could be due to the fact I

now see it from a lower level and from another direction. Then I understand why the dog returned to the house immediately.

Selena is standing there with a whistle in her mouth, her hands on the hips.

I didn't hear the blow of the whistle, but my quadruped new friend did of course. Let's hope Selena doesn't see the difference between the sleeping Doberman and me.

Two bowls with food are at her feet. My companion immediately starts gorging himself. Selena leans down and caresses him with a tender smile about her lips. Then she comes towards me and looks at me with frowned eyebrows. *Oh, shit, she sees I'm fake, oh shit.*

I must start eating now, otherwise she'll even grow more suspicious. I bow my head over the bowl. *Yuck!* It stinks horribly and floats in fresh blood. I suspect they are kidneys and let that be something I find incredibly nasty. *Don't think about it, Manon, just eat. It's healthy, nothing wrong with it, you're not going to die of it.* With all of my will-power inside of me I open my muzzle and stuff myself with a kidney. Eat quicker, I urge myself, dogs always eat faster and luckily without really chewing. With my mind on blank, even forgetting that Selena is standing near to me, I eat all the kidneys as greedily as possible.

I've never felt so relieved something was over before.

Then I feel a hesitating hand land on my head and look up at Selena's face. She nods approvingly and smiles.

'Good dog,' she says and scratches behind my ears. I need to say, she doesn't do a bad job. Again I feel a relief go through me, she isn't on to it.

'You don't want the blood today?' she asks me.

Then she does something extremely gross. She takes my bowl and drinks the last rest of blood. Nauseous I turn my head away from the event, by which I don't see how Selena disappears with both bowl into the house.

I decide to immediately investigate the case and take a stroll around the house. To my great relief the windows aren't blacked out. My fellow quadruped, which I have baptized with the name 'Bass', follows me faithfully. Despite my humble position when we met each other he seems to have accepted me as the leader. Strange. Probably the sleeping Doberman was the alpha, and I have, after 'cutting him out', taken its position in the order of ranking. Fine with me, as long as he doesn't go thinking about a little sex treat.

I don't see movement anywhere, nor in the living room and kitchen, nor when I look at the windows of the bedroom. Selena has probably retired to the cellar. My stomach turns when I think about those poor people and Lucas, who are still in this miserable condition.

A few hours pass in which no one is to be seen and it seems as if the house is deserted. Nevertheless, I know better, they're all in that happy cellar with sadistic attributes. To kill time I frolic with Bass. We jump around each other, run after each other, bite one another softly in the paws and tail. I even pee like a dog and lick my paws clean. Well, the longer you're in a specific shape, the more you take characteristics and behaviors of that shape. I've got the impression people think that the less they allow hair on their body, the farther they're from animals. But our beastliness is in our DNA and not in the way we look. And then, suddenly, I notice a movement in the living room.

It's the man himself. I go lying in front of the window, with my head resting on my legs and one eye half-opened, so it seems as if I'm sleeping. Bass comes to lie next to me and lays, after heaving a deep sigh, his head on my side. He's so adorable, as long as he doesn't keep people caught or attacks them. I mean the dog of course, not Noël. After all, Bass is only just an instrument in the hands of the true animal.

Noël paces through the living room and looks concerned. Now he doesn't have anyone to intimidate he doesn't seem self-assured at all. From time to time he scratches his hair and mutters to himself. Unfortunately I can't hear what he's saying. He's looking regularly at his watch. Then he opens his mobile phone. Apparently he's being called, because I don't see him pushing any buttons.

The person on the other side of the line is really getting hell. Noël is making wild gestures and his face is running red. There go his well-manneredness and self-control when no one sees him, I think with satisfaction.

I hear a car coming closer, it sounds as if it's on the other side of the house. I jump up, through which Bass wakes with a growl and shakes. I quickly run around the house, with Bass following in my tracks.

There are for sure twenty parking spaces laid with pebbles. A long drive in between leads to a double iron gate. The car I heard is a Mercedes. He parks near the house and a man gets out.

Ed.

Apparently all better again after the injuries I inflicted on him with the knife. He walks towards the house with vehement steps. He gets a magnetic card out of his pocket that he holds in front of a detector that's attached to a pole and that stands about a meter in front of the house. A window glides open and he walks inside. Aha, so that's how the house opens itself.

I put on a sprint to the other side where I have a better view on the living room. I'm thinking about transforming into something so I can sneak into the house, but that doesn't seem to be necessary. Ed and Noël are standing outside in the garden, talking agitated.

'He isn't coming? He isn't coming?' Noël spits the words into Ed's face.

'I can't help it, boss, he doesn't risk to make the journey now he's undergone an operation,' Ed answers in an apologizing tone.

Bass wants to play with me again, he's cutting jolly capers. A growl from my side makes him



slink off with his tail between his legs. He goes lying down with his head on his legs and heaves a deep sigh. *Sorry, Boss, but works comes first.*

‘I’ve even complied with his special request! Well, supposedly.’ Noël again.

‘Can’t you find someone else for it?’

‘Still? Are you nuts! They’ll all arrive within a few hours! It’s too late! All that effort!’ Noël runs his fingers through his hair and turns away from Ed. Half-muttering he continues: ‘Every client has been put through an in-depth investigation. Their financial status, their personality and behavior. The candidates need to be utmost appropriate and especially be able to keep their mouths shut. The rest of the potential candidates do not meet the necessary requirements, so I might not even think about them. The chance on a leak is too big.’

‘It isn’t my fault, boss,’ Ed whines.

Noël waves with his hands and then turns around again. ‘I surely know that. Are all the other arrangements made?’

‘Everything alright, boss. I found those special storage containers. The same they use for organ transport.’

‘I don’t understand why they want to keep their discarded brains. Well, it doesn’t matter anyway.’

‘That’s right, boss.’

‘The doctor? The operating room? The medication?’

‘All double checked, boss.’

‘Good, good. Now nothing can go wrong anymore.’

‘Certainly, boss.’

‘The account?’

‘Not traceable.’

‘They should have done the advance payment by now.’

Ed nods. ‘I’ll read their minds during the champagne and check whether they’ve informed someone else about what’s going on here.’

‘Make sure you have enough time to do it thoroughly. And do the same with those others.’

‘Certainly, boss.’

Noël falls back into pondering. Then: ‘And Manon? No sign?’

‘No, boss.’

‘So Jabar’s house was completely deserted, no furniture, nothing?’

‘Yes, boss, no living soul to be found. There were still a few empty boxes in the living room,

that's all.'

'I can't imagine Jabar moved so quickly again, although he has the necessary means of course.'

'Manon is very important to him. They've probably worked through the entire night and made a team of movers come around for a great consideration.'

'Yes, and besides that Jabar is a coward. Now he knows I'm after him and knows where he lives, he's of course running away as quick as he can.' An embittered line appears about Noël's face, as if he's biting a sour lemon.

If only he knew, I think to myself, how close Jabar really is.

It's really clear now a few people are expected this evening at eight 'o'clock. It's just I need to find out what for, although I'm having a pretty idea through the hint of the operating room and the discarded brains. I'm afraid my earlier suspicions are becoming the truth.

I get an idea. What if I would transform into one of the guests? But then I realize that will become impossible. They probably won't come alone and I still need to know how to overpower someone the same length as mine.

'When do the others arrive?' Noël asks.

'Seven-thirty.'

'It's going to be a long night,' Noël sighs deeply.

'Yes, it will be, boss.'

'Keep your eyes open tonight. It wouldn't surprise me if Jabar would still come around.'

'You think so, boss?'

Noël nods, his look hard as stone. 'Through Manon he knows something fishy right here.'

'That's indeed very annoying.'

'But I think he wants to prepare himself elaborately first. Knowing him, he'll be busy making plans for days and run through everything in great detail.' Noël purses his lips. 'Starting from tomorrow or the day after tomorrow we may expect him. By then we're already long gone.'

'All the necessary stuff has been packed already.'

'That's good. We don't have to waste time and above that we can't know for sure Jabar won't appear earlier.'

'Boss?'

'Yes?'

Ed shuffles uncomfortably back and forth on his feet. He doesn't look at Noël when he asks:

'Wouldn't it have been better if you postponed the entire event? Until we cut out Jabar and

his group?’

Noël looks at Ed so fiercely even I shrink back, while I’m even lying on a distance of about 4 meters.

‘No! This operation took me years of my life on preparation and investigation. We carry on with our plan just the way it is! Besides, the clients are already on their way. Postponing isn’t possible anymore.’

