

# Snapshots

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by

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**eBooks by Natalie Herzer**

Snapshots – A Collection of Short Stories

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## Braving the Storm

She sat still on the wooden bench behind the house, looking out over the tidy garden. The air was hot and close. The heat and humidity oppressive. Swallows chased each other through the sky, zigzagging between the carefully selected and lopped trees, and buzzing bees flew from one neatly planted and arranged flower to another. The flowerbeds were the right size, the tutored lawn mowed at just the right height. Everything was as it should be, or almost. She hadn't pulled the weeds today.

From the west she saw clouds coming in. Slowly gathering, thickening, and billowing high into the sky like giant cotton balls. But for now, the birds were chirping, and the bees were busy. It seemed peaceful, this natural tranquility. The quiet before the storm.

She heard the car coming up the driveway and park beside the house. He came home from a hard and long day of work. His work was important. He was an important man. She heard him get out of the car and shut the door with a hollow bang. He walked towards the front door, rustling with his keys, inspecting the lawn and the dream house for the slightest blemish with a sweeping glance and whistling. Always whistling. She heard him get in, could see it clearly in her mind when and where he put down his leather briefcase.

"Darling, I'm home," he announced cheerfully. "I brought you a wonderful dress. I want you to wear it tomorrow night."

She could see him hang up his stylish coat onto the right hook of the rack and the dress hanger onto the left one. He pulled off his shoes, storing them properly away in the little cabinet.

He went into the clean, stainless steel kitchen, and she could see his quick, scrutinizing look as he inspected everything, from the smooth, clean surfaces over the arrangement of the dishtowels then to the already laid table in the dining room. Everything was just right, she knew it, just as she knew he moved either the silver candlestick or the crystal vase standing on the table a hairbreadth to the right or left; accurate to the millimeter. She knew, could hear him in her head as he muttered about her inability to arrange even the slightest things and as he started to wonder, displeased, about her absence.

The sun was low in the sky and as the storm clouds blocked its shining disk from the world they gleamed in an eerie red changing quickly to a sickly dark violet. Ominous and foreboding. The air thickened with electricity, seemed to crackle with it along her skin. The buzz of busy insects, the chirp of birds ceased. Eerie silence followed, waited.

She could sense it when he went into the bathroom, shaking his head out of wistful pity for her. He used the same inspecting look there before he bent over the marble sink to scrub his hands. When he straightened and looked up into the mirror, she could see him freeze. She hadn't cleaned it today. The smallest beads of water had dried on the smooth, cold surface; had left a trace, had marred what was his.

Outside the blanket of storm clouds, heavy with trapped rain and lightning, settled over the house and with it a dark, threatening gloom. The first thunder rolled. The birds were nowhere to be seen, the insects were in hiding and the neighbor's horses whickered in dismay and pranced in their caging enclosure. She was sitting motionless on the bench, looking out over the garden.

"Where are you?" he bellowed, then checked himself. It wasn't seemly to shout. But, by God, how often did he have to tell her? She knew the consequences. He was an important man, others depended on him. "Is it too much to ask of my own wife to just take care of the house, of the things I gave her?" he muttered.

Where was she? She should have come down to greet him properly by now. Was she off, to a damn friend? But no, she wouldn't dare, not if she knew he came home at seven and wanted dinner to be served thirty minutes later. She knew the consequences. Then again, women were stupid, foolish, not sparing a mere thought about who and what hard work put food into their mouths. Ungrateful bitches.

Anger boiling, thunder growling, he went back into the kitchen, looking for a sign of her. The oven was on. He opened the door and saw his favorite meal, roast rabbit marinated in rosemary – with the wrong vegetables.

She knew mushrooms and shallots went with it, but had chosen string beans for today instead. He roared, slamming the door shut, and the first lightning split the sky. She could see in her mind the anger distorting his features.

"You bitch! How stupid can you be?" Wild now, loud enough for her to hear him outside, he paced the house, "Where are you? Where are you hiding? You know it's useless. You know the consequences. I even think you like it. Why else would you disappoint me so much?" He checked every room for her. "You won't ever get away from me. You're my wife!" he snapped, his voice like a whip. He rolled his sleeves up, automatically fumbling with his leather belt.

She sat on the bench behind the house, still, looking over the tidy garden, listening to the rolling thunder. Her hands didn't even tremble. The horses whickered, prancing, caged. Lightning flashed.

He was upstairs now. She looked up to the window.

She had left the light on in their bedroom today.

Wild with rage, his blood bubbling he wanted to go and find her and drag her home, that deceitful bitch. But he couldn't afford a public scene, and so he would have to wait until she returned to the privacy of their home. She would be punished for that, too, for letting him wait. With a howl of fury he slammed his hand onto the light switch.

Outside she saw the flicker of lethal, bluish light in the room, felt the electricity in the air, and heard – dead silence. Peaceful quiet.

Rain started to pour down, and the woman sitting on the wooden bench behind the house got up slowly. Lifting her arms high, she turned her face into the reviving rain, her silent, freeing tears mixing with it. Smiling now, she felt the warm droplets trickle against her marred skin like a loving caress. Sensed the relieving breeze awakening. She bathed in the beautiful rain and let the water cleanse her bruised body.

Her heart beat strong and fast.

Finally, Sarah was alive.

## Try the Door, John

A knock sounded at the door. He lay on the couch, not caring over much and continued staring at the ceiling. The banging persisted and got even louder until a woman's voice called out, "Hello? I know you're home. Your cars still parked, and you sure haven't moved your butt outside."

Frowning at the unusual disturbance he got up and dragged himself towards the door; oblivious to his disheveled appearance in his old, crumpled jeans, unshaved and unkempt.

A tall woman with short blonde hair and green eyes smiled at him, "Hi! I'm Cara, your new neighbor."

He leaned against the door frame, tired, "Yeah. I'm John. Nice to meet you. No, I have no salt, milk, sugar or whatever it is you need. Bye, then." He was about to shut the door in her face, pretty sure she would leave in a huff, but he didn't get the reaction he had hoped for.

She didn't go away, but chuckled instead, "Forgot your manners, huh? Lucky you the neighbors warned me and told me of your loss." She stepped forward and with one hand pushed the door open so she could brush past him and go inside.

"Sure, come on in," John remarked, not closing the door.

She looked around, "Jeez, since when's your wife dead?"

He gritted his teeth, "Ten months."

"Yeah, I can see that." She turned to look at him and let her gaze travel the length of his body, "Not big on personal hygiene either, huh?"

John just stared at her. This woman was nuts. What did she want here anyway? Surely with her direct way she would spill it out soon. In the meantime he lightened up a cigarette, took a pull and enjoyed its tarry taste before filling his mouth with the delicate flavor of tequila. He squinted at her through the cloud of smoke.

"You shouldn't do that," she warned him, pointing towards the cigarette and the bottle of tequila in his hands, "it will kill you."

He raised a mocking brow, "So?"

She snorted at that, "Oh, come on. Stop acting the poor, hurting widower. Your wife's dead. I'm sorry, everybody's sorry, but that's life, damn it."

"What the hell? You've no idea what you're talking about, and no right. What the hell do you want anyway?"

"Checking out my neighbor, of course."

He put the cigarette out, "Well, you have done that. Now I'm really, really sorry but I've to ask you to leave." He went to the door, holding it open for her. Smiling sarcastically he showed her with a sweeping move of his arm the way out. "Goodbye, forever!"

She stopped in front of him, grinning, "For now. But I promise I'll soon be over again. I might come back on that offer for milk or so."

"That wasn't an offer. On the contrary, I was just notifying you that it would be useless to ask for such things since I haven't gotten any around."

"So what do you eat?"

He held up his bottle of tequila, "I've got all I need."

She shook her head and her eyes filled with mocking pity, "Oh, poor Johnny boy! There's much work ahead of us."

Without another word she turned and bounced down the stairs. He looked after her, shaking his head in utter disbelief before finally closing the door on the world again.

The next morning John woke to the sounds of a hammer, then a lawn mower and back to the hammer again. He got up from the couch, groaning and muttering and walked to the window. Just as he was about to close it, he saw his new least favorite neighbor jumping up and down, moving her hand wildly and screaming, "Ouch, ouch, ouch."

With a curse he snatched up a shirt, which he wasn't sure was actually clean but pulled on anyway as he ran out the door and over his unkempt lawn towards his neighbor's house. Cara was her name, he remembered.

"What the hell are you doing?" he snarled as he grabbed her hand and inspected it. The cut was bleeding but not deep.

Cara smiled sweetly, "Well, good morning to you, too."

"Being rudely awakened by hammers and stuff isn't good."

"So sorry I disturbed your beauty sleep. I know how much you need it."

John shot her a glance that bordered on murder. This woman was friggin' unbelievable. "Do you have a first-aid kit?"

"No."

Without a word he turned and headed back for his house, tugging her along. He told her to sit down in the kitchen while he searched his own kit. When he finally found it he sat on a chair in front of her and taking her hand in his he began to clean the cut.

"You came out of your shell," she remarked.

He looked at her, irritated, "I don't live in a shell."



Cara chuckled, "Sure you do. Look around you. You've holed up in here ever since your wife died."

"And I came out because my dearest neighbor screamed her head off. Over a little scratch at that," he grumbled in a voice that made it quite clear that he doubted he had taken the right decision.

"A little scratch it might be, but enough to make you come running and offer help. Though in a rude cave man kind of way."

"You of all people want to tell me I'm rude?"

"Yeah, but that's beside the point. What's important is, I think, deep inside of you, you want to participate in the world again, but feel guilty about doing so. Though there's nothing you should feel guilty about, believe me. The world moves on, it always does, and so one day you should, too. You won't ever forget your wife and-

"And our child." He didn't know why he told her, but it was too late to take it back now.

Cara leaned forward, her green eyes soft and gentle. "She was pregnant?"

John nodded and swallowed the lump in his throat, "Four months."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and when he looked at her he knew she was sincere.

He cleared his throat, applied a plaster to her cut and straightened in his chair, "This shouldn't give you any trouble."

She stood, "Thank you." When she past him, she laid a hand on his shoulder, giving it a light, comforting squeeze.

John listened to the sound of her receding footsteps until she was out. Then, in the utter quiet of the house he sat in the kitchen, thinking back on their conversation. Cara was a strange woman, without a doubt one of the strangest he had ever met. And yet she made him wonder about what she'd said. John watched her through the window as she continued to plant red and yellow blooming flowers into pots.

He took a look around him. Empty bottles of tequila and pizza boxes lay scattered on every available surface, all of it coated with dust and cold ashes.

With a long sigh John stood and began rummaging through the cabinets until he came up with a roll of bin liners. Filling one bag after the other he cleaned the kitchen, wiping it down from top to bottom before moving on to the next room, where he did the same. His clothes, and there wasn't one clean thing left, were immediately thrown into the washing machine. On a pad he noted down what he needed to buy and restock, and soon realized that grocery shopping was a top priority.

After he had taken a hot shower he stood in front of the mirror and looked at his reflection, shaved and clean. He felt human and alive, something he hadn't felt in a long time. And after honest introspection, he found that, much to his own surprise, Cara was right, there was guilt mixed in between.

He left the groceries for tomorrow and with one beer in his hand settled on his couch. There was only one room left he hadn't touched. Their bedroom. He hadn't stepped one foot inside it since his wife's death. Well, there was only so much one could do in a day.

