

DIFFERENT

A Manon Maxim novel.

(original title: ANDERS, Een Manon Maxim roman)

(Translator from Dutch: Ester Magis)

1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No problem, Manon. Make yourself comfortable.'

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

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

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

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

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

'Light one up than.'

He shakes his head heavily.

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

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

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

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

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

I sink deeper into my chair and heave a sigh.

'Difficult task?' Tony asks me.

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

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

'Probably a devil.'

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

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

'Than he must have had enough drinks.'

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

'What did he do?'

For a while, I look at him incomprehensively.

'That devil in New York.'

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

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

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

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

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

Tony nods. ‘Rightly so.’

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

I stand up. ‘I’ll get some coffee.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, that's me.'

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

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

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

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'My name is Selena,' the woman says.

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

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

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

'Did he train you?' I ask.

'Who? Ben?'

I nod.

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

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

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

'Probably.'

‘Just what I thought.’

I startle when Selena hoots loudly.

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

‘A vampire could do that too.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thanks a lot, goat!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Showtime.

I ring at the door.

3.

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

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

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

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

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

Kudos for you, Diedie.

'No hawkers,' he finally lisps.

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

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

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

'I don't have money inside.'

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

I put a step forward.

'Tomorrow,' he says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You're name isn't Sarah, is it.'

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

'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' I turn the tables.

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

'Okay, good deal.'

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

Good little devil.

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

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

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

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

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

'You're a clever boy.'

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

'What are you doing here?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What are you talking about?'

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

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

Damn it, my pistol arm is getting tired.

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

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

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

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

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

When will he finally get he can’t win?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Why?’

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

‘Drugs?’

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

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

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

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

‘Five seconds.’

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

‘As soon as possible.’

He nods heavily. ‘As soon as possible.’

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

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

‘Without the sausage.’

‘Yeah yeah.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I’ll be there in one hour.’

‘Don’t rush yourself, I’m hungry.’

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

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

4.

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

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

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

'Are you ready? It smells in here.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Now I'm ready.'

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

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

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

‘How did it go?’

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

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

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

‘Jabar?’

She nods. ‘Than Jabar will be satisfied.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Somewhere private and comfortable.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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