‘You’re right, boss, sorry.’

‘Just stop thinking, you. That’s no use at all. Is the one room closed well?’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘Good, I don’t want the clients to see this one. The shock would be too great.’

Noël walks to a similar pole as the one on the other side of the house and passes a card in front of it. So that’s why there aren’t any handles or clinches. The windows can only be electronically opened with a special made pass for that purpose. I now also remember the pole in the living room.

Both of them walk inside and the window closes behind them.

I know enough for now. I want to discuss my earlier formed plan with the others. At a trot I spurt to the wall I came from. Bass is of course following me. When I arrive at the wall I transform into myself again. Bass looks suspicious at me and lays his ears flat. But he doesn’t growl, clearly confused. I give him a pat on his head and then turn around. Just like the previous time I stretch out my arms and pull me up the wall this way. I land softly on the ground at the other side.

‘Jabar?’ I say.

‘I’m listening. Everything alright?’

‘Fine. Say, where are you?’

‘Follow the street to the left and then take the second street on the right. That’s where we’re standing.’

‘Okay.’

I quickly walk towards it. Now I can look at my spare mobile phone and I see it’s already 4 p.m.. Time seems to go faster when you go through life like a dog.

I knock on the rear window of the van and the door opens. Three pairs of eyes look at me.

‘Hi,’ I grin.

Diedie hugs me immediately. ‘You’re alright. Thank God.’

I clamber into the car. Diedie immediately slips a sandwich and a cup of coffee to me.

'I've already eaten, but I can certainly eat this on top of it,' I say and take a big bite.

'You've already eaten?' Diedie asks. 'What? Dry dog food?'

'Raw kidneys.' I pull a face.

Then I tell everything I've heard. 'I suggest I try to overpower one of the guests and adopt his or her figure.'

'That doesn't seem wise to me,' Jabar thinks. 'You don't know that person, so the chance you'll do a poor showing is big.'

'We just need to do something today, because they're gone by tomorrow,' I say.

'I agree with that,' Jabar says. 'It's just we have to look for another method.'

Also Oded agrees with that. 'You don't have to run unnecessary risks, Manon, it isn't fucking worth it.'

'Hey, I was right, you know,' I grin. 'He's planning to sell the brains of otherkinds to filthy rich people and bring them into them.'

'Yes, that could indeed be the case,' Jabar admits. 'Nevertheless, it still seems utmost unlikely to me.'

'What a horrible idea.' Diedie's face twists with disgust.

'I wonder who those 'others' Noël was talking about are,' I say. 'Maybe another medical team? I don't think a single man can perform all those operations.'

'What horrible they are. Horrible. Killing others for their own benefit,' Diedie continues, shaking her head.

'Could it work?' I ask.

'What?' Oded asks.

'Well, could those people adopt those gifts?'

'I suspect they can,' Jabar answers. 'Otherwise it wouldn't have a point.'

'That means,' Diedie says shuddering, 'he's probably doing tests on otherkinds for years already to see whether it works.'

'Would he also have experimented on himself?' Oded asks.

I shrug my shoulders. 'I didn't see any prove of it. He didn't use gifts and I never saw the color of his eyes change.'

'What would be in that closed room?' Diedie wonders.

'There were more rooms in that cellar, seven to be precise, of which I only saw three. So I don't have a clue.'

At that moment I look outside and see Selena drive past, looking grumpily in front of her. I

duck away in a reflex.

‘What are you doing?’ Oded asks.

‘That was Selena who drove past,’ I whisper, as if she could hear me.

The others now look outside, but Selena has already disappeared out of sight.

Oded says thoughtful: ‘She’s a good prey. You know her.’

‘Then she needs to return,’ Diedie says.

‘Probably she will,’ I say. ‘She’ll be expected tonight, even if it’s just as mere security.’

‘I like that idea already more,’ Jabar thinks.

I grin. ‘Playing a bitch isn’t that hard. And then I can finally give her hell.’

‘Besides you can keep your earplug in when being a vampire and keep your weapons close,’ Oded adds.

We decide to risk it and to wait, hoping that Selena will take the same way back. In the meantime we make plans about what we’ll do if it indeed comes that far Noël will sell the brains of otherkinds and implant them in the rich clients.

A few hours pass and the tension builds up inside the delivery van. We fear our plan will fall to pieces, that Selena doesn’t turn back at all or took another way back. Time presses, it’s almost six ‘o clock. Through the nerves I drink one cup of coffee after the other, which isn’t very smart of course. Next I’ll have to go to the toilet every five minutes. On the other hand I hope the caffeine will keep my adrenaline level high. Now I discovered, thanks to Noël, it influences our gifts, I’m of course taking it into account.

And then, finally, a car comes closer that looks like Selena’s one. An outstanding canary yellow sports car of one or another Japanese brand.

‘Action!’ Oded yells.

I jump out of the delivery van and transform into a Doberman. In the middle of the road I go lying down on the ground, with my eyes half-open. Let’s hope I’ve assessed Selena rightly, and she’s indeed friendlier with dogs than with humans. The car comes closer at a raging speeds and I’m keeping myself ready to jump up and run away. Then, to my great relief, she pushes the breaks and slows down until she’s standing completely still one meter away from me. *Phew!*

That was just in the nick of time.

I immediately transform back into myself. At that same moment Oded and Jabar jump out of the delivery van, with their pistols aimed to the front. Selena scares the living daylights out of

her and wants to get back in the car.

‘Not a single move, damn it!’ Oded threatens. ‘Or we’ll shoot you down.’

‘With a lot of pleasure,’ I add grinningly.

Selena throws a devastating look at me. I don’t care. I run towards her and give her, without hesitating, a punch in her face.

She gives a cry and holds a hand before her bleeding nose. I don’t hesitate one second and hit her fully on her lips again. And again. It seems as if I’m giving my frustrations and pain of the last few days free reign on her. She undergoes it without defending herself and that immediately takes away all the pleasure. After a punch in her stomach, she doubles over and smacks down to the ground.

‘So, you’re feeling better now?’ Jabar asks.

I turn around to him. ‘Much better.’

Oded drags Selena into the delivery van. With a piece of robe from the car he ties up her hands and feet in such a way they’re both also connected to each other on her back. In the meantime Jabar has parked the car on the side of the road. I’m transformed into Selena, with the same clothes she was wearing; black cotton trousers, white blouse with long sleeves, black long coat and pumps. The coat is perfect to hide my Glock and blackjack in it. Finally I put in the earplug and attach the device on my stomach. I try to camouflage the wire with my hair. I just hope they don’t notice Selena has lost a few inches.

‘Do you see the wire?’ I ask Diedie.

She looks elaborately at me and then shakes her head. ‘No.’

‘Then here I go,’ I say as eager as possible, but in the meantime I explode with nerves.

Jabar gives me the car keys of Selena’s car. ‘We hear everything you say. We’re keeping an eye on you.’

‘I’m counting on that.’ I force a self-assured smile.

Oded found a magnetic card in Selena’s pockets he hands to me.

‘I almost forgot, stupid of me,’ I say apologizing.

I see a remote control in the car with which I can probably open the iron gate. I start the car and drive off after I’ve still waved at them. Diedie watches me drive off with a worried look in her eyes.

Sometimes I doubt whether I fit for this kind of work. It's just I grew up with it and didn't want to disappoint Jabar, but in my opinion I'm only granted a short life. If an otherkind that wants to get back on me doesn't kill me someday, my heart will probably chuck it at an early age. Still I have to admit the adventure is keeping my life variable and exiting and the fulfilling feeling, after a successful mission, can't be compared to anything.

The gate indeed opens when I push on the remote control. I drive inside flexibly and park the car next to Ed's one. Immediately Bass comes walking along, apparently his mate is still dozed off. Probably he smells it's me and not Selena, because he comes to me, wagging his tail and jumps up so his legs land on top of my chest. Look, and that's just the advantage of my transformation into a dog first. He would never have accepted me otherwise. It could of course be he liked Selena very much, although I doubt that. Or at least I'd rather don't believe it.

'Hi, sweetie,' I say and pat his head.

I open the window with the card and enter the house. The living room is deserted, so I immediately walk to the cellar. Noël's office door is open and I take a look inside. He's sitting at his desk, leaned over a pile of documents. Quickly I bring back all the information on Selena, how she interacted with Noël and how she talks.