When his door opened, he didn't bother to look who it was. There was only one so bold enough to come not knocking on his door.

"Come on in."

Cara crossed to him, her eyes scrutinizing the room with an approving gaze before landing on him, "You've done quite a lot here. You're actually handsome without the dirt."

He laughed, shaking his head at her.

A little hesitantly she added, "I wanted to see whether you're alright, or whether I... My mouth often gets the better of my mind, you know."

"You don't say! Everything's fine, though, don't worry."

"Good. So do you have some salt?"

John got up, leading the way into the kitchen, "Try tomorrow. I just might go grocery shopping."

"No kidding?"

"Until then I can only offer you beer or water."

"Beer." She took the bottle he held out to her and asked, "Do you mind sitting down out on the porch? I spend the entire day inside, painting the kitchen and the living room. A little fresh air would be great."

He had noticed the dabs of paint on her clothes and the splatters in her hair. "I can imagine."

They went out, and set down in the wicker chairs, overlooking the back yard. The lawn was unkempt, the weed growing rampant between rosebushes and lavender. Once it had been his wife's haven, and now it was utterly neglected. He would have to see to that, too, John mused.

"So you decided to redecorate the house? Well, I guess it does need a little renovation. The Campbells, the previous owners must have lived there all their lives. Kate and Tom, you never saw one without the other for long. Their grandson, Sean, works in the food store, but

you probably know him already. So, you chose that green there for the kitchen or the living room?” he asked, pointing towards a dab on her blouse.

Cara looked down at herself and laughed, “The kitchen. I like strong colors.”

They drank their beer as they watched the sun gliding lower through drafting clouds, tinging them with a first orange hue.

“Do you believe in God?” The question surprised John, and angered him somehow. He lifted an eyebrow and after a long telling look, she bit her lip, “Well, I guess with what happened you aren’t fond of Him. And who could blame you, right?”

She looked at him from the side, observing him closely, as she continued. “On the other hand it seems your faith just wasn’t strong enough to help you through your trials.”

John snorted at that, “I take it you believe in God.” When she nodded, he asked, “And for you, losing a loved one is a trial? For me, it was the end of my world, our world. The world we started to build together crumpled in a blink of an eye, when I opened the door to find a police officer standing there.”

Cara put a hand on his shoulder, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to anger or hurt you. I just believe that everything is a great puzzle, greater than we could ever understand, and only God knows the resulting picture of it all.”

John took a deep breath that now spoke more of sorrow and desperation than anger. Leaning back in the chair he looked out over the garden, into the distance, and he remembered how he had talked to God, screamed at Him, to be exact. But answers hadn’t come, and he had felt more deserted and alone than before.

Cara’s voice pushed through his thoughts, and he noticed she continued talking. “My dad, you could say he was a man of the church, he liked to tell us, me and my sisters and brothers, about the wonders of the world. He was kind of preaching the choir, actually, but we had questions of course, and he would take the time to answer us. Once when I was a kid I wanted to know, why God didn’t answer us, at least when it was really, really urgent. And he said, ‘Well, the world is mighty big and complex in so many ways, and sometimes God just doesn’t answer us in a way we expect. There are more than voices to be heard. So for example, the next time when you’re sad, and think there’s a big fat rain cloud over your head, watch if there’s not a rainbow nearby, too.’ And I did. Whenever I was sad or needed an answer I would watch whether there wasn’t something around that made me smile or simply feel better.”

He surely could have come up with a nasty remark, but didn't. She looked peaceful and for once less annoying as she sat in the wicker chair, facing the setting sun with a sweet smile on her lips, full of memories. "Your dad must be an interesting man."

"Indeed, he is."

John took a pull from his beer, "So where is he?"

She waved a hand, "Oh, further to the north. I travel and move a lot, but we always keep in touch. Not a day goes by without us talking," she grinned at him, "or getting on each other's nerves."

When he found himself smiling back at her, he wondered at this exasperating woman in front of him. One second he was angry and about to wrap his hands around her throat, and the next he was smiling. Maybe he shouldn't have opened when she came knocking on his door, John mused. But then again, it felt good, to sit out on the porch, watch the sun light dance through the trees and to talk about, well, everything under it; even with, or maybe because of, the forward, no-nonsense woman beside him.

The next morning John got up, showered and planned his day. He would finally go grocery shopping and afterwards he would attack the lawn. And maybe he would even find the nerve to go up, into the bedroom.

The grocery store hadn't changed much, but he noticed that Sean, his former neighbors' grandson had decided to grow a goatee, probably in an attempt to look manlier and to distract from his lanky frame. At least the distraction was a success.

John tried his best to suppress a smile as Sean put his food through the till. "So, you managed to let the house?"

The young man looked up, a little surprised, "Yep, a writer from London wants it. She didn't even want to look at the house, just paid for it. But how did you know? Word travels fast, I guess."

"I already saw her."

"Oh, I thought she said she would still need a little longer taking care of things in London? Well, since we settled everything I told her I left the key under the doormat, so she could come by whenever she wanted. That's £55.36, by the way."

John paid and accepted the change, wondering what else his new neighbor had kept from him while ruthlessly poking her nose into his life. He wished Sean a nice day, and drove back home. As he put away his groceries, he contemplated inviting Cara over for a couple of barbecued steaks. She might have been a little too nosy and cheeky, but she was also new in the neighborhood and he could at least welcome her properly.

His mind set John went over to Cara's. He knocked and waited. When no one answered he squinted through the windows trying to look inside. What he saw didn't make any sense at all.

Remembering what Sean had told him, he flipped back the doormat and found a key. Opening the door he stepped inside.

The wooden floor creaked under his careful step. Sunbeams streamed in through the back windows, and stunned he saw the light dust covering the shelves and the old furnishings that stood where the Campbells had left them. No fresh paint, no blooming flowers.

He swore he heard the rustle of spreading wings. And then he saw the single white feather wafting through the air, swaying gently, before landing in a pool of light on the floor.

## Despairing Hope

The air was filled with incessant chatter and laughter, and hinted at mouthwatering promises as the barbecue was getting started. The family had met at her in-laws' place and was enjoying the late afternoon sun out back in the blooming garden. The women set the table and carried out different bowls of salad and bread that everyone had brought along. The men enjoyed a fresh beer and stood debating around the grill.

Kate liked being here. She loved the abundance of sweet-scented flowers, the occasional neigh of the horse grazing in the neighbor's garden and baaing of the sheep across the street. Irene, her mother-in-law denied having a magical green thumb but somehow that woman could bring any plant or flower to thrive and to bloom, and even those she would sometimes forget out in the frost didn't wither.

Since the grill needed a little more time, the women decided to walk through the garden, marveling at its beauty and occasionally plucking a twig of rosemary or lavender, while nursing a glass of cool white wine.

Her sister-in-law, Marie came up beside her with her little daughter in her arms, "Can you hold her a moment? I have to pee."

"Sure," Kate took the gurgling package with a smile. "Hey there, are you having a nice time?" Of their own accord, her eyes searched her husband. Their gazes met.

They had always thought it would be easy to have a child, but after five years of trying they knew better now. At first the doctor had said not to worry, a bright smile on his lips, and that it was normal after taking the birth control pills for a few years. He said that the body needed time to find its own rhythm again. Then the smile had become forced and less reassuring as he'd told her that her ovulation was irregular and sometimes even absent, but that they might be able to fix that with the help of a hormone therapy.

After endless syringes and doctor's appointments without improvement, her husband and she had decided to stop the treatment, since their love life, which was supposed to be a way to live and show their love and pleasure and a shelter where words were needless, had become a duty, a timed task. Now she wanted to scream every time she saw her monthly blood flush away another chance of life. She started to hate her failing body, her flat stomach.

Her sister-in-law and her fiancé, Thomas came back, holding hands. When they reached Kate, Marie started making funny faces at her daughter, which the child stared at with big loving eyes. Thomas took his beautiful girl and held her above his head and she giggled in delight while Marie put one arm around his waist. A happy family. Jealousy sparked,

unwanted and uncontrollable. She knew the baby hadn't been planned. And guilt speared her as soon as the thought arose, because Kate knew they loved her and treated her as such.

Watching the mother and father playing with the gurgling child, a fist squeezed her heart tight until it broke, and inside she was screaming and crying.

Kate had heard that some people, scientists even, say that sometimes a child simply wasn't meant to be between two people. Others said that love was just chemistry, the result of the body searching for and reacting to the most suitable of partners. So then how could it be that, when she loved her husband with all her heart and wanted to carry his baby, it wouldn't work? They both wanted a child so much, to love and care for it, to see it grow. Could fate, or whatever power responsible, really be so cruel? And bring together two loving souls and deny them their greatest joy to be as one?

"Dinner will be ready soon," her husband, the master of the grill called out, and pulled her from her dark thoughts without knowing it. The family gathered and sat down at the table. Platters and bowls and bread were passed along without conversation pausing for even a moment.

"Your potato salad is delicious, Kate. So fresh."

"It's the capers," she explained, forcing herself to smile brightly.

Later that night she lay in bed with her husband, naked and out of breath. His arms held her close, and she could hear the strong beating of his heart. A silent tear slipped away and ran down her cheek. For she knew the time of waiting began again. And, even though she tried to stop it, she knew that with each day that passed frustrating hope would eat away at her more and more.

## Live

Once again I woke in a body claimed by death. My mother was hovering over the bed, my medicaments and a glass of water in her hands. The sheer terror and fear of the possibility I might not awake was still plainly visible behind the relief in her eyes. I groaned. It was no bad dream, no tear-jerking Hollywood movie, just goddamn plain reality. It was unfortunate and a real shame.

“Honey, how are you feeling today?” my mother was fussing over me again, and though I could never have imagined such a thing it got worse with every day that past. With each day that meant there was one less for her daughter to live. But then again I guess it wasn’t easy for parents to helplessly watch their child fade away. It wasn’t the natural order of things. And so I endured the sometimes suffocating mothering, fixing a somewhat faint but hopefully reassuring smile onto my lips. Then I got up, popped the various pills she gave me, and swallowed them down with a gulp of water.

“I’m fine, mom. I’ll just grab a shower.”

Worried eyes fixed me as if trying to keep me from vanishing into thin air right then and there. “Sure. But breakfast is ready, hon.”

“I’ll make it quick,” I promised and gave her a little peck on her cheek and tried that reassuring smile again. It must have worked this time since she nodded and the corners of her lips curled slightly.

In the bathroom I stripped out of my pajama. And for the first time in quite a while and for whatever the reason I turned around to really look at my reflection in the mirror. I didn’t like what I saw. Some women wanted to look like anorexic sticks, I wasn’t one of them but I certainly could join the club now. I was skinny, in an unhealthy bones-and-angles-showing kind of way. But that wasn’t even the worst of it all. My skin wasn’t just pale, it was gray. I looked like a walking corpse, and to my horror pretty much felt like one as well.

I was going to die. I knew it, and with each day that passed there was one question in my mind that pressed ever harder to be heard.

Pushing away the thought, I stepped under the spray of warm water, let it caress my sensitive skin, let it wash over me. When I was finished I toweled off, and rubbed a hand over my bald, scarred head.

Dressed, I went downstairs. My father was sitting at the table, reading the newspaper, of which one corner nearly drowned in his coffee.



“Morning, dad.” I sat down. I wasn’t hungry, but with the inspection of my corpse still fresh in my mind I grabbed a roll.