'I'm back,' I say, leaning nonchalantly against the doorpost.

Noël barely looks up. 'Do you have the extra champagne with you?'

Yes, of course. Selena needed a reason to drive off. So she was after champagne.

'Yes,' I say quickly thinking. 'In the trunk.' I can't remember it was in the backseat of the car, so the bottles need to be in the trunk.

He looks at me for a while. 'You only need to be pretty tonight, welcome the guests and start a conversation with them. Ed takes care of the rest.'

I nod.

'Well? What are you waiting for? Put the champagne in the fridge or let Ed do it.' He gets rid of me with a nervous motion of his hand.

Pff, working on top of it. Nah well, I need to participate in the game. I bump into Ed in the living room. Ed's face spells trouble and the seeing of 'Selena' doesn't make it better. His mouth tightens to a failed grin.

'Hi,' I just say then. I almost said 'Ed', but restrain myself right in time. Although Noël also

said Ed a moment ago, which means they're using each other's pseudonyms.

Surprised he raises his eyebrows. 'Since when do we greet each other?'

*Whoops, mistake.* Apparently there's a lot of bad blood between those two.

'I'm in a good mood.' I make an effort to make my look come around as hard and cool.

'Well, I'm not, so piss off!' He walks past me.

'Want to help me a hand with the champagne?' I ask. I hope I can question him a bit in the meantime.

He stops and then turns around slowly. 'Alright then,' he says.

We walk together to Selena's car. I hope I'm able to open the trunk immediately and don't mess about it. That would betray my disguise.

I didn't lock the car just now and pray the trunk is still open. Apparently self-assured I put my hand underneath the edge of the trunk, feel a little handle and click it up relieved. Except for a cotton bag with tubes of suntan oil hanging out of it and a pair of shoes with stiletto heels even I would break my legs with, are four crates of champagne. La Grande Dame of Veuve Clicquot. Go ahead, at least one hundred Euros per bottle. Ed takes two crates for his account and I do the same.

I need to pretend I'm stronger than I really am, since it's not because I look like the vamp Selena I also have her strengths. Unfortunately not. Two crates of champagne would weigh just as little as two bags of wads of absorbent cotton to her, but not to me. I therefore walk with squeezed lips from the effort behind Ed.

'Say, why are you so grouchy?' I ask.

He looks backward for a while. 'A client cancelled.'

'Ah, no. Who?'

'The Arab. Apparently he's in the hospital for one or another emergency operation.'

'Noël shall be enraged.'

'He surely is. I feel like burning something down again.'

*Filthy firebug!* I make a guess. 'Just like Oded's pub?'

'Indeed,' he answers grimly.

The bastard! So it was him. Well, it shouldn't really surprise me anymore.

My arm muscles hurt when I put the crates on the counter. I might practice fighting, but not weightlifting. A good fighter isn't only determined by just his physical power, but especially by his mental strength, how well he can assess his opponent, speed and skills.

As soon as Ed places his crates on the counter he leaves the kitchen and takes the stair to the



cellar.

After putting the champagne in the fridge, next to the already present bottles, I decide to follow him. I hear him in the room at the end of the hall, where the glazed tubes stand. I suck my breath inaudible and walk inside. I'm especially scared I won't be able to keep my reaction under control when I'll find Lucas.

Nothing seems to have changes in the room, at least at first sight. Ed walks to the computer and puts it on. I try to see which password he uses, but he turns around with a tug to me and asks: 'May I?'

'Oh, erm, yeah, sorry.'

Apparently Selena never excuses, because he looks gauging at me for a while and then turns his look to the screen again.

I look around a little and see to my great dismay something has indeed changes. All heads are open now, scalped. The woman with grey hair has her eyes closed and her face is twisted in a painful grimace. She even looks paler than she already was. What I see is too horrible to be put in words and almost instinctively I shrink back, just knowing to suppress a scream.

Then I see Lucas and blurt a fairly hard 'oh' out.

Ed looks at me. 'What's wrong?'

'Oh, damn it, I forgot something,' I save myself and disappear from the room.

As quick as I can I run upstairs and outside. With my hands leaning on my knees I try to recover and get rid of the image of the scalped Lucas. I suck in the fresh air until deep into my lungs and feel like puking out my meal until the last crumb. But I can't afford all of this without coming around as suspicious.

*Oh, Lucas, poor Lucas, if only you had never met me!* Feelings of guilt force themselves again with great violence. I straighten myself and rub my face as if I can get rid of all the sorrow with that.

'Manon?' I hear in my ear. I jump out of my skin. It's Jabar who's talking to me through the earplug.

'Yes?' I whisper as quietly as possible.

'Is everything still alright?'

I nod until I realize he can't see me of course and then say: 'Yes.' I don't dare to say more out of fear someone might accidentally see me.

I pull myself together mentally and enter the house again. Luckily no one has seen me. There's nothing else to do, it all happens in the cellar, so I need to go back.

Noël isn't present in his office anymore, but I hear his voice coming from the room with the tubes. I carefully try other door handles in the passing. They're all locked, except the last door on the left. Should I risk it to walk inside?

Noël and Ed are only a few meters away from the room, but I decide to risk it.

It's a more spacious room than I thought, at least ten meters in length and about five meters in width. In the middle stands an operating table and around it all kinds of apparatus that's, I presume, reading the biological functions. On a smaller table are chirurgical working devices. The room smells so strongly of disinfectant I'm becoming nauseous of it. Everything looks spotless, the operating table, the white stone floor and the empty walls. Underneath the operating table I do see a few specks that look like drips of blood. I suspect that the piercing blood smell I smelled recently in the cellar originated from here. I'm terror-stricken when I think about the fact it's possible that at that same moment an otherkind was been cut open.

*The assholes!*

So it's here the 'clients' get their new brains later on. I wonder where the doctors and nurses are, but maybe they'll only appear when they need to operate. Anyway an entire team will be necessary to do a suchlike complicated transplantation. Which inhuman doctors participate in a kind of obscure business like this anyway? They really don't have a soul or are extremely addicted to money.

I then see a glazed showcase cabinet standing at the end of the room. While I walk towards it I realize what I'll get to see even before I can take a good look at it. And it appears I'm right. But it's still a shocking image.

There are five glazed bowls in the cabinet. In each bowl floats in one or another liquid a pinkish body part. It can't be anything else than that those things are the brains or at least a part of them. I suddenly realize one of those things might come from Lucas's head! My stomach protests and I quickly run out of the room.

In the hall I look at the door of the tube room and still hear Noël and Ed being busy. Good, they didn't notice I was in the room. Probably Selena can go into the operating room, but I don't know that for sure.

'Selena!' Noël yells from the tube room.

I run towards it. 'Yes?'

'The clients can arrive any moment from now. You still aren't dressed yet?'

*Dressed? Ah, shoot!*

'Right away,' I say and run away.

Where would Selena's dresses hang? Logically seen in her bedroom and luckily I know to find that one. And what does he mean with getting dressed? Something festive, sexy or what? I will have to make a guess, there's nothing else to do.

I hurry up the stairs and open Selena's room door, the first on the left. The room rather looks like a hotel room than one of a young woman. I open the built-in closet. It's completely empty except for one dress that hangs in a plastic cover. That makes the choice luckily much easier. They have of course put away the rest of the clothes in moving boxes already. Relieved I rip it open and see a truly breathtaking, stylish, but still simple creation. It's a long model, quite clinging and with only one sleeve. The color is really gorgeous: royal blue. I now also notice there are shoes with stiletto heels at the bottom of the closet and try them on. They're a bit too big, but are walkable.

There's one problem. As soon as I put out Selena's black trousers and white blouse, they immediately change into my original jeans and sweater. I rumple them up and dump them in the corner of the closet. No one will probably know a thing, but you might never know.

Problem number two: where do I leave my pistol and blackjack? The dress fits perfectly, but leaves little space for hidden weapons. I could attach the Glock to the inside of my thighbone, it's just I don't have tape or a belt with me. Wait a second, the belt of my jeans of course!

It takes me quite a lot of effort to turn the belt around my thighbone in such a way it isn't visible through the thin fabric of the dress, but I manage. With regret I have to leave the blackjack between my clothes in the closet.

So, I take a look at myself in the mirror that's hanging in the room and reluctantly have to admit the dress fits Selena perfectly. Her black hair becomes even more intense by the blue of the dress.

Time for action!