“Morning. How are you feeling?”

“Good.” I sighed and let the roll drop onto my plate. I couldn’t put it off. Time wasn’t on my side. And so I took a deep breath. “I want to stop the treatment.”

The resulting silence was absolute. And then came the storm.

“What the hell are you talking about?” my father’s face was red with sudden fury and his eyes huge with helplessness at the prospect of losing his daughter. “Are you out of your mind?”

“The treatment isn’t working. I don’t respond to it.”

“Then we can still try that new one.”

“No,” I shook my head and looked at him, utterly calm. “No, dad. We won’t, because I can’t take it anymore. The treatment is killing me, the doctor told me so. My liver is shit. We have to stop. And what’s the use anyhow? What would we win? A day? I don’t even know what I’m fighting for anymore. I don’t feel good. Look at me. I’m numb, I don’t feel anything. Even with the treatment, all we would do is stall. The treatment won’t heal me, we all know it. So, please, let me have the time I have left.” I got up and headed for the door, and out. I needed to get away. I got in the car and just drove, blindly, to wherever it would take me.

After some time I stopped and really looked out the windshield, and saw my old school. It hadn’t changed much. Some signs of old age here and there, but the schoolyard in front was still filled with squealing, talking or quarreling children. And those who were hiding out to have a smoke and thought that made them pretty clever and cool. There were places where time preferred crawling to flying. With memories filling my head and an idea forming in between them I pulled away. I knew where to go now.

I drove nearly two hours to see a friend I hadn’t met in a long time. I parked the car, got out and walked to the door of the five-storey building. After searching the name, I rang and waited.

“Yes?”

“Delivery,” I said into the interphone. With a click the door was opened and I got in, heading up the stairs.

She stood waiting in the door. The last time I’d seen her she had short blue and red hair, now it was brown and flowing past her shoulders, but the rest, complete with the black clothes and spiked bracelets, seemed the same. Her face wasn’t what one would call beautiful or

pretty, with a sharp nose and strong chin, but the chocolate brown, almond-shaped eyes gave her a certain interesting attractiveness. That typical expression on her face, that others might identify to be one of boredom but which was a careful study of faked indifference and what-do-you-know, hadn't changed either.

When recognition dawned, her eyes went wide with surprise and her eyebrows went up. "What the hell? Charlotte?"

I came to a stop in front of her and grinned, "Hello Bea!"

The smile that spread across her face was one of those that always reached the eyes, an honest and beautiful smile that made guys and sometimes even women look back at her.

"Can I come in?"

"Sorry. Sure." Bea stepped to the side to let me in, before she closed the door behind me. The living room looked nothing special except for the mural painting covering the length of the wall. It showed a magnificent black dragon, crouching with its wings about to spread above its back – and it made the flat all hers. Bea loved dragons and painting, and pissing off her landlord surely played a factor as well.

We walked into the kitchen. "Well, if that isn't a surprise I don't know what is. What are you doing here?"

I walked to the glass door that opened to her balcony. Instead of answering her right away, I asked, "How are you? And how is it going, at the university and with the family?"

She sighed, "Ah, well. You know how my folks are. I don't like it. My parents keep an eye on my studies, and look at me with disappointment and pity while wishing for me to be a little more clever and better. But otherwise they don't give a shit about my mental state, nor my general well-being come to think of it."

Bea had thought about suicide while we've still been in school. The scars were still there. She'd been living in a prison her parents had forged out of their own unfulfilled dreams, high-wrought expectations and a scary indifference to their youngest daughter's personality. I had told her to hang on in there, that graduation and a flat away from her folks was just around the corner, and invited her over for half of our last summer holidays.

She shrugged, "Otherwise I'm fine. And you?"

"I'm dying." I turned around, "Cancer."

For a moment she just looked at me, speechless. "Want a beer?"

It felt as if I hadn't had one in years, "Yeah."

She grabbed two green bottles out of her fridge, uncapped them and gave me one before she motioned for me to sit down on one of the chairs. She grabbed the only other one, turned and straddled it. "I'm all ears."

Turning the sweaty bottle between my fingers, I told her of my disease and that my own body now forced me to end the treatment. When I was finished, she took a long gulp of her beer and then said, "Well, that certainly qualifies as bad news."

I went out onto the balcony and took a deep breath. The air was fresh, and I smelled that unique salty yet also sweet scent of the Baltic Sea on it.

Bea followed me out. "What do you want to do now?"

"Can I crash here?"

"Of course."

I nodded in thanks. For the rest of the day we turned to other superficial subjects and just enjoyed brushing the dust off the bond between us. The two of us hadn't seen each other for nearly six years and were rather different, and somehow not. We could talk about everything, in the fashion of old friends, as if time hadn't passed and at the same time accepting the changes it had brought.

At some point I called my parents so they wouldn't worry about my whereabouts. After the sun had set I made myself comfortable on the couch as Bea walked towards her bedroom. In the door she stopped and turned around, "How long do you have?"

"A couple of months," I answered honestly. With a thoughtful nod she disappeared, and I lay down, turning onto my side and looking at the dragon on the wall. I hadn't talked about my disease in such an open no-nonsense way with any other person. It was nice and relieving. Soon I was fast asleep.

"Hey, wake up!" Someone was shaking me. My eyes opened. Bea was leaning over me. "God, you sleep like the dead. Practicing already, or what?"

"What? What is it?" I scrambled to get up.

Bea plopped into her black arm chair beside me, a notepad on her knee and a pen in her hand. "Top three places you want to visit?"

I shook my head, trying to clear it from lasting scraps of some dream. "What?"

She shrugged, and explained a little impatient in a voice reserved for the mentally challenged, "You're dying, and I want to know where you would like to go before you snuff it."

Right. "Um. Jeez Bea, I don't know." I pinched the bridge of my nose and looked at her without a clue, "Paris, Canada maybe."

She scribbled away on her pad and muttered, “Okay. What do you want to do? Some reckless stuff, I mean.”

“Escape death.” When she gave me one hard look, I recognized that Bea wouldn’t go away any time soon and that she was earnest about this and so I tried to get in a more comfortable position and sat cross-legged on the couch. I blew out my cheeks, rubbed a hand over my face and concentrated on what she was asking me. “To swim with a whale. I always wanted to see a whale, in the wild, not in a tank.”

Bea looked up again and grinned, “Ah, that’s more like it. Now we’re getting some where. What else?”

I smiled back at her, and finally in the mood I gave it some thought. “Can we go back to that first question? Do you remember the pub we used to go to in Rostock? And the pact we made there?”

The smile widened on her lips, “Yes. We swore that if we’d ever go to Ireland, we’d go together the first time.”

“Yeah, Ireland, that’s my top one place I want to visit.”

“Okay,” Bea jotted it down, and then stopped. Looking up again, she leaned forward, a daring gleam in her eyes, “Let’s go there tomorrow. We’ll take a plane and be there in a heartbeat.”

Of all the people I knew, Bea was the only one I could imagine to do such a thing - to drop everything and fly to Ireland with me. She would do it, because no one else would dare to and probably panic at the idea of missing out on University.

When I hesitated, she lifted one of her eyebrows and asked, “Got anything better to do?”

No, I hadn’t.

“Alright,” a nearly hysterical laugh tickled my throat and bubbled out.

The next day we were on a plane, destination Dublin, where we rented a car. Since Bea didn’t have a driving license, I got to sit behind the wheel. It took me a while to get used to driving on the wrong side of the road which resulted in some scary and damned funny moments when turning at junctions, but eventually I managed. We had brought CDs and we listened to U2. It seemed to be a cliché but we didn’t care then the music was good. For a while we followed the M7 but then turned onto back roads that led us through Templemore and Newport. The air seemed so clean, and scented of grass and lakes and the sea. The rise and fall of green hills and the silvery ribbons of clear streams were breathtaking. The vine-covered houses and churches and the stone bridges were beautiful. We stopped at castle ruins, reminder of times long gone that made me think of rainy nights and sieges and the noise of

clashing swords. Others I imagined caressed by sunshine, buzzing with busy maidens and filled with the sound of children's laughter as they chased fairies. A little ways before Limerick we stopped and had a picnic by the River Shannon.

"Do you think it's an advantage to know when you will be pushing up the daisies?" Bea asked.

We were sitting on the grassy banks of the river and I had been watching the glittering sunlight dance upon the water. At her question I turned my head to look at her, caught between laughter and disbelief, "First 'snuff it' and now 'pushing up the daisies'?"

She nodded, grinning widely, "Or bite the dust or kick the bucket. I prefer those to the good old 'die'."

So did I, I suddenly realized. It held less of that feeling of impending doom. She finished off her sandwich and nursed a bottle of Harp, "But don't change the subject here. Back to my question!"

I sighed, "Maybe it is. I mean, others just suddenly die in a car accident or they have a heart attack, and most of them are alone. They have a family and friends but they are alone in the car or out on the street or wherever, and they die. I don't want to die alone."

"You won't." Bea toyed with her second sandwich as she cocked her head as if in deep thought and tried to get back the beforehand cheerful atmosphere, "Shouldn't dying people be all accepting, really wise and philosophical and all?"

I shrugged, "Yeah, well. I guess that's just another pretty but fake little picture Hollywood likes to draw. In reality we're as clueless as any other and angry at the world and pissed off with the universe in general and scared shitless."

"Ah well then, that's comforting."

We looked at each other and snorted with laughter. Any other, after what I had said, would have patted my shoulder awkwardly, trying to get out some nonsensical 'don't you worry, it will all be fine', but not Bea.

She got up, "Come on, lazybones. We need to head into Limerick. I've got a surprise for you."

Bungee-jumping. The woman who wanted me to have some fun and live before I die wanted me to jump from a ramp sixty meters above the ground, free-falling headfirst. Sure, why the hell not.

Her arms were wrapped around me, mine around her. "You said you wanted to escape death. Dropping out of the sky, literally hanging by a thread - if that isn't escaping death, I don't know what is," she announced happily grinning.

Right. My heart beat somewhere in my throat and I didn't dare looking down. Then we both jumped off the edge, and screamed.

The next day as we headed towards Cork I was sure I still had adrenaline pumping through my veins. But I had to give it to Bea - I felt alive. I drove through the probably most beautiful country ever to have existed, full of laughter, joy and life. That morning my cheeks had been rosy, and I had even taken the time to moisten my skin with a sweet-scented lotion and applied some mascara, going against a lately acquired habit.

While I drove, we listened to music and Bea pulled out her notepad again. "You ever had sex?"

"Sure. Why?" I asked.

"Damn." I looked at her as if she had suddenly gone insane. She shrugged, "What? It would have been so sweet and tragically romantic to set you up."

"Being my deflowering pimp would have been sweet and tragically romantic?"

Bea nodded, grinning, and I shook my head, laughing. She was incredible.

With a carefree smile on my lips we drove into Cork – where Bea had organized for us to go on a whale watching tour. When she told me her plan, I hugged her to me, tears, of joy and of thanks and of sorrow, filling my eyes.

\*

My friend Charlotte passed away on a balmy autumn morning as soft rays of sunlight played across her bed, and surrounded by those she loved. I will never forget what a wonderful time we had, what we had done and experienced. It was a journey of discoveries, as much of the land as of ourselves and life. And the lesson was clear: live, and enjoy every moment of it, even if you do nothing at all. Now I appreciated and knew that there was nothing greater or more delicate than the bitter-sweet taste of life.

## **The Glass In Between** **- Or The Wonderful Freedom Of Delivering Pizzas**

Ants. Yes, that was what they reminded her of. She looked out her bay window, watching people rushing past on cramped streets. The evening sun touched the roofs of the city with soft fingertips, illuminating everything in a golden halo. It was her favorite moment of the day. But the tiny figures downstairs didn't see it. They were busy hurrying towards a home they didn't want to get back to or cheating their partners or simply fleeing their dreams.

The basics were the same every day. The polluting cars and busses, their horns blaring because of one lost second at a traffic light. Stressed men ran along, fashionable women dragged their equally fashionable kids, or even smarter ones were dragging their tiny dogs behind them in such a way that she was almost thankful they'd gone for a dog and not a child. Others had a phone plastered to the ear, or had one of those tiny things dangling near their chin, where you had to take a good look to figure out whether the person was actually speaking to someone on the other end or just talking crazy. Most of them stared straight ahead, unsmiling, not sparing a glance for those who had nothing and lived on the cold pavement. The only ones really looking and seeing and enjoying the city through their camera lenses were probably the tourists.

With a sad sigh she kept her eyes open for her favorite but rare glimpses at happiness, when a couple might stop dead and kiss in the middle of the crowd, carefree behind rose-colored glasses. All the while she was looking forward to her glass of red wine that would go nicely with a slice of the pizza that would soon be delivered and a chapter or two of the new book she recently bought online. She liked the Internet, and was grateful that it made it possible for her to work at home. With nothing but an invisible screen between them, she could mentor her students and see them thrive as if she was right there, at their side.

She tensed at the thought. Was she the same as those downstairs? Did she live locked up and separated from the world as they were? Yes, she realized with a sinking heart. Then though she worked with her students, there was a screen between them. She couldn't even remember the last time she had gone out, or really talked to someone, not just on the phone, but in a real face-to-face conversation. A conversation where she had truly spoken to someone, without running through the typical phrases, that sprang automatically to mind. Standing, she started pacing the room, wondering at how the hell she had gotten so closed in. Modern technology was just part of the problem; simple laziness and even selfishness were the root of it. It was so much easier to just buy a book online than to actually go into a store

and go through the trouble or risk of human contact, of chatting a minute or two with a salesperson.

The doorbell rang and she turned around. Right on time, as always. She opened the door, and there he was, with her pizza in his hands and a smile on his lips. The man had practically fed her for the last few weeks – and she hadn't been able to say more to him than the usual "Hi and bye". With regret and shame shaking her awake to a harsh, cold reality she even remembered a time or two where she hadn't said a thing at all to him.

"Hi. One Regina, right?" When she just stood there, not moving, he asked, "Is everything alright?"

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and then nodded, "Yeah. Yes. I was just..." She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time; which she had to admit, was very close to the truth. He was handsome, and funny and nice and once she had seen him from her window giving his last cigarette to a tramp. Patrick, that was his name. The first times he had come by, he had tried to flirt with her, but she hadn't reacted to it. An unnecessary cold brush off, she now realized. She took the leap, "Are you free tonight?"

He seemed startled. "I have to work till ten."

"Oh, of course." Feeling foolish and embarrassed she only wanted to grab the box in his hands.

Smiling, he sought her eyes and added, "But I could come by tomorrow."

Trying to hide the grin that tugged at her lips and to regulate her breathing again, she asked, "Would it be weird to ask whether I could come with you, now I mean?"

"You want to deliver pizzas with me?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I want to do. I want to go out, knock on other people's doors, look them in the eyes and deliver them their pizza."

"You seem full of surprises tonight. Okay then, but you won't have enough time to eat this one."

He held up her pizza, and she took it. "That's alright." She turned and with hands trembling from excitement she snatched her purse from the dresser in a swift movement that had her cell flying out of it. The phone landed with a crash, and when she picked it up the display was cracked. With a shrug she put it back on the dresser, and went out, feeling strangely liberated.

Outside, she looked the street up and down, and when she found what she'd been looking for she told him, "Give me just a second." She walked towards a hunched figure, sitting in the dark, "Hello, what's your name?"



The man looked up, wary, “Travis, ma’am. Why? Do I bother you? If so, there’s no need to call the police, I’ll go.”

When he started to rise, she touched his shoulder, “No, not at all. That’s not why I’m here.” She held out the pizza, “Here, this is for you, Travis. Enjoy.”

Blinking, as if he didn’t trust his eyes, the man looked from the pizza box and up to her and back again. Startled he took it, and when she turned around, the man called out with a voice hoarse from lack of using, “Thank you, ma’am. Thank you very much.”

When she joined Patrick who was already sitting on his moped, he motioned towards the tramp, “It seems you already delivered your first pizza tonight.”

“I did, and it feels great.” Taking a deep breath of the freshening evening air she got on the bike behind Patrick. She put her arms around him, and relished his warmth flooding through her.

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ALSO AVAILABLE

Book 1 in the Patroness Series from

NATALIE HERZER

**BLUE MOON RISING**

\*

Maiwenn Cadic does not have an easy life. Not only does she try to solve magical troubles as a Private Investigator by day, but she is also the Patroness of Paris and kicks the ass of the shadows lurking in the night – and all of it in a world, where magic supposedly doesn't even exist.

When five shapeshifters end up dead, she knows it's bad news and has to call in The Council, who immediately send their legendary assassin and shapeshifter, Kylian 'The Killer' Tremaine. Together they have to overcome their prejudices and obstacles in the form of a trigger-happy bounty hunter and a hungry rogue, and solve the murder before more bodies pile up...

**Turn the page for the excerpt...**

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# BLUE MOON RISING

## Chapter 1

*Paris, France*

*26th August, 2012*

It could have been such an ordinary, balmy Friday evening – but not for me. With a sigh I walked closer to the heap on the street that was partially illuminated by a street lamp, already sensing trouble. There was blood, and the bizarre form turned out to be a shredded-to-pieces body lying in an awkward angle on the cobbled alleyway. The victim was human, a young female. Her killer was a shapeshifter, probably gone rogue. Sure I wasn't one of them and couldn't tell it by scent or anything but the small strands of gray fur here and there and the open stomach made it seem obvious. To top it all off, the police station was right around the corner and the last thing I needed was a long discussion with some smart-ass officer as to my presence on a murder scene – again. Way to go, Maiwenn. I really knew how to pick them.

I looked the small and narrow alley up and down. It was calm here, no cafés; but only a few meters away, turning into the next street, the nightlife was buzzing with people celebrating the weekend. Most humans were ignorant and repressed any unexplainable stuff that would make their world tremble, but I preferred to be better safe than sorry. I began to chant, repeating the same phrase over and over so that it would divert the eyes of passersby. Although I was a witch – okay, okay only half – I couldn't do a lot more in this case. I didn't have the time for something fancy. And so I just grabbed my cell and began taking pictures of the crime scene; first of the surroundings, mostly modest apartment buildings lying in the dark and where only a few windows were still lit-up, and then of the body. I knelt down and took a closer look on the wounds; deep claw marks and pieces of flesh ripped out. Yep, definitely shapeshifter. And he would be punished for his acts - with death.

When I was finished, I got up murmuring a prayer for the young girl whose life had ended too early and in too brutally a way. Then I pulled a little bottle out of the pockets of my leather jacket and poured the contents over the body. I would never get used to the horrible noise created by the acid burning through flesh and bones but I didn't have a choice. Even humans were only ignorant up to a certain extent.

After I cleaned the scene I moved on. I would find the bastard who had done this to her, but for tonight my patrol was done. Soon I would lose the cover of darkness, so I headed home.

Home was a comfy apartment located on the upper floor of an old six-story building near Place de la Bastille in the east of Paris. I punched in the code for the security door, got the mail and headed upstairs, enjoying the scent of the old wooden stairs. On the fifth floor a door opened with a soft creak and Viviane, not only my relying neighbor but also my tutor and friend, appeared in the doorway. She was fifty-some, still good in shape and had short auburn hair showing streaks of white.

“Bonsoir Viviane!” I greeted her, kissing her on each cheek, and breathed in her familiar scent of Chanel No.5. I was surprised to see her up at this late, or rather early, hour. It was almost five.

Viviane looked me over with worry showing in her warm hazel eyes as she searched for wounds.

“I’m fine, really,” I assured her and the tension showing in her slim shoulders released a little but not entirely, telling me there was more.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come home. I need to talk to you, Maiwenn.” Her voice, like whiskey, rolled through the dark silence of the stairwell.

I frowned, wondering what was wrong, but nodded. We climbed the last steps together and went into my apartment. I closed the door behind her, took off my boots and went into the kitchen where I put my keys on the big counter, which served as a table and roughly divided the room, and made us some tea. The kitchen and the living room were actually one spacious room painted in a color Viviane called apricot. I watched Viv sit down in one of the blood red comfy armchairs and heard her sigh as she looked out the big double-caseament windows offering a breathtaking view over a sea of roofs and little, round chimneys.

“Ah, I’ve always loved this view. Paris, the City of Light. When I see this, I understand again why we risk our lives each and every single night.”

I carried our two steaming mugs on a tray to the little table standing in front of her, took one for me to warm my hands and set on the couch facing her, tucking my legs up. The scent of strawberry and raspberry filled the air as I waited for her to tell me what worried her. Sooner or later she would, Viviane had her own time.

“We’re broke.”

I just stared at her, probably catching flies with my mouth since that revelation came rather unexpected. “How’s that even possible?” I finally got out.

“You remember the crisis a couple of years ago? Well, the patronesses, so actually we, mostly invested in stocks. It was good...but after the crisis, it went downhill. I thought we could manage it. But now I have to admit that it was foolish of me, I should have told you right away. So...”

“We’re broke,” I whispered still trying to wrap my mind around that one.

Then Viviane leaned forward, the light back in her hazel eyes and a shadow of a smile pulling at her lips. “But I have an idea how we could fix this. You should rent the other rooms. You don’t use the space here anyway. You could get yourself some company and some money. Two birds with one stone, darling. And maybe we could reconstruct the first floor, turning the space beside your office into stores or something like that. What do you think?”

I thought about it. I couldn’t work more hours since I already had a full-time job – two actually – so the money had to come in from somewhere else. “Reconstructing the first floor is a good idea. It will take some time and money but given the high demand for space in this city, in the end, it might work out. But roommates, Viviane? With my line of work?”

“Maiwenn, the magic might still be hidden in this world but you aren’t the only one to know that it is there.”

“I’ll think about it, okay?”

Viviane took a relieving breath and took the mug of tea in front of her. “Now that that’s settled, how was the patrol?” She sipped carefully, watching me.

She said it in a way others might ask “how was your day”. I liked that, it made me feel normal. As if we were talking about a job and not a curse. Then that’s what it was – a curse. Not meant to be but it just turned out that way.

My mother was Geneviève, the first Patroness of Paris. She’d been devastated, heart-broken and pregnant when she had finally found shelter and a hint of hope in the city of Paris; only to see everything endangered by the invading Huns. Having enough of running away she decided and promised to do and give everything in her power to defend her new home. Well, she kind of gave me, unintentionally.

My mother had died when I’d still been a child and so her loyal friend the Lady of the Lake, Viviane, had been taking care of me ever since. She loved and trained me, was my tutor and my mother. Geneviève’s death left first Viviane and then me as the new Patroness of Paris behind. But my mother couldn’t have known that we didn’t die. Well, we did die; our

deaths just weren't exactly permanent. For the rest of the world the Patronesses were born, fought and died; ever changing, never staying. Whereas, in reality, we weren't.