I feel there's a snag attached to my provision pistol holder, when I descend the stairs. The belt fairly cuts in my skin. Those will become serious slashes. But I would endure much more just to keep my Glock with me. For sure!

It's a lot busier in the living room already. The Doc and Ed are busy with putting the champagne coolers and glasses ready. I notice in the low sun it has to be around eight already. The guest can thus arrive any moment. I can only hope fervently I'll know what I'm supposed to do at the "moment supreme" and play havoc.

The Doc nods shortly at me. 'Hopefully those stinking rich people leave some champagne for us,' he says.

'I'd like a glass,' I say.

'I still have to wait, but you just take one.'

'She needs to wait until the guests have arrived,' Ed snarls at the Doc.

I hear a car on the drive.

Doc looks at the door. 'That will be my team. Send them downstairs, Selena. I'm already on my way.'

The Doc disappears to the cellar and I walk to the windows. Actually I'm curious about those Frankenstein monsters. How they look and especially how they are.

The car that's being parked is a grey Jaguar. Three men and a woman get out. One man has a broad figure and is wearing a white suit that resembles those of nurses. His face is grim and he walks with self-assured steps to the house. The other man looks like his younger brother, but smaller and above all fairly bald already. They both have an English accent, but talk Dutch fluently. Number three of the male gender is in my opinion also a nurse. His ginger hair is tightly combed backward and he has a neutral look in his eyes and freckled cheeks. I vaguely hear he's of German origin. The woman is, if I'm right, a doctor. She wears a simple green dress, has a pearl necklace around her neck and looks a bit doubtful, as if she doesn't really know what she's doing here.

I greet them at the door and coax them along the inside. I'm proven right, only the woman in the green dress presents herself as doctor Sophie Servais. She talks Dutch fluently with a pleasant French accent. The nurses call Michael Trent, Kevin Trent and Carl Kurz. Aha, so those first two are brothers.

'The doctor is awaiting you downstairs in the operating room,' I say and point at the cellar stairs.

'Thank you,' Sophie says with a wavering smile.

She comes around less self-assured than the three others. I don't think it comes forth out of incompetence, but maybe because she doubts about the intentions of the operations. Noël must have offered an enormous amount of money to this woman to convince her. She looks a lot more sincere than those other three.

They descend the stairs and at that moment I hear a car's engine. The next ten minutes four clients arrive. Two limousines, a Mercedes and a Bentley. A chauffeur or a bodyguard who looks after the car accompanies them.

The first is Ghalid Nablisi, a middle-aged man with black hair and a regular face. He looks around as if the world is his and at me especially haughty. He refuses to shake my hand and walks immediately inside where Ed offers him a glass of champagne.

The next one, Johanna De La Torre, is a beautiful brown-haired woman with long eyelashes, full Botox lips and an olive skin. She has really tried her best to pass for someone in her thirties, but you clearly notice the unnatural tightness of her skin. She greets me shortly with a hand that's full of twinkling rings and looks jealous at me.

Jack Jefferson is the third one who arrived. He's the only one who's approaching me with a

big smile on his face and looking shamelessly at me from head to toe. His dark blond hair is fairly messy and the sleep lines haven't totally disappeared from his face yet. Amused I follow his nonchalant cowboy-ish steps towards me.

'Hello,' he greets me in American. 'You don't look bad!' Then he leans conspiratorial towards me and whispers: 'Are you also different?'

I nod, a bit unsettled for a moment.

'Then what?'

'Vampire,' I say and grin, showing my teeth.

'Oh,' his eyes become as big as full moons. 'Beautiful, beautiful. Interesting. I've doubt about it, but finally decided to take something else. Sorry!' He throws his hand with a flamboyant gesture in the air and rolls his eyes.

I chuckle, surely impressed by his charms.

When the last one arrives, I feel my nerves increase seriously. The game can't take long anymore now. Soon I'll have to swing into action, in any case before they're going to lie down on the operating table.

Number four is a little Japanese with the name Yuta Yamamoto. Luckily I don't have to remember the names for long. Yuta looks nervous and uncertain. He approaches me with quick little steps, looking timidly to and fro in the meantime. I'm towering at least a head above him and greet him by bowing very deep. The deeper the greeting in Japan, the more respect you show. He greets me back with a little bow, but doesn't say a word, so I gesture he can come inside.

Inside the English conversations between the clients are modest and short. Only the American seems to be perfectly at ease and even blows kisses to me when I join them. Since Ed doesn't do anything, Jack fills me a glass of champagne and offers it to me with a wink. I wonder if this can actually be, drink champagne before an operation, but decide it are none of my business. I do know, I've heard that once, that brains are insensible.

The others don't realize it, but I observe Ed better than them. From time to time a black haze appears in his eyes, a sign he's reading the clients' minds. If only he doesn't penetrate mine, I suddenly realize terror-stricken. *Damned!* Why didn't I let Diedie protect my thoughts? Ed sees me looking at his black eyes, but Selena is of course informed about everything and he doesn't need to hide his telepathy for her.

Johanna's face seems to brighten up immediately when Noël enters the room. Apparently she knows Noël well or adores him for what he's planning to do, I can't really determine that.

Noël greets them all in a different way, it's clear he's having tighter bonds with some than with others. Ed gives him a glass of bubbles, exchanges a knowing glance and then walks out of the room. We all take a seat in the white leather couches, Jack in between me and Yuta. Ghalid and Johanna take a seat on the other couch.

Initially the conversations are about nothing in particular. Their last financial successes and transactions, muttering about the stock market, their new countryseat in one or another exotic country, and more of that stuff. I can barely concentrate because my thoughts go to how I can nip all of this in the bud before there's really an operation going on.

I hear Jabar say in my plug: 'Still do nothing, Manon. We hear everything that's being said. When the moment is right, we'll give a tip.'

Ed comes upstairs again and has a laptop in his arms. He takes a seat next to Ghalid and opens the laptop.

'My assistant will now first check if all the advance payments have been done,' Noël says.

'Of course they've been done,' Jack brings out quasi upset and grins.

Noël only nods. I see in his look he doesn't like Jack much, probably he's too flamboyant for his taste.

Ed starts to type and then looks up. 'It's been accomplished.'

Noël seems to relax now, his shoulders lower noticeable.

Then he gets up and says: 'Time for a demonstration.'

Jack clasps enthusiastically in his hands, Johanna looks at him with even a bigger adoration than before, Yuta keeps looking unemotionally and Ghalid straightens up a bit. I didn't see what follows next coming in a hundred years! I really need to control myself to not cry out of bewilderment.

Noël changes into a giant python in front of everyone. The snake isn't that long, but it is just as fat and his green-yellow scales shimmer in the light. My mouth falls open and I close it quickly again before Ed sees it. Noël a transformer? Just like me? My thoughts work like crazy. Have I really not seen any proves of that before? No, I don't think so. Besides the color of the eyes doesn't change when a transformer transforms, that in comparison to the other otherkinds.

But didn't Jabar want Noël to stay away from his sister because he was a human? Although that also applies for when he's a transformer. Also transformers can't have children with elves. And transformers age, just like humans, so his age is correct. Did Jabar know this? It doesn't seem likely to me, because he certainly would have told. Another possibility is of

course Noël has undergone the operation already. In my opinion this theory seems more plausible.

‘A snake!’ Jack cries out. ‘Ain’t that cool!’

Johanna shrinks back and looks at the reptile less slobbery than when she looked at Noël. Yuta didn’t move an inch, it seems as if that guy is sleeping with his eyes open. Ghalid smiles and is clearly impressed.

‘That’s Noël, a transformer now,’ I say. Not to inform the others, but so Jabar hears it. Johanna looks at me with frowned eyebrows, the other didn’t even hear me.

Noël transforms back into himself and looks self-satisfied and haughty at every one of them.

‘How can we know for certain you’ve undergone the operation?’ Ghalid asks in a calm tone. ‘And that you haven’t been a transformer for your entire life. This still isn’t a sufficient evidence.’

‘You’ll have to take me at my word,’ Noël says, who is clearly trying not to lose his self-control. His one hands clenches to a fist. He continues: ‘The person who could confirm this unfortunately couldn’t be here tonight. She could tell you I was a human before.’

I suspect he’s referring to me. So I didn’t only get kidnapped to become his wife and play a dirty trick on Jabar, but also to nicely explain to the others he was a human being.

I naturally understand the Arab’s suspicion. The price for the operation won’t be low and of course he wants certainty.

‘You just follow me,’ Noël then orders. ‘There are still some evidences in the cellar.’

Without waiting for them, Noël walks to the cellar stairs.

Walking next to me, Jack says: ‘I’m really starting to doubt now.’

‘About letting the operation go on?’ I ask hopeful.

‘No, no, I doubt about my choice. I’ve now chosen for an angel because it looked cool to me to be able to move things.’ He lets me go before him on the stairs and says against my back: ‘But now I would maybe choose for a transformer. Ah, nothing can be changed about it anymore.’

In the hall I want to ask him what the other one’s chose, but then I realize Selena was probably informed about it. It would thus be imprudent to ask about it.

We are taken to the back room. All immediately hold their breath and stare with big eyes at the glazed tubes. Somewhere I hope this horrible image will make them give up on the operation, but I fear the worst. Be able to transform, read minds, move things with the mind and manipulate nature, is of course attractive. They didn’t make the trip for nothing and paid



so much money. I try not to look at Lucas and go standing in such a way I can't see him anymore.

When the initial bewilderment and disgust are over, the clients only become more enthusiastic. Doc is standing at the tubes and answers their question as good as possible. He assures them the procedure is safe and above that painless.

I find the way in which Noël observes his clients looks sinister. It seems as if he's hiding something. The surreptitious looks he and Ed exchange, can't predict much good.

'Time for the last payment,' Noël says, when the clients' questions seem to be at an end.

They all nod passionately.

'Selena will guide you upstairs, because here in the cellar the connection for mobile phones is rather bad,' Noël still adds. 'Afterwards I'll let you show the operating room.'

Arriving upstairs, they all open their mobile phones and give through instruction in their own language. I only understand the American.

'Fifty million dollar, right now,' he snaps. 'No... yes... of course!... Did it happen?'

I accompany them innocently back to the cellar and straight to the operating room. The entire way Jack is making overtures to and flirting with me. I try to behave like the cold-blooded Selena, but from time to time he really makes me laugh. I wonder when Jabar thinks the time is right to strike, because in my opinion they're going to start with the operations in a minute. Unfortunately I can't ask him.

In the operating room the doctors and nurses are all standing along silly and I can't help but think they all don't really belong in this environment, except for the Doc. Sophie looks at the operating tools as if they're strange objects that are willing to bite her any minute.

Jabar talks to me: 'Manon, take out the pistol and keep Noël covered. We're on our way.'

I lean down and pretend I'll scratch my ankle. At the same moment everything happens super-fast and so unexpected that neither I, nor Jabar could have foreseen something like this. With my look turned to ground I see Ed moving from the corner of my eye. I hear a shot and immediately another one. Nevertheless, it isn't me who's shooting, but Ed, I see when I quickly pull my Glock from the belt and stand up. Johanna screams, Jack falls down to the ground. Even before I can recover from the astonishment, Ed shoots for a second time. Ghalid is staring surprised at his chest from where an arrow-like object is sticking out and collapses. The four clients are lying flat on the ground and for a moment I don't know what to do. Where are the others?

Noël sees my doubt and surprise, because he says: 'Selena? What's wrong?' Then he notices

the pistol in my hand and now it's his turn to look surprised. Quickly I point my pistol at him. 'Not a single movement or I'll shoot you,' I swing my pistol threateningly in Ed's direction. 'Drop it! Drop your pistol!'

Ed luckily obeys. With a loud thump the pistol falls to the ground.

'Selena? What the hell are you doing? You knew we we're going to anaesthetize them, didn't you?' Noël seems to be totally upset. Good.

Both Ed, the doctors and the nurses are standing stock-still and follow every move I make.

With the pistol aimed at Noël's forehead, I say: 'I'm not Selena.'

‘Manon.’ I’ll never forget the expression on Noël’s face. I wish I brought a camera.

‘What did you do to them?’ I ask brusquely.

‘They’re just anaesthetized,’ Noël answers.

‘What for? For the operation?’

Noël roars with laughter and his sidekick, Ed, is happily joining him. Also the doctors and the nurses seem to find what I’ve just said very funny.

‘Where is Jabar?’ Noël asks. The laughing wrinkles make place for an irritated look.

‘On his way to this place and he isn’t alone. Why?’ I look at the exhausted clients on the ground.

‘You really don’t get it, do you? Nothing of all of this.’ Noël grins. ‘You’re still so naïve. Really cute.’

I aim at his balls. ‘Then explain it to me, so I don’t have to waste a bullet on your crotch. And don’t transform, a shot will reach you in less than two seconds.’

Noël sighs. ‘We need them to do tests on them.’

‘What do you mean with tests?’

‘What we are deceiving them, isn’t possible yet. Not at all.’

‘So you want to use them as human guinea pigs?’ I ask surprised.

‘Exactly.’

‘Then why don’t you take tramps or people without companies and family?’

‘Because they’re filthy rich and they won’t only serve us with their body, but also with their money.’

‘You still haven’t enough then, filthy murderer?’

‘The more money you have, the more you want, Manon, haven’t you learned that lesson yet? Well, at least I’ve thought you that.’ The sarcasm drips from his words.

‘They’ll be missed. People that lead multinationals just know a lot of other people.’ Although I have a big suspicion he has taken care of that.

‘You see them?’ He points in Sophie’s and the nurses’ direction. ‘They don’t know a bit of medical conditions, but they’re an ace at transforming.’

Transformers! I could’ve known. He wants to replace the four clients by them. At least until they’ve flown back to their country, met their family or visited their company and then they’ll of course disappear all of a sudden. Then no one will be able to link it with Noël or Belgium.

Clever, very clever and unusually nasty.

‘I see you’re starting to understand. Maybe you are smarter than I thought,’ Noël grins.

I watch quickly at the door opening. Where the fuck are the others?! They weren’t parked that far.

‘If you’re expecting Jabar, you can still wait for a while,’ Noël says. ‘Because you see, when I found the sleeping Doberman, I already suspected something wasn’t right.’

This can’t be true, goes through my head, did he know it all along it was me?

As if he can guess my thoughts, Noël continues: ‘I didn’t know whose place you would take, but I know now. After I found the dog I made security take place at the wall, without someone knowing about it. Even not he.’ Noël nods in Ed’s direction.

The panic starts to increase. *Stay calm, Manon, stay calm.* Maybe Jabar, Diedie and Oded will find something to it. With the three of them and their gifts they’ve got a lot more to offer than simple human guards. At least I hope so.

‘Have you always been a transformer then?’ I ask as calmly as possible, but I feel my heart beating in the tips of my fingers and have a difficult time keeping my grip on the Glock.

‘Just think about it for a while,’ Noël says in a teacher-tone. ‘What did I just tell you? Pay a bit more attention, Manon!’

‘Yes, you’ve always been one.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But why do you want to experiment with the implantation of brains of otherkinds into human beings? And why all those lies against me before?’

‘You don’t have to play all your trumps, Manon, lesson number two for today. Too bad you didn’t want to become my wife. We could have been a perfect couple and you still could have learned a lot from me, more than from Jabar. You do know there aren’t many transformers? Not as many as vampires or witches?’

So that’s the reason he wanted to marry me. Killing two birds with one stone, his favorite way of working. Play a dirty trick on Jabar and because we’re both transformers, give him children. *Hey, yuck!* I can’t think about it.

Jack starts to snore loudly and in such a comical way I would burst out laughing if the situation wasn’t so threatening.

‘I wanted you to believe I was an ordinary human, so you couldn’t be prepared to that, in case you succeeded to escape. And you did, so it was a considerable clever stroke of me, wasn’t it? I refuse to answer. ‘You didn’t answer my earlier question. Why the experimenting? Aren’t

you an otherkind after all?’

‘The four clients are a foretaste of the actual work. A test to find out how many people are willing to pay, and if they can indeed keep their mouths shut and if we can take their places temporarily without causing suspicion. Imagine how rich you could become if suchlike procedure would indeed work. Doc here is doing his best to find that out and one day time will be ready. Then I’ll sell the gifts of otherkinds to the highest bidder and the real game can begin. We anaesthetized them at the same time, so we could put them in tubes at the same time, without one of them able to accidentally discover it was his turn.’

I notice Noël is as pleased as Punch now he can finally reveal his brilliant plans to me. If he thinks I find him super-intelligent now, he’s wrong. Well, okay, it’s of course all very vicious, but even more disgusting and inhuman. And that last one is the most important. From time to time I hear puffing, a heavy cry and a fully-fledged Oded-curse through my earplug.