We were reborn, again and again, to protect the city. So technically, we were the only Patronesses to have ever existed after Geneviève, although we couldn't remember our previous lives. What a shame. Now I probably made the same mistakes over and over again. What a depressing thought.

I understood and accepted why I didn't cease to exist permanently. My mother was a witch, she just didn't know it at the time, and spoke those words with all her power behind it, all her heart, so she accidentally jinxed me. Magic was a tricky bitch. But I didn't really understand why Viviane would be reborn and she refused to explain it to me. I only could guess. The Lady of the Lake, being a powerful and mysterious creature herself, chose to be reborn; either to watch over Caledfwlch, also known as Excalibur which she gave to me, or to look after me. I hoped for both.

"It's been quiet lately. Disturbingly quiet. Something's up. I found a dead girl tonight, about sixteen years old, a rogue got her."

"Et merde! You've found him?"

I shook my head. "Not yet, but I will."

Viviane smiled at me, pride showing in her eyes. "You always do." She got up; her body already a little tired after all those years of fighting. "Now, I'll let you be, you must be exhausted. Sweet dreams, ma grande."

I saw her to the door and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Bonne nuit."

Left alone I studied the room and thought about Viviane's idea of sharing the apartment. Maybe it wouldn't be that bad to have someone around. Except that someone would be in permanent danger with me around and therefore would have to be somewhat crazy. With a sigh I went along the living room and into my room. It was nothing fancy; just a bed covered with golden yellow sheets and the only trustworthy man on earth lying sprawled across it – my orange cat Malo. A closet in one corner, desk in the other one. The walls were painted a warm grass-green and covered with overcharged bookshelves. Like everything else in the apartment they were made out of pine wood, even the floor, and the fresh scent welcomed me.

"Salut!" I greeted Malo, who got up and stretched, and then I opened the left door of my closet, containing a full-length mirror. I looked at my reflection. It wasn't bad but it wasn't anything special either. Green eyes were staring back at me. I was about five-ten and

had dark blond hair which normally came down past my shoulders but I always kept it braided or in a bun to keep it out of harm's way, so to speak.

I began to take off my weapons; three throwing stars and my two Trident Daggers, everything went into a drawer. I really liked my daggers. By pushing a concealed button on the ivory heft a portion of the blade would spring outwards on each side. That way the dagger was not only capable of trapping other blades – well, claws most of the time – more securely but also of inflicting more damage to the wound while I pulled it out of my adversary's flesh.

Yep, times and methods had definitely changed. Geneviève had defended Paris by praying, that was nice and effective but I for one preferred a more personal and direct approach.

The last weapon that I still had on me was Excalibur, my double-edged sword. Long, lean and lethal, with a design of two chimeras on the antique golden hilt. It had its own magic, so that tucked away in its leather harness it stayed hidden from curious eyes. Given the fact that the sword was of value and allegedly lost and Excalibur a too famous a name I called it Cutter according to its original meaning. It wouldn't end up in the closet. I always kept it close, never out of reach.

I went over to the desk, opened my laptop and began to upload the pictures from the crime scene I'd taken. After that was done I headed into the bathroom to freshen up with Malo following my every step. Then it was finally time to crawl into bed. I hid my sword in a way so it was easy to grasp and donned a top and shorts, just in case an enemy decided to pop in – I really couldn't recommend fighting butt naked – before hopping into bed. Beside me my cat found an acceptable spot, circled a little and curled up resting his head on his front paws. I stroked the soft fur behind his ears, eliciting a vibrant purr, and wondered about what Viviane had told me. We were broke. How could that have happened?

“Jesus Malo, what'll tomorrow bring?”

## **Chapter 2**

There was an annoying noise in my head. I hoped it would go away very, very soon. It didn't.

After I fought my way through a foggy cloud, which some people might have called thoughts, I was able to notice the blaring alarm clock on my nightstand telling me it was half past eight and time to get moving. Given the fact that I went to sleep after five, I felt a little groggy.

Growling I got up and stretched a little. I didn't do mornings and everything inside me screamed for caffeine, desperately. The cool wooden floor against my feet did nothing to wake me up. In the kitchen with my eyes not even half open I prepared breakfast for Malo and made coffee. As the machine began to gurgle around I threw two deep-frozen croissants in the oven – the gestures automatic – before settling on a high stool to flop my head on the counter. Soon the tempting scents of strong coffee and sweet, rising puff pastry enveloped me and boosted my system. As my first big dose of caffeine streamed through my veins I took a quick shower, braided my hair and then dressed, deciding on white pants and a wildly green patterned top.

After breakfast I grabbed a thermos filled with the rest of my coffee, my laptop and keys, and pulled on a comfortable pair of colorful sandals and was out the door. Arriving downstairs I didn't head out the front door but turned left instead and into my office. The room was painted in pale amber, a warm color invoking grain fields on a rainy day, and dominated by an old, wooden desk. The wall behind it was covered with rows of filing cabinets.

I put the laptop on the desk, booting it up and then set down to sip a little of my coffee, enjoying this peaceful moment of silence. When the clock announced that it was time to get to work I moved to open the front door of my office and waited for the first clients to show up.

My telephone rang. I turned and answered it, "Bonjour, Maiwenn Cadic with Saints Investigation, how may I help you?"

Yes, I was a private detective. Mostly strange stuff. My job was it to keep Paris safe after all so I decided it would make life easier to become a P.I. It made it less complicated to explain my presence in delicate situations to the police, if necessary. And of course, sometimes I was able to help people before it's too late. Translation: before they were dead.

"Bonjour, my name is Sandrine", a female and desperate voice said. "I need your help. A friend of mine gave me your number and told me you would believe me, listen to me."

That's the way it mostly worked. By hearsay. I opened the office five years ago and started to hand out my card to those I helped on the street and told them to come by if they were in trouble. Magical trouble. Word spread and after establishing some connections and relations, folks came rushing in. Well, almost.

"Hello Sandrine. I'm listening, what's troubling you?"

"I have a boyfriend. We've been together for four years now. We want to get married. But last night he made this special candlelight dinner...said he needed to explain something." She snuffled, "He told me he's a wolf. A werewolf." She slowed down, probably expecting



me to cut in and tell her she should stop this nonsense, but I stayed silent, listening. “At first I thought it’s a joke, but...then he changed right in front of me. What do I do now? Will I become a werewolf, too? Can I marry a werewolf? Will he kill me? What’ll our babies look like? I have so many questions...”

And sometimes I ended up the agony aunt. Oh boy.

At seven I closed up to head out, patrolling. One last time I checked my weapons – everything was there; three throwing stars, my two Trident daggers and, of course, my sword Cutter which was safely tucked away in its dark brown leather harness strapped across my back.

The air was clear thanks to a light but steady breeze, even if dry and scented of summer and the occasional waft of perfume from people passing by. Cars drove past with their brakes screeching or the horn hooting and mopeds droned. The streets of Paris were crowded as usual but people were wearing less and laughing more, thanks to the heat and the holiday period. During the hot months of summer the city was cramped with tourists, to such an extent that it almost belonged only to them while the Parisians fled, escaping the stress and the noise, and enjoying their summer elsewhere.

Never taking a particular route I just followed my gut, my instinct. They would guide me to where I was needed.

We were living in interesting but also very dangerous times. We were living in times full of change. The Mayan calendar would stop in December but the reason for it was not the end of the world, like the humans wanted to believe. Not exactly, anyway. Let’s just say it would be the end of the world as we know it when Earth’s magnetic field would reverse. Human scientists wouldn’t know what to expect but the magical community knew it very well.

With the reversion of the magnetic field, the magical balance between realms would change, too. Our – at present – non-magical world would change into a magical one. There were transparent gates between realms and in December they would open up again and magic would flood the world once more. Californian’s trembling coast, the floods in Europe and the storms in Asia were only a few catastrophes that were a sign of the weakening of the gates and only a foretaste of what was to come.

After the last Turn some magical creatures got trapped or some just chose to stay here. That’s how we’ve still got shapeshifters, undead, witches, faeries and other stuff roaming the

Earth. Sometimes those gates between the worlds leaked and magic would flow into our realm, giving strength to those magical creatures.

In the 19th century chosen representatives of the magical creatures formed The Council, an institution established to govern the magical community in secrecy and located in the USA. They enacted laws everybody had to follow or otherwise would be punished, permitting a secret coexistence with humans. The three most important laws were quite simple:

*No one gets turned without the permission of the Council.*

*Every creature gone rogue was to be killed.*

*The existence of magic and otherworldly creatures was to be kept a secret.*

The last one was going to change very soon though.

The Turn would be like a bomb going off. Chaos would rule. Humans – now perfectly ordinary beings – might develop powers they've never even dreamed of, just because their grandmother might have been a witch or something like that. To avoid this kind of chaos or to at least contain it The Council was in negotiation with the human governments to on one hand prepare the humans for the things to come and on the other one to plan their coming-out.

I was walking through the Quartier Latin enjoying how the last rays of the evening sun envelopped the typical limestone buildings in a warm glow when I saw what seemed to be a couple leaning against a wall, making out in the shadows of a gap between houses. The man had his hands on each side of the woman, trapping her. He bent down, apparently kissing her throat. Every other passerby would probably turn away believing to interrupt some lovebirds. But not me. Goosebumps covered my skin and warned me. I saw behind this facade. It was all in the woman's eyes. She was terrified. Vampires could put their victims in a sort of trance, with just one glance, and then they would pull them somewhere private and feed upon them. That's what was going on here.

I unsheathed Cutter, being alert. "I'm the Patroness of Paris. May I see your license please?"

The vampire's head whipped around, his face distorted in a hiss and blood red eyes glowing in the night. Nope, I wouldn't find any license here. That I was sure of.

Vampires were bound by the Council's law to carry a license including a magical sensor that would tell how many humans they were allowed to drink from and had actually tapped. Still, feeding off humans was rarely possible. They mostly had to be satisfied with canned blood.

His red eyes had the same effect as a bright neon sign flashing “Bloodlust”. And for me it ranked right up there with “Jackpot”. Exactly what I needed as a warm-up.

I rotated my wrists swinging Cutter around, stretching my muscles, and smiled at the vamp. He growled back. And his gaze locked on my neck. I smiled, feeling the familiar weight of the silver locket engraved with a Celtic knot under my shirt. It would protect me as good as a cross would a Christian – the power depending only on true faith and not the deity.

“Looks like you should work on your seduction skills. Apparently she doesn’t want you.” I slowly approached them. “But lucky for you, I do. Come here, I won’t bite!”

The vampire charged me. In the last moment I sidestepped him so that he ran passed me. Quickly whirling around and wielding Cutter in a wide circular motion I severed his head and kicked his back from behind. His body fell to the ground, his head toppling down a split second later. Both turned instantly to dust.

I stared at the swirling ashes in disbelief. “Oh come on, I really expected better from you!”

Behind me the woman had snapped out of the magical hold and started crying. Not a loud wailing but those silent and heartbreaking tears. She sunk to the ground, her legs giving away.

I sheathed my sword and hurried to settle down beside her and taking her into my arms I murmured into her hair, “Shh, everything’s okay. You’re save now.”

We sat together till there were no more tears left within her.