‘You don’t have a way to go, Manon, with the seven of us we’ll overpower you right away. The fact our little devil here hasn’t manipulated you mentally yet, is only because I didn’t ask him to so do yet.’

‘At least I’ll take you with me, bastard, if I need to die.’

‘Tut-tut-tut,’ Noël soothes and shakes his head. ‘You really think that?’

I cock the pistol and stay persisting with my cool attitude. But in reality I’m wetting myself.

While I keep looking at Noël I snap at the transformers: ‘How for fuck’s sake can you join in this? You’re killing people and your own kind!’

In the corner of my eye I see how Sophie is taking her eyes aside to the ground, but the three men are looking provocatively at me, as if they want to say: mind your own business. Doc’s face is as stoical as can be.

‘Join us,’ Noël says suddenly in a friendly tone. ‘How can you still trust Jabar now? He knew I was a transformer the entire time.’

‘No!’ I cry out very loud to my own surprise. ‘He would have told me that.’

‘Jabar has more secrets for you than just this one, Manon, I already told you. But do you believe me? No. You’d rather believe a filthy elf than someone of your own kind.’

‘I’d rather believe a politician than you!’

‘And me who could tell you whom your real parents are. Really too bad.’

I refuse to let myself get blackmailed by that promise, although there’s still a desire to know it burning somewhere deep inside. I do believe him, oh yes, certainly. The fact he has found four transformers that want to join in his nasty murdering game, while transformers are

indeed rarer than the other otherkinds, is already a prove of that. It therefore seems plausible to me he also found my parents.

*Concentrate, Manon, don't let yourself get distracted by slick talk.* But it's very tempting to give in to it. Not to join him, I'd rather die. Nevertheless, I could pretend and then...

Noël sees my doubt and puts in another word: 'I can take you to them right away. I know where they live and what they're doing now.'

'No,' I say.

I can hear it myself; I already sound a lot less confident. *Damned!*

A loud shot rings out from somewhere outside. Jabar!

Because I'm distracted for a while, Noël sees his chance to transform into a fog bank. I shoot, but he's too quick and the bullet narrowly misses him. The scrap of fog zooms past me, with a disgusting eau de cologne smell attached to it, inside the hall and upstairs. I have the choice: go after him and let the rest go or the other way around. Ed and the others use the sudden uproar to fly at me. I can aim at Ed in the nick of time and shoot. He tumbles backward. Apparently I've hit him straight in the chest.

'Not a single move anymore!' I yell at the others.

Except for Sophie, they all look at me as if they want to eat me alive. They take a few steps backward, but their attitude gives away they're staying ready to jump or transform.

'If one of you transform, I'll shoot the others!' I just add to it.

Ed lies moaning on the floor. That doesn't look good. The blood trickles out of his chest and the pool in which he's lying only gets bigger. I find it horrible I had to shoot him, but it's actually better like this. Now Noël has escaped Ed would probably have brainwashed me and then I would have been completely defenseless.

Loud footsteps and yelling come from upstairs.

'Manon?' I hear Oded yelling. 'Where are you, goddamnit?'

'Here downstairs!' I yell back. 'Last door on the left.'

I hear stumbling and then Oded: 'Godfuckingasscuntdamnit on top of that!'

I think he almost tumbled down the stairs in his hurry. With a big scratch on his face that bleeds a little he appears in the operating room, a pistol in his hand. He takes in everything at a glance and keeps the transformers covered.

'Who are this bunch of persuaded nitwits?' he asks, while his eyes become totally black.

'Transformers that are part of the plot, I'll tell you later about that. And on the ground is a devil.'

'Nice shot,' he grins.

'Over there,' I point at Doc, 'is the doctor and according to me a human.'

'Indeed, he is,' Oded confirms who of course has read his mind. 'And those others on the ground? The clients?'

'Yeah, they're asleep. They're anaesthetized.'

I hear another two persons descending the stair and pray they are Jabar and Diedie.

'Where's Selena?' I ask Oded.

'Diedie has set free her magic on her,' Oded smiles sardonically. 'She's been released, but with a completely new identity. From today onwards she'll do everything to lead a celibate life. I'm curious about which monastery she'll choose.'

Jabar and Diedie indeed enter the room.

'Light punishment for a murderer,' I still say to Oded. He opens his mouth, but I'm ahead of him: 'Yeah yeah, I know, it can't be otherwise.'

Diedie sees the wounded Ed and immediately walks towards him. She even has compassion with monsters.

'Poor man, what a wound,' she says.

Ed doesn't moan anymore, his breathing comes out irregular and blood trickles out of his mouth.

Diedie leans down and puts her finger against his neck. 'He won't make it.'

'Everything under control here?' Jabar asks.

'Yes,' Oded answers.

Jabar looks surprised at the people on the ground. 'We've combed out the entire environment and the house but there's no one here anymore. Four guards, angels by the way, got to know us. Luckily we saw them right on time and they were set up scattered. Noël has probably put them there in the last minute?'

I nod. 'He suspected something wasn't right.'

It surprises me Noël has set up so little, four guards isn't much. I've seen Jabar put four people down on his own, just through fighting techniques and without help of his gift. I can already imagine how everything went just now. Probably Jabar has used a natural element from a distance, like wind or fog, to make their sight more difficult so they could aim their pistols at them. Next Oded could come closer to manipulate their thoughts and made them believe no one was walking towards them. Then it was of course still as easy as falling off a log to bring them down with the two of them. Diedie has probably blotted out their minds.

'He's gone,' Diedie then says in a sad tone and stand up.

I find it hard to admit, but I'm not sorry about it. I know I'll still feel the consequences of killing him later on, but at this moment I don't have the strength nor the time to give it a moment's thought. And besides I have a lot to comfort myself; Ed burned down Oded's pub, helped with my and the others' kidnapping and made Sharon's boyfriend kill people. Although it wasn't with his own hands, it comes down to the same.

'But...,' Diedie points at the carrot transformer. 'That's the one who pretended to be you, Manon, the one who scared the living daylight out of me at our home.'

The man grins and straightens his back, clearly proud of his performance. I can't help it, run towards him and give him a kick in the balls.

'What happened?' Jabar asks. 'Through the fights upstairs I couldn't follow the conversations anymore.'

I tell everything in a nutshell and then ask: 'What are we going to do with them?'

Diedie walks to just in front of the people and looks sympathetically down on them. 'They're wrong of course,' she then says. 'But let us just, like with those people who are awaiting them in their cars, blot out their memory from the last few weeks. What do you think?'

It's all fine with me, I want to be done with this as soon as possible. The others also agree.

'Oded?' Diedie looks at him. 'Do you want to look in their minds for a while until how far in time they've had contact with Noël?'

Jabar takes the place of Oded next to me and walks to the sleeping clients.

'Where is Noël?' Jabar says the name with a sour face.

'Escaped as fog. He's a transformer. Did you know that?'

'Transformer? I already though I heard something like that through the plug, but couldn't believe it.' Jabar looks truly surprised. 'No, I absolutely didn't know that. Escaped hey? Annoying, very annoying.'

I nod. 'What are we going to do with Doc?'

'Doc?' Jabar asks.

'Frankenstein over there.' I point at him.

'I have an answer to that,' Diedie thinks. 'We'll make him think he killed people, what's even true, and burden him with such an immense feeling of guilt he'll give himself up to the police.'

'I even have a better idea,' Jabar says who's looking at Ed as if he's the most disgusting creature he has ever seen. 'When everyone's outside, we'll put the house on fire with the devil



in it. But we let Diedie put an illusion around it, so it seems as if the house is still standing here for a few days. We'll make Ed believe he committed the murder and burned down the house and later on he'll give himself up for the facts. By then the illusion will be over.'

We all think it's a brilliant idea, except Doc of course. He starts to lament and apologize himself in a clumsy way. Like a little child he begins to beg and says he'll never do it again, never. Of course we're not listening to his pleadings. We let the transformers go, they haven't done anything wrong.

'If I still catch one of you out on committing a crime or only just the mere thought about it, I'll know to find you,' Jabar threatens them in a calm tone.

First Diedie does her mojo on the foreign clients. Although they're asleep, their unconsciousness registers her whispered words. After that she takes care of Doc. Oded needs to hold him tight, because he places his hands on his ears so he doesn't hear Diedie's words and struggles like a fish out of the water.

The clients are brought upstairs by Oded and Jabar one by one and dumped in their cars. Oded manipulates the chauffeurs' thoughts and orders them to bring them back to the airport. Doc is being anaesthetized with the arrow from Ed's gun and put down in the bushes at the end of the territory. Oded explains the guards have already left through the instructions he gave them. It seems all of the loose ends are being removed, except for Noël of course. In the meantime I transformed back into my own shape and I get so cold my teeth chatter lightly.

The only thing that's left is the hardest task of all.

The otherkinds in the glazed tubes.

We don't look forward to it, but descend for the last time the cellar stairs to the most distant room.

They're all having a reasonably fright when they see the tubes. Hearing about it or actually seeing it with your own eyes is of course a serious difference. Diedie starts to whine and flees to the hall with the words: 'This cannot be, this cannot be,' interrupted by sobbing.

Oded's face spells trouble. If he would have had his Brengun with him, he would have probably ran upstairs to kill Doc and Selena after all. I wouldn't have stopped him. It's easy to be against death penalty as long as you aren't confronted with the horrors of murder yourself. Believe me, if you would see what we're seeing right now, you would curse us for the light punishments we gave the culprits.

Jabar keeps shaking his head in denial, as if he can't believe that suchlike monsters exist that would do something like this to otherkinds.

'I've warned you it would be a horrible image,' I say softly and bite my lower lip to ease the pressure I feel in my chest, which naturally completely fails. My heart breaks and my eyes mist over when I look at Lucas. Slowly the tears run down my cheeks, but I don't do anything to dry them.

'This is... words fail me,' Jabar says with a broken voice.

'Against this kind of sick ideas Jabar and I have fought in the Second World War,' Oded says. 'Are they still alive?'

'Yes.' With heavy legs I walk towards a tube and tap the display that shows all kind of active lines. 'This one shows among other things their heartbeat.'

Jabar also shuffles to the tubes and looks at their scalped heads one by one. I hear Diedie cry softly on the background. I want to comfort her, although comfort is by far inadequate here, but first we need to decide what we're going to do.

Jabar sighs deeply and then says: 'Parts of their brains are missing.'

'Yes,' I say. 'They've kept them in the operating room in some kind of bowls with liquid in them.'

'So that's what I saw,' Oded says with clenched jaws. 'I was already wondering. Slime monsters, that's what they are!'

'Can they live on like this... without... you know?' I ask Jabar.

He shakes his head gloomily. 'No, Manon, at least not like they used to.'

'Those parts can be put back, can't they?!' I now cry out. I realize how stupid I must sound, but I don't want to give up hope. Not yet. No, not yet...

‘No, Manon, they can’t. They’re largely brain death.’

‘Yes, I understand that,’ I now say calmer.

‘Manon, you’d rather don’t want to hear what I’m going to suggest now.’ Jabar looks at me with a sad look in his eyes.

‘What?’ And then I realize. ‘No! Absolutely not! They’re still alive!’

‘You call this alive? Would you want to live like this? Like a plant? Who knows what has been damages. Their speech, their reason, memory?’

‘Jabar is right, Manon,’ Oded adds. ‘It isn’t a life for them anymore this way. And how should it be declared to the outside world?’

I turn away from them and stare at the white wall. How can they even think about killing those people? It’s too horrible to be put in words. Some of them are still very young and they’re still alive! But are they really? Would I indeed want to live on like that? No, probably not. On the other hand it’s easily said now. Maybe if I could decide myself in this kind of situation I would want to go on. Everything better than dead? No, I don’t believe that, at least not in the deepest of my heart.

I turn around again and look at the tube in which a woman is hanging who must have once looked stunning, but now only looks like a lifeless doll with hollow cheeks and light-blue lips. Her bones are sharply sticking out and her skin looks pale and spotted. Some clips of limp hair frame the still remaining exposed, pink-red brains.

I’m frightened when she suddenly opens her eyes. She slowly looks around in the room, looks at us one by one and then inaudibly forms words with her mouth. I understand what she’s saying, but I don’t want to accept it.

Nevertheless, Oded has also seen it and says in a sad voice: ‘She says she wants to die.’

She then repeats with great difficulty a few times the word: ‘Please.’

I nod while the tears are streaming down my cheeks. For the last time I run to Lucas’s tube and kiss the cold glass.

‘Goodbye, my love,’ I whisper, turn around, run out of the room, run past Diedie, upstairs and by means of the card outside.

There I scream my lungs out. I scream to the trees, to the air, the grass. I cry out all of my misery, all my feelings of guilt in my head and the pain out of my heart. When I’m done screaming, the catharsis has freed me a little bit, but certainly not totally.

I feel something poking against my leg and see Bass standing next to me. He looks up at me and it seems he understands what’s going on. His mate is standing next to him and seems to

know Bass and I know each other, because he's looking quietly at me. I lean down and scratch Bass in his neck. His eyes look understandingly when he licks my hands and maybe I'm only just imagining it. I hug Bass and dry my tears on his fur. He allows it as if he knows he's helping someone this way. There's nothing that heals more than the support of human's best friend, the dog. At the spot I decide to take both of them home with me. Jabar will probably allow it, if only it is because he knows it would comfort me.

I stay there, sitting on the ground with Bass and his mate, until I feel a hand coming down on my shoulder. It's Diedie who looks understandingly and with red eyes down on me.

'They need to do it, Manon,' she says softly.

'I know.'

'Beautiful dogs.' She leans down and pats their heads.

'I'm taking them with me,' I say resolutely, so she knows I won't tolerate contradiction.

'That's alright. Have you already given them a name?'

I know what she's doing, she's trying to distract me.

'Only him here, his name is Bass.'

'Not really original.' It's a sad smile that appears on her face.

'I'll call the other one... Bonkers. He's more muscles and fatter.'

'Bonkers?' She chuckles softly. 'Is that even a name?'

'From now on it is. I think it sounds fairly tough and it fits a Doberman, doesn't it?'

Diedie nods.

'Bass and Bonkers,' I decide and give both of them a kiss on their head.

At that moment Jabar and Oded come outside. I've never saw a suchlike expression on their faces. As if their entire family has died and above that the world is going to end. With hanging shoulders and guilty looks they join us.

'It has happened, we separated them from the machines. Manon, go to the car. We're going to burn down the house,' Jabar says. Each word seems to cost him a lot of effort.

'No! I'm not a little child anymore, damn it, I'm twenty-four! I'm staying.'

Jabar nods.

'Hey, your Lexicon!' I cry out. 'We almost forget that one. And the files about the otherkinds!'

'Just let it burn with the rest. If we take them with us, we're only running the risk they'll end up in the wrong hands again.'

'But maybe,' Oded thinks, 'we save lives with it in the future.'

‘Do you want to take information with you that has been gathered by such a horrible person? I should have destroyed the Lexicon a lot earlier already.’

‘Now you’re saying,’ Oded admits.

‘No!’ I cry out.

It’s strange, but it seems as if the Lexicon is the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It feels as another victory for Noël if we let it burn together with the house. I just can’t allow that. I run into the house and straight towards Noël’s office.

It isn’t on the desk, so I open the desk drawers. I don’t do it tidy, because this way I can still let off steam. Paper twirls around and enraged I push the items aside, but in the drawers no Lexicon is to be found. The bookcases are also in for it; books land with a thud on the ground and covers scratch open. I seem to be a tornado going astray that’s raging through the office with a devastating power. Enraged I look around the room and walk towards the painting I grab with both hands and throw down with brute force. No hidden safe. The archive room!

I run towards it, but it’s locked. I take out my Glock and shoot with two well-aimed shots the lock into smithereens, after which I kick open the door. One by one I open each cabinet drawer and throw the papers and files out and let them fall carelessly on the ground. No Lexicon. Nowhere! Jabar quietly comes to stand beside me and puts his hand on my shoulder.

‘Just leave it, Manon, it isn’t that important.’

Nevertheless, I hear he doesn’t mean it, but nod after all. Then suddenly something comes back to my mind.

I look at Jabar with big eyes. ‘We haven’t checked the locked room.’

‘Should we do that?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I answer upset. I don’t get he still doubts about that.

‘If what’s in there is even worse than that room with all those...’ Jabar softly shakes his head.

‘I don’t know if it is that wise. The nightmares won’t be tender already.’

‘I want to know!’

Curiosity will once become my death, I realize, but until then I will please it. I run out of the archive room with Jabar following in my tracks. Oded is just descending the stairs and looks interrogatively at us. Jabar wavers his hand as if he wants to say: don’t ask.