Then she looked up at me, her eyes swollen from her tears. “Thank you, thank you so much. I don’t understand what just happened, but...thank you. I think you saved my life.”

“It was an honor.”

We got up and I lead her into the lights of a bigger side street. It was time to move on.

“Hey, who are you?” The woman asked, still trying to understand what had happened and working herself through the confusion.

I smiled at her and gave her my card. “If you ever need my help again. Was nice meeting you. I have to go now. Take care.”

I set forth towards the Jardin de Luxembourg without farther troubles – and without any sign of the rogue. Dammit. When I reached the gates of the park I looked around, checking the area. Since no one seemed to look or to care I swiftly climbed the fence and landed quietly on the soft green grass on the other side. Standing still for a moment I listened to the night. The distant hum of cars, a cricket singing in the park; nothing out of the ordinary,

and so I continued my way. As usual I was once again baffled how quickly the air had changed – no deafening noise but a reverent calm as if time passed more slowly here, no polluting fumes but the scents of flowers and green leaves instead.

As I drew nearer towards the grand stairways leading to the Senate building I caught a faint sound and took cover behind the trees, moving quickly but silently. Soft moonlight illuminated the great central fountain below – and the woman dancing in its waters. Buck naked. A faery, if the wings were anything to go by. I sighed, stood up and approached the faery. She was about my age, slender and had curls bouncing around an oval face, her pointed ears sticking out.

She caught sight of me and, stretching her arms out, she nearly begged, “Come! Come dance with me.”

The woman was obviously high on faery dust. It happened from time to time. Faeries needed to dust flowers and trees and stuff to make them grow and blossom. But if they didn’t get the golden colored dust out of their system it would accumulate. The result? Well, they might end up dancing naked in a fountain before the senate in the middle of Paris. That’s why most faeries preferred life in the country, by the way.

It would take a while for her to calm down judging from the glittery cloud swirling around her and making her glow like a firefly. I closed my eyes and drew in the energy of the dust flying around us and hoped I had enough time to take care of the delicate faery situation at hand.

I kicked my shoes off and stepped into the fountain. The water was cool and refreshing after a hot summer day. “What’s your name?”

“Pauline, and yours?”

“Hi Pauline, I’m Maiwenn.”

“Oh, that’s a beautiful name and you’re beautiful, too.” She must be delirious. “Like an Amazon...” she bounced around, flashing her breasts at me. “Dance with me, please!”

Yep, delirious.

I approached her to take her hand. “I’m sorry Pauline!” I threw a golden brown powder in front of her face as she breathed in, and caught her as she fell. It wouldn’t hurt her. The sleeping powder was mainly made out of valerian root mixed with a little magic. It just knocked her out long enough for me to bring her to safety.

I wrapped her up in my jacket and carried her as fast as possible to my apartment clouding us in fog so we couldn’t be seen. At home I laid her onto the couch for a while,

preparing a bed in one of the other rooms in the mean time. When everything was ready I tucked her in.

I would have liked to crawl into my bed too, but had this feeling that the patrol wasn't done for tonight so I headed out again.

The streets were rather quiet with only the distant and tidal hum of cars, air conditions and electricity pumping through the city's veins. The evening was warm, the air stagnant, but there was a hint of refreshing music in it. People, illuminated by streetlights and colorful neon signs, on their search for a next drink, a next dance or a next flirt passed me by, and I kept going, watching for vampires or other shadows of the dark. Then, with a new slowly rising wind came the smell of blood. And death. Not far away.

Five mutilated bodies were lying in an alley not far from my apartment. Surprisingly, they were naked. Shapeshifters, who had changed back to their human form after death?

I was used to seeing this stuff but I sure as hell would never get used to the feeling of loss and failure.

Pushing away those negative thoughts since the situation at hand needed my full attention I pulled out my cell, prayed for the lost souls and started taking pictures of the crime scene. After that was done I crouched down and I got out a small plastic bag and carefully filled it with a sample of the bundle of fur that seemed to have been rather deliberately placed between the bodies. Standing up again I sealed it and tucked it into the waist bag I carried around my hips.

Next step was the clean-up. Of course, I had some acid with me but it was not nearly enough to make five bodies disappear. Special situations needed special treatment and for this one I needed help. Lucky me, I knew the right guy for this. Well, actually he was the only one I could depend on with such a case so hopefully he would hold his stomach.

I pushed the button for speed-dial on my phone. Mathieu Ardent was a human, or almost, and a friend of mine. We had met three years ago while I had been on the pursuit of an exceptionally nasty vampire, who had tried to open his own personal blood bank by stocking anything that walks on two feet in a hidden basement – among them Mathieu. He had been sixteen at that time, and we have been close friends ever since. In such a way that more often than not I feel like the bigger sister running after her baby brother.

Mathieu answered after the second ring, "Allô?"

I was running out of time, so I kept things simple. "Salut, I need your help!"

Understanding, he sighed. "How much do you need this time?"

I looked over the bodies. “Hmm, actually a lot, maybe some liters will do.”

“Wha...What? What did you do?”

“Me? I didn’t do anything. I just stumbled over five dead shapeshifters during my patrol. I need you ASAP. Passage Main d’Or.” I hung up.

Mathieu would only need a couple of minutes to find me since he was living nearby. I crouched down again to take a good look at the wounds. Broken limbs. What looked like to be red bruises tinged with gray; silver poisoning. And some deep wounds, probably caused by a very sharp tool; how strange. Their heads were cut off, to ensure they’d really stay dead.

Then, for the first time, after I rolled a body over I noticed that it had an intriguing symbol burned onto the chest. What the hell? Checking the others I came up with five different symbols showing a wolf, a cross, wings, a cat and a shape looking rather like a Halloween ghost costume. Examining all of them very closely I knew this one was big trouble.

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## THE HUNT IS ON

### ONE

*Paris, France*

*December 2012*

Lightning struck, splitting a tree that was a little too close for comfort. Immediately another blinding flash followed to the right. The noise of tearing wood and cracking thunder deafening, and the scent of ozone was thick in the air.

The rogue vampire I had been following cowered, frantically searching the sky with glowing red eyes as if frightened he might be grilled next - and quickly decided to take off. Running for his life and obviously more terrified of the capricious weather than at the idea of being offed by the Patroness of Paris. Go figure. He wasn't the first, and if this kept up I would have to put in more training sessions to keep in shape.

But that's what it was like these days. If it had started to rain frogs, I wouldn't have been surprised. I snorted, shaking my head as I remembered the words of the US president when he had talked to the citizens of the world about the upcoming Turn. 'We live in interesting times, full of change', he'd said. Really nice way of sugarcoating impending doom.

I looked at the pitch-black sky above me that was boiling with a rage and flaring with violet-blue forks of lightning, and which seemed even more eerily as it stood in stark contrast with the orange halos coming from the streetlamps, flooding the otherwise dark and empty street below.

The Turn, the earth's shift into becoming a place of magic, was only three weeks ahead and mother earth was either very thrilled or annoyed about it. Really hard to tell. The weather was a major force and going haywire. Storms, rain, or an incredibly warm sun – it all could change in the blink of an eye. Three days ago a tornado, which was a rare thing on the European continent to begin with, had nuked an entire small town in the north of France. And it hadn't been just a whirlwind, but a full-blown F5. The people had been totally unprepared and not forewarned.

It wasn't just the weather, though. Earth itself was in an uproar. The ground trembled all around the world, in California and the usual spots, but also places where no plates were tectonically active, like some parts of Europe, Russia and the heart of North America.



Tsunamis and lava rolled over land, and if the ash clouds were anything to go by, air traffic was about to become a thing of the past. Interesting times indeed.

I was finishing up my daily, or rather nightly, patrol through Paris a little earlier than usual, since there had been annoyingly little for me to do. The steady buzz of cars that never completely faded away had dimmed, and the streets were empty except for those searching oblivion at the bottom of their glass. Just like the other nights. One would have expected quite the contrary, but no, it seemed that even the magical creatures had holed up, waiting for the Turn and chaos to pass. Well, I certainly wouldn't complain, though I had to admit it somehow made me restless and edgy. In my experience such draughts ended with a big, messy *boom*.

Which made me think of the letter I had received a week ago. It had been from the police. No one liked to get letters from the police and I wasn't an exception, especially if the letter was an invitation. Tomorrow the new special unit investigating magic-related crimes was to be officially introduced. And I was invited.

The job of leading that unit had been offered to me after the Council had come out of hiding and explained the facts of magical life to the human governments and other higher institutions. But I had politely declined since I was quite happy in my position as a private detective and had a long and not so good history with Paris' finest that all too often had ended with me twiddling my thumbs behind bars.

I was pretty sure I wasn't the only one invited, and I doubted that the rest of the police liked the idea of having the Parisian leaders of the two biggest magical factions in one place at the same time given the fact that they didn't like each other that much. It made me curious indeed to see who had taken on the job of leading that new unit. The invitation was either a proof of stupidity or cunning.

The sky flashed white and thunder boomed, leaving no place for any other sound. Heavy rain started to fall. The last souls that had had the courage to walk these streets scattered away, hiding out or giving up. I liked the rain, the roar of it.

Drenched I reached my building, punched in the security code and got in, where I shook myself like a dog before heading up the stairs to the sixth floor. As quietly as possible I opened the door and got inside, slipping out of my coat before noticing the flickering blue light coming from the TV in the living room.

When I walked into the room, I found Pauline snuggled up on the couch with my orange tiger-trapped-in-the-body-of-a-cat Malo beside her. "Hi, already back? Calm out there, I take it?"

Pauline was a German faery with violet eyes, flaxen curls and pointed ears. She was also my roommate and friend. “Yeah, just like the other nights. What are you watching?”

“Pretty Woman.”

As she continued to watch the movie, I sat down beside her, stroking a happy Malo under his chin, and studied her. We had met three months ago while I was patrolling the *Jardin de Luxembourg* where I had found her dancing naked in the fountain before the Senate building. I had been nearly dead broke, Pauline more or less homeless thanks to some unfaithful jerk, and so it had seemed logical and kind of natural to start apartment-sharing right the next day. And however crazy Pauline seemed to be on a first glance, there was more to her, a kindness and warmth that made me feel grateful for letting the fresh breeze (tornado, cough) she personified into my life. My eyes drifted to her lavender wings that still seemed a little too thin and delicate, but had finally reached their usual size after a mad scientist had ripped them out a few months back. My stomach clenched. Pauline might not see it that way, but I knew that it was my fault. He had mistaken her for me.

“I don’t need a knight. I just want the right one, he’ll do just fine.”

My gaze drifted back to the TV to see Richard Gere swinging his umbrella instead of a sword.

“You’ll find him. I’ll go get some sleep, tomorrow might be interesting.”

Pauline looked up, grinning. “The meeting, right. You have to tell me all about it when you get back.”

“Will do. Good night.”

The walls were cold, white tiles. It stank of fear and death, covered by the sharp smell of disinfectant. Even behind closed eyes the light was blinding. I was cold. I knew I lay on a steal operating table in the lab.

“You should have been there,” a hard voice accused.

My eyes snapped open and focused on Pauline. Pauline, cut and probed, with blood running from her back where her wings should have been and along her legs. “They wanted you, not me. You should have been in your office, not me. Look what they did to me.”

The leather straps around my wrists and chest snapped tight, making it hard to breathe. Silent tears, hot against my cold skin, ran down my face. I couldn’t breathe.