The secret room can be either the middle room on the left or one of the two last rooms on the right. The first one I try, by shooting down the lock, only seems to be a stock room with medical stuff. I don’t think it’s the great hidden thing and cross to the middle room on the right. Oded and Jabar don’t say a word and let me do as I please.

I shoot my pistol empty on the lock. What we get to see in that room makes me wish I could turn back time and followed Jabar's advice. He always knows things better than I do, so why didn't I just listen!

On a table lies a man that's tied up with belts that run over his stomach and chest. His hands and feet are chained with irons to the table and over his forehead runs a tight band. His head is being scalped and his brains are exposed. The brains appear to be unnaturally big to me, bulging further out than the border of his head. I walk towards him with rapid beating heart but the worst is still to come then.

His chest has been opened more than once and closed again, that's clear from the different sloppy made stitches. Next to him stands an ECG device that shows a strong irregular heartbeat.

The poor man is above that awake, looks at me with wide-open eyes and lips that move, but don't make a sound. His look is so begging and afraid my eyes become moist again.

Then I see he has vampire teeth and his eyes are colored red. If I thought I had heard and seen the worst, I was wrong again.

Oded comes to stand besides me and holds a file in his hands. 'It was lying there on the cabinet,' he says softly. 'What I read in here can't be true.'

'What?' Oded asks and looks over his shoulders. 'Oh, my goodness.'

Oded clears his throat and says: 'There's really no end to the distasteful and horrible practices of that guy.'

Jabar sounds exhausted when he says: 'This is the lowest of the lowest.'

The man on the table opens his mouth a bit further and I see his tongue has been cut out!

'Unbelievable,' Oded sighs. 'Noël was trying to make a cross between the different otherkinds, that's why his brains look much bigger than normally is the case.'

The man produced a heartbreaking sound.

'He wants to die,' Oded says in a sad tone. 'I'm reading his thoughts. They've tortured him for weeks. He doesn't want to live anymore and certainly not in the way he is now. Once he was only a vampire and now... His body hurts everywhere and he can't handle the different gifts. They're colliding with one another so he continuously has a dreadful headache.'

'Noël is a real Frankenstein,' I say with a rasping voice.

I look at the man and put my hand on his cheek. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what you've been through. You must have suffered horribly.'

The man answers by blinking his eyes, looks at me for the last time and then closes his eyes

for eternity. The fickle ECG pattern becomes a completely straight line.

‘He has stopped his heart,’ Oded says. His voice cracks. ‘He wanted to do it for a long time already, but they kept his gifts suppressed with a sleeping drug.’

I know everything about that.

With a depressed feeling, we leave the dead man.

I hope he has finally found rest now.

Together with Oded, Jabar gets the delivery van, in which Oded always keeps an extra jerrycan with petrol in it, just in case he would run out and no petrol station would be around. Diedie and I wait at the house, together with the dogs. From time to time we hug each other without saying anything.

Less than five minutes later Jabar and Oded arrive at the drive and stop at the parking places. With the jerrycan in between them they walk towards the house. After about ten minutes they come back outside. They leave the front door open so there’s enough oxygen in the house and the fire won’t be put out.

With the six of us we watch from a safe distance how smoke comes out of the house, the first flames lick and the window burst. Finally Diedie still does her mojo and the result is amazing. It seems as if nothing has happened and the house looks exactly the same before Oded and Jabar burned it down. I feel the heat coming from the house, I smell the thick smoke and hear the house falling to pieces, but there are no flames to be seen.

The sun has totally set and through the cold blackness of the night, everything seems even more grim and terrifying. Without saying a word we get into the car. Bass and Bonkers immediately takes their places next to me and lay their heads on my lap.

The entire road home we’re all quiet in sorrow.

A week has passed now. Although summer is breaking through outside and the sun is warming us, it has been a dark week for us. Never before have we needed to take such drastic and horrible steps to keep the otherkinds secret. The first nights my dreams were filled with the most terrifying nightmares that even kept creeping in my mind after waking up. If only I'd kept something positive out of it, like knowing whom my parents are, I maybe could have bared it better. Although I strongly doubt it.

The sore spots all over my body and my still painful nose make me remember the events over and over again. Worse are the psychological scars, the feelings of guilt and the constant thinking about: what if...

When I think about Lucas I feel nauseous because I still miss him so badly and because I'm convinced he could have taken a special place in my life. I grieve over him, go to sleep with him in my thoughts and wake up with it. Diedie tells me vamps can indeed hypnotize each other. It's a cold comfort Lucas didn't end up in Selena's bed voluntarily.

I catch myself that I suddenly, without any reason, start to cry and then let off steam on the punching bag on the attic. Or I run into the garden and let me comfort by Bass and Bonkers. Sometimes I transform into a Doberman and live it up by running with them through the garden. They both sleep on my bed and sometimes, when I wake up screaming from a nightmare, they're lying closely to me, as if they also want to protect me in my sleep.

I hope I'll never cross Selena's path anymore, because I won't be responsible for my acts then. She took Lucas away from me and murdered him in that glazed house. Something I'll never ever forgive her.

That week we walk around lifeless like zombies, without any energy to do something. We barely eat and talk, as if we're afraid when one of us starts about it, it will strengthen the pain. From time to time I find Diedie crying in the kitchen, she doesn't even follow her usual soap series anymore. Jabar hides between his plants and herbs, but doesn't do much. I catch him staring at a plant in a pot for minutes and sometimes shaking his head in thought. Oded is going out a lot, coming home heavily drunk, stinking of booze and cigarette smoke and falling asleep next to his bed on the ground. Other moments he drags himself to his new pub he's decorating. He let the old location break down and sell to a real estate developer. He refuses our help and thinks he needs to cope with this alone. Because the fire brigade and the public prosecutor couldn't prove a deliberate arson, the insurance at least makes up for the



damage.

I call Sharon a lot and although she can't help me with this because I can't tell her anything, her happy events are a band-aid to the wound. She got backstage to Placebo indeed and above that, which doesn't surprise me at all, she slept with the singer. Her suspicions seemed to be true.

De Doc gave himself up to the police. The papers were full of it; massive and horrible massacre in which many people got killed and after which the culprit burned down the house. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and that the only news that gave me a short moment of jubilancy that week.

Noël Borgax has really done a moonlight flit. Jabar still called one of his companies and it seems he's selling all businesses and staying on an unknown address. Nobody can tell us where.

We still think it's strange Noël only set up four angels as security. He must have known it was as easy as falling off a log to us to break into the house. We suspect he was maybe hoping we would clean up his mess for him.

What Noël doesn't know, or maybe he does, is that Morgan Tahon died even before my birth in a tragic car-accident. Jabar didn't tell me earlier because he's still having a hard time dealing with it.

Jabar has sent all our contact persons over the entire world a description of Noël with attached everything we know about him, his transformers-gift, and so on. The chance is very small he'll be seen somewhere, but it's all we can do.

Somewhere we of course hope it's all behind us with this, but a monster like Noël won't quit that easily. A hurt man with a deep-rooted grudge and a lost love will certainly lay new plans to give us and others a hard time.

Until we get that far I'm not planning to give it a moment's thought.

Whether I'll succeed to do so is the question.

Our life has now started to take its normal routine again, but we all know those terrible images will stay in our minds forever.

Because of the nice weather I'm in the garden with Bass and Bonkers again. It's a windless day with a sultry temperature and I feel fairly better today. The two rascals make me smile when they cut crazy capers, especially when they think they'll catch a bird in their umpteenth attempt. Luckily those little animals fly faster than they can get caught.

Jabar is busy in his herb garden and Oded is helping Diedie in the kitchen.

A few minutes later Jabar and I get called. When we enter the kitchen, Diedie plops down a cake on the table with a demonstrative gesture. It's a high, dark brown chocolate of which the chocolate is dripping off and which smells yummy.

'And now,' she says firmly, 'it's all done and over with grieving! We're all snugly going to eat this cake and leave the past behind us. With every bite we take, we'll feel better.'

'Is that a spell?' I ask smilingly.

'No, Manon, it's an order,' Diedie answers and looks tenderly at me.

'We can't ignore that one,' Oded chuckles. 'If only it is because that cake looks enormously delicious.'

We all take a seat at the table and the cake is being served. Diedie could have just used a spell, because it seems as if I'm indeed feeling better with every bite I'm taking. I look suspicious at her.

She winks at me.