The next moment I was in a dark room, where a hooded figure stood in front of an altar. The priest I hadn’t been able to save. The man I had killed. His only mistakes had been

ignorance and the fear of change, both of which had turned into madness when a god had taken his mind prisoner.

But the madness was gone now and the hooded figure turning to face me was only human. A kind man I had met in a church, with warm yet painfully sad eyes. “You could have saved me. There must have been another way.”

The pain was back in my chest, a heavy weight. I couldn’t breathe and I couldn’t cry. I was alone.

“You failed. You will fail again.”

Suddenly cruel, feminine laughter rang out, echoing from the walls and rising to a piercing cacophony. Louder and louder, inhuman. I covered my ears that felt like bursting, but to no avail.

I woke up, an unvoiced scream in my throat and covered in cold sweat. It wasn’t the first time I had this dream, and I didn’t need a shrink to understand what was going on inside my head.

It was difficult to remember the ones you saved, when you kept seeing those you couldn’t, wanting to change that one moment it went wrong. Like me being in the office, instead of Pauline.

I rubbed my face and just sat in my bed for a moment, darkness surrounding me. Then, with a sigh, I threw the covers to the side and pulled on my sweats, before grabbing my sneakers. Dawn was hours away but I knew sleep wouldn’t come again and didn’t like the idea of wasting time. So I would use it to keep me in shape, and to keep myself out of my head. To hell with the beauty sleep and the dark circles under my eyes.

Warm rays of sunlight had finally made their way through the thick cover of dark clouds and patches of an icy blue sky peeped through here and there. The invitation had said to come to the police station in the 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissement which was just a stone’s throw away from my apartment. Nevertheless I enjoyed the sun on my face and the scent of rain in the air as the streets and sidewalks slowly dried.

The police station was nothing fancy, neither was the alley where it was situated. I really think their favorite color was gray, and it started at the outside. Rain and exhaust fumes painted walls that were supposed to be the color of sand in an imitation of the sandstone that was so typical for Paris and steel-gray bars blocked the view, inside and out.

Suddenly a passing shadow caught my attention. I looked up and saw a breathtaking silhouette with spread wings against the clear blue sky. A woman in the street noticed it too

and ran away, her eyes wide in horror. I only sighed and waited for the shadow to land beside me.

Gabin was a tall, sharp featured raven and had blue-black hair that, when rays of the sun or moonlight hit just right, was streaked with a subtle green. The magnificent wings spreading from his back were made out of feathers that held the same play of colors.

I chided him, though I couldn't hide a smile, "Was that drama really necessary? What about keeping a low profile for the fragile humans' sake?"

He rolled his eyes. Gray eyes that held shadows, a quiet sadness that never really went away even when he smiled. "That from the woman who has a sword strapped onto her back."

"At least they don't *know* that, since they can't see it."

"Kylian didn't want me to be late so there was no other way."

Kylian Tremaine, the Council's former assassin had been sent to help me out a few months back and had ended up killing and then taking the place of the *Chef de la Meute*, the leader of the Parisian shapeshifter pack. Technically and biologically Gabin wasn't a shapeshifter, but he could change into a nine feet tall battle version of a raven and therefore he was living with them. In contrast to shapeshifters, who could change into complete human shapes, the pair of giant and angelic wings always stayed on his back, never disappearing whichever form he took.

"So you drew the short straw, or what?"

"The boss just gave it to me, to save us both the time and trouble."

At some times it still staggered me how easy and normal it was to talk with him. For someone who only came into existence less than a year ago he certainly knew how to adapt and fit just right in.

I laughed drily, "Of course he did. Well, shall we go inside?"

The police stations in Paris seemed to be either made out of a depressive gray cloud, or were a weird and failed attempt to reflect modernism and design. This one belonged somewhere in between, with touches of color that some might call art but that weren't capable of distracting from the obvious: gray. In the end it was just another police station and the people working here either liked their job too much or not at all. But all of them were a lot heavier armed than usual, thanks to the police forces and army working together and planning on how to retain the pre-Turn panic.

Television and radio were endlessly talking about The Turn, of the magic breaking through and of the things to come. Totally ordinary humans, little grandmas or nerds or whoever, might suddenly be able to set people on fire or grow wings, everything imagination

could come up with and more would be possible. The Council and the governments and other human institution could talk about preparations all they wanted, but once the magic hit people in this world would panic. Even if it were just a few, panic was like a nasty virus, if we were out of luck, it could spread in epidemical proportions.

Gabin and I didn't go unnoticed. There were careful stares and watchful glances out of the corner of the eye. The last time I visited I stayed the night, so walking up to the reception desk instead of coming in handcuffed through the back door felt rather refreshing. We made the woman behind the desk jump as she looked up at us. Though I was sure it was mostly Gabin's fault. I looked normal, sleep-deprived maybe but normal none the less. He was the one with the wings.

Unfazed he pulled out the letter that held his invitation and so did I, grateful we weren't shot on the spot.

Gabin tried the charming smile he must have discovered was a lethal weapon against everything female. It worked. "Gabin Corbeau, acting in place of Kylian Tremaine the *Chef de la Meute*."

Though unseen and ignored I added, "And Maiwenn Cadic, Patroness of Paris, acting for myself."

She didn't even take her eyes off the yummy raven beside me to study the invitations. "Of course. Commandant Moulin awaits you upstairs. Second floor, third door on your right."

"Thanks."

We took the stairs and followed the lady's directions.

The room was nothing special, neither were the four desks occupying it, but managed to tell a long story about the importance and priority attached to the new unit inside the police ranking. Commandant Moulin was easy to make out; not because of the uniform but rather because of his presence. He looked like a strong and capable man who hadn't let his desk job affect his shape. The face was friendly and yet subtly commanding.

With two quick strides he stood in front of us. Extending his hand he said, "Miss Cadic, nice to finally meet you."

I shook the hand that was offered. "Thank you."

Moulin's attention shifted towards the man beside me. His eyes revealed no reaction or thought, neither about the man nor the creature in front of him. "I take it Kylian Tremaine was held up elsewhere?"

Gabin nodded, "Yes, unfortunately."

So despite the bubbling hormones the woman from the reception desk had managed to get the information about the change of plans, or rather invitees, to the Commandant before we had even entered the room.

A woman stepped forward to stand beside Moulin. Olive-skinned, as if dusted with the gold of setting sunlight, black hair cut short in a pixie style and whiskey-colored eyes that didn't bother to hide the lethal cat she was. She seemed geared up for whatever was to come, her stance tough; both of which revealed that to her being a cop came before being a shapeshifter. Still, I was more than mildly impressed that the police was for once smart enough to choose a magical creature as head of their new unit.

“May I introduce *Inspecteur* Anouk Vigeur to you? She will be leading this unit.”

She nodded in greeting and took her cue. “Which brings us to why we are here. I invited you both since I've heard the Pack and the Patroness worked together before, and so I assumed you wouldn't bite each other's heads off.”

I shrugged. “Actually, it depends on the head.”

Her gaze swept towards Gabin, who hurried to smooth the waters like the gentleman he was. “She's fine with mine, though.”

Vigneur pulled up an eyebrow and looked at us another moment, then said, “Please, let's sit down.”

Behind her stood seven chairs arranged in a circle. Vigneur motioned towards those already taken by three men. “My colleagues, Agents Moreau, Rodriguez and Perrin.”

As I sat down I studied the three men. Like Vigneur they were dressed in plain clothes. Perrin was a willowy, young cop, who appeared eager on satisfying and impressing his superiors, and human. So was bald and brawny Rodriguez, though a lot more experienced and with a healthy dose of distrust in his brown eyes. Moreau however, dark-skinned with intelligent eyes, had something about him, what I couldn't say, but I was sure he wasn't human.

Instead of taking a chair like everybody else *Inspecteur* Vigneur leaned against her desk, gaining everyone's attention. “The magical community has known about what is going on for some time now. Humans, however, have been quite brutally pulled out of the dark and into the light to face some sudden changes. They have to live with the fact that a magical shift, which they hardly understand to begin with, is coming their way *and* they have to accept that their monsters from movies and legends are real. Let's be honest, it's quite a load to deal with. This unit was put together not only to facilitate the transit that is necessary due to the recent revelations and to maintain order, but also to broaden our knowledge about the magical

community. Knowledge is the key to understanding, which in turn is key to a peaceful coexistence.”

The whole last part was essentially code for ‘everything will be reported’. I had expected that much, but it didn’t mean I liked it. There was stuff humans were better off not knowing – lest we burst their fairy tale bubbles, again.

Vigueur continued, “I hope we will agree on some of these points and therefore will find some mutual footing. Eventually there might come a situation where a close collaboration will not only be necessary but vital.”

I said, “Since there are only seven of us, I take it that not *all* of us agree on that.”

“If you’re referring to Madame Lilith also known as the Queen of the Undead, then you’re right. She was offered two invitations, one for a private meeting and one to this. Both were declined.”

I snorted, “Of course. Lilith sees herself being above such mundane things as law and order or even making allies.”

“Now, I think the tone isn’t necessary, and you should know that we carry silver bullets,” Agent Rodriguez calmly cut in.

Unruffled I studied him. “Thanks for letting me know, but I was just stating the truth. And by the way, I couldn’t care less what kind of metal the bullet is made of that rips through my vital parts. It would hurt like hell no matter what.”

Vigueur explained, “I think what Miss Cadic wanted to say was that Madame Lilith doesn’t see us or the human population as important enough to participate in this meeting.”

Unfortunately I had the feeling that she ranged Kylian on the same level even though he had sent Gabin in his place.

“Good to hear that for once the police was clever enough to hire a magical creature for this one,” Viviane, said as soon as I got home and brought her and Pauline up to date.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Viviane, the mysterious Lady of the Lake, my mother figure, friend and tutor was fifty-some and had short auburn hair showing streaks of white and a low, husky but warm voice. At the moment she was busy making a salad in my kitchen, while Pauline fried chicken breasts in a pan.

I started to set the table for us, which was actually a counter surrounded by high stools that separated the kitchen and living room areas. “She’s clever too, and knows that Lilith pegged her as biased, given that she’s a shifter.”

Viviane snorted, “Whatever creature they would have chosen, Lilith would always have found something to criticize and used it as an excuse for being uncooperative and a general pain in the ass.”

“What do you think Pauline?”

“For now it seems to me you’re the one that got the most out of it. Someone whose ready to cooperate with you and not eager on taking you in.”

I smiled. “You’re right. The police and I on something close to equal footing, hell, if that isn’t worth celebrating.” With that thought in mind I grabbed a bottle of red wine from the rack and opened it. “But enough of my business, how’s yours doing Pauline?”

When Pauline had moved in she had told me that she wanted to open up a flower shop. The idea was perfect since she would be able to control her fairy nature thanks to dusting the flowers. All that had stood in the way had been the renovation of the first floor.

Viviane served the salad, which Pauline topped off with the chicken breasts. She grinned at me when we all sat down.

“Well, we might have several events worth celebrating. I’m happy to announce that *Une conte de Fée* opens in a week.”

“Yay!” I sprang from my stool to hug Pauline, all the while giggling and cheering. “That is great. Though I have to warn you, I think Viviane and I won’t be able to top that birthday present.”

Pauline smiled sweetly, “I’ve all I need right here. Oh, by the way I thought you’d be happy that you can go take care of your paperwork. You said you weren’t able to do them before with all the noise and stuff.”

My smile crumbled at the same time as Viviane and Pauline burst out laughing. “Gee, thanks. How considerate of you to remind me.”

My office was painted in pale amber and dominated by an old, wooden desk. The wall behind it was covered with stereotypical rows of filing cabinets in an attempt to make it look like a normal investigative agency and to reassure clients. A big window and a glassed door offered ample light and for interested pedestrians to give free rein to their curiosity. I put down my laptop on the desk, and settling down into my chair I enjoyed the heavenly coffee. The silence surrounding me was deafening now that all the workers and their sounds were gone.

I thought about Pauline’s shop and her upcoming birthday. Some people might wonder why we continued to think of tomorrow, of the future, when there was a big fat magical shift



in front of us that the Mayans had marked as the end of the world. The thing was that this wasn't the first time it happened, and so far we all had survived – humans and magical creatures alike. So we would plan and celebrate as we well should.

Once again my mind drifted back to *Inspecteur* Vigeur and Commandant Moulin who had offered her job to me. But for the life of me, I liked being my own boss too much. Saints Investigation was mine, and even with the police I'd be stuck with paperwork anyway, so I could just as well stay here. With a sigh and a last sip from my coffee I finally set out to attack the giant stack of papers in front of me.

The stack of paper had narrowed down about two thirds to reach its usual height when a knock sounded at the door. The man that entered looked carefully around before letting his gaze settle on me. He was in his mid-thirties and in good shape. And obviously he wasn't a hundred percent sure whether he was at the right address.

I stood and went around my desk to greet him, extending my hand. "*Bonjour*, my name is Maiwenn Cadic. Would you like to sit down?"

After another sweep of the room he nodded and sat.

"Can I offer you anything, a cup of coffee maybe?"

He cleared his throat. "No, thank you."

I went back behind the desk and sat down too. "How can I help you, *Monsieur* -?"  
"Gauthier."

I gave my best, most reassuring smile, like you would a child when it made his first steps towards you. "*Monsieur Gauthier*, what I can I do for you?"

The dam broke. "They wouldn't help me. But she wouldn't run, you understand? She wouldn't do that to me. But they said they won't do it. Because of this thing, the Turn, coming up and so. That there are a lot of people disappearing, or hightailing it as they called it." He sighed, trying to gather himself. "I'm sorry."

I reached out to touch his hand. "It's alright. Take your time." My mind was used to such reactions from clients and quickly translated. A woman he knew, probably his wife given the gold band on his finger, had gone missing and the police wouldn't help him. I spoke softly but determined on getting the information I needed to help him, "Your wife is missing?"

He nodded.

"Can you tell me more about her? About what happened?"

He took a deep breath. "Her name's Sophie. She's my wife. She went missing. Didn't come home after work."

“When was that, *Monsieur* Gauthier?”

“Two days ago.” For the first time his eyes looked at me, really seeing me as he watched me taking notes. “So you believe me, then? That she didn’t just run off?”

In these times a lot of people ran. I squeezed his hand. “We will find out.”

## TWO

It was cold outside, and it was already getting dark. I liked that about winter; this open, natural and not oppressive kind of darkness. Funny thing given the fact that I protected the *City of Lights* that really lived up to its name in the winter. Soft lights illuminated the streets, vibrant ones decorated the houses and buildings and shop windows were colorfully dressed – at least where inhabitants or owners hadn’t left. Scents of cinnamon, burned wood and warm dinner wafted out of the cafés and floated on the cold, nightly breeze. The city’s magic was still there though.

Christmas wasn’t far. I inhaled a deep breath of fresh air and smiled. Snow wasn’t far either. I enjoyed watching my breath come back out of my mouth as small, foggy clouds. Cutter, my beloved sword was strapped across my back but not visible in the leather sheath thanks to its own magic, and I felt the familiar weight of my emergency bag around my hips. Pulling up the collar of my coat against the cold I began my patrol and headed north-west.

A group of four dark and tall men caught my eye when I was patrolling in the eighteenth arrondissement, on my way towards Montmartre. Vampires. They mostly dressed all alike, mainly in black leather. Their skin was pale and nearly white, and nicely accentuated by their choice of wardrobe and their red, pouty lips. They believed the stark contrast and tragic aura made them the most mysterious creatures of the night. Right, keep on dreaming.

Their leader had long, raven black hair and wore a dark, long and floating black leather coat – his trademark – and was one of the few who successfully pulled off the mysterious thing. Ah, pain-in-the-ass Valère.

I approached them slowly but unimpressed, “Hello guys.”

Valère stepped a little forward from the group and acknowledged me with a little bow of his head.

“Does this feel like a bad déjà-vu to you, too? What are you doing top ground?” I wanted to know since vampires lived underground with Lilith, the Queen of the Undead, in their Den.

“Can’t tell you”, Valère replied and immediately held up his pale hand. “Before you pull this whole I’m-the-Patroness-and-demand-answers shit I’ll tell you that we’re here under the Queen’s orders. Her idea, her reasons. So go ask her.”

Weird. Two things were off. One, Valère had answered my question without our usual battle of wills. Two, he’d said the truth. And Lilith, the Queen of the Undead only ordered her best slayers to go top ground if she feared for her Den’s safety. Okay, that were three things. Even more disturbing.

What was going on? Ask her about it...I’d like to avoid that. Inside the city walls the vampires had the majority, but they also had the highest number of rogues, which were magical creatures that had become crazy slaves to bloodlust since it turned out that the sweet, coppery taste of blood was very addictive. So I killed them a lot, their rogues. It was the law and my job. Still it was reason enough for Lilith to hate my guts. And the fact that she felt it whenever one of her babies went dust-to-dust wasn’t helping either. I needed a little, okay, a lot more reasons and questions to go talk to her.

I nodded, “Okay. Move on, then,” and continued my way, along the foot of Montmartre, across the dark cemetery, heading west.

After killing another blood-crazed vampire on my way through the city – see, at this rate I’d never be on Lilith’s good side – I checked once again the places where my missing persons had been last seen, which had added up to two now. But I found nothing new. There was nothing I might have missed before. Well, at least nothing my *eyes* could have missed. I was half witch and therefore not gifted with a very sensitive sense of smell, unlike a shapeshifter. Maybe I could ask *Inspecteur* Vigeur to lend me hers.

And no, this was not a way to avoid Kylian, who had kissed me brainless, before practically disappearing without saying so much as a goodbye the last time we’ve met. Absolutely not. Really. Asking Vigeur would be a sign of good will, of agreeing that we all could benefit from a good collaboration. And a possibility to find out more about her. So...no avoiding. I was just being practical.

With that thought in mind I pulled out my cell and punched in her number.

Twenty minutes later we met in a café nearby where I had gone to warm up while waiting. *Inspecteur* Anouk Vigeur didn’t look at all happy as she found me and made her way to the table. Before sitting down she took off her coat, revealing black jeans and a comfy shirt that said ‘Only dogs have owners, cats have staff’.

I didn’t comment on it, at least not verbally though my eyes apparently did a good job at it. The lethal glare answering had me biting my lip to hide the laughter.

She growled, with more grouch than anger behind it. "It's my night off."

I held up my hands in a common gesture of truce. "Hey, I've a cat. I happen to know the saying is true. Just kinda funny to see it on the shirt of a feline shifter who commands an investigative unit."

Another mock killing glance. "You'd better tell me why I'm here and not stretching out on my couch right now."

I quickly clued her in on my two missing persons, and her demeanor changed from grumpy to being all ears, the cop's curiosity stirring.

Resting her arms on the table she asked, "When were they last seen?"

"Madame Gauthier didn't come home from work, an art shop not far from here, three nights ago. And Monsieur Dessus, a tourist slash visitor, went out of his hotel near *Gare du Nord* to get another bottle of wine to share with his mistress last evening and never came back." Leaning forward I also told her about Monsieur Gauthier's failed attempt to get the police involved. "They think she ran off."

"It happens, Cadic. People react differently. Some are just sitting around waiting to die. Others are doing whatever will give them the impression of dying happily, which sometimes means they disappear to reappear in the arms of their high school sweetheart or some such. Only a few have listened and actually understood that this happened before and that our chances of survival aren't that bad."

"Monsieur Gauthier *was* her high school sweetheart."

"Maybe she wanted a change then, fearing she might have missed out on something."

I leaned back in my seat, studying her. "But you don't believe that, and neither do I."

She smiled sadly, "You're right, I don't." Vigeur expelled a deep breath. "Both disappeared in the same area, maybe just a few streets away from each other for all we know, and in the evening. Already too many points in common for my liking. Let's go have a look."

She got up from her seat, grabbing for her coat when I said, "I already did that." I opened the small bag around my hips and pulled out two sealed plastic bags, one filled with a lock of brown hair and the other with a piece of fabric. Smiling sweetly I added, "Thought you could help me with the sniff."

"Why do I suddenly feel like a search dog?" Vigeur muttered, but snatched the bags anyway.

The black leopard strolled silently along the sidewalk, only stopping to scent the air or the ground, its gait fluid and lethal, while I was following a few steps behind and carrying the *Inspecteur*'s clothes.

"Just walking my cat," I muttered under my breath.

We had started at the hotel where Monsieur Dessus had last been seen, since his trail would be the freshest of the two missing. For once even the weather was on our side; it was damp and it hadn't rained in the last thirty-six hours but most importantly the wind, our biggest enemy, had settled. Ideal conditions. I wasn't able to track scent, but I had read about it and I had seen shapeshifters in action. Scents dispersed in the wind but would cling for dear life to shady areas and vegetation, to moisture to be exact, so Anouk's best chances weren't exactly the sidewalk but the shadows, corners, gutters and trees and shrubs planted along it.

As I looked at the sky I could even make out a few stars and a smile touched my lips. Whatever might happen, those stars would be there; even the Turn couldn't change that. I hoped others would find comfort in that as well.

I grew up knowing that the magic left on Earth was only residual but that one day it would be back full force. So I wondered how it would be growing up thinking that the world had nothing more to it than was visible. How would it feel like now, suddenly knowing what was out there and having a family to protect – without the slightest idea as to how to do it? It was true, humans had a lot on their plate.

Anouk was right, there were those who disappeared without a word or explanation, too focused on running, on erasing the regrets or fulfilling the dreams they have.

But my missing persons? They didn't fit the bill. I had checked their financials and nothing had seemed out of the ordinary, except that no withdrawals or purchases had been made since they went missing. Neither of them showed the behavior or had the cash on them that would support the runaway theory. But most of all it was my gut telling me that these two didn't go voluntarily.

The black leopard hissed and suddenly I was ripped out of my thoughts. For one moment my senses sharpened – the colors, scents and sounds became more intense and through the sheath across my back I could feel Cutter warming. My whole body seemed to vibrate with... magic, I realized. It was gone as quickly as it had come.

Breathing heavily as if I'd run a marathon – and won – I looked at Anouk who had changed back into her human form.

Panting she cursed. "What the hell?"

I tossed her the clothes, which she hurried to put on. “I think we just got a taste of things to come. The gates leak.”

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## About the Author

Natalie Herzer is a twenty-six year old indie author living in France. Much like her travel bug, the love for words has always been there, and after "rewriting" some books in her head she finally decided to give it a shot and to write her own.

She is the author of *The Patroness*, an urban-fantasy series, and *Snapshots*, a collection of short stories.

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