

Witches' Manor

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Joseph Roelands

****WARNING****

Dear reader,

This novel was originally written in Dutch as *Heksenburcht*.

It was never intended to be published in English.

However, after the author was asked for a translation,
he translated it himself.

This translation has not been professionally edited.

Please enjoy the story, and forgive any typos or awkward phrasing.

J.R.

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1 paradise

Friday, June 5th

The three girls are making a hellish racket in the large jacuzzi on this balcony. Erica has tried to warn her daughter a few times already, but with my two involved, that is a lost cause. I have to admit, one of those two is my wife. She loves being just as crazy and fanatical as the two fourteen-year-old friends.

'Have you heard something new from Lucio or the other two?' my loyal secretary asks.

I tell her that the three of them will finally come back from Egypt on Monday. I am happy that Luna and I decided to leave it all to them and withdraw from publicity ourselves. Our names are mentioned every now and then in magazine articles that my grandfather sends me on a regular basis. The focus, however, remains on the prince, his sister, and her bride. He also wrote that we can expect a large compensation from the Egyptian government, who are ecstatic about the discoveries we made and have been very generous with their rewards.

Luna sits down with us, dripping in her bikini, and gives me a wet kiss. 'I'm looking forward to spending some more time with your mother,' she says, immediately adding that our company over the past week has certainly not been any less welcome or entertaining.

Erica laughs. They flew back to Rome with us and stayed at our place for a week, which gave her the opportunity to show us everything she bought for the new apartment herself. It has truly become more homely and warmer than when we spent one night here, some four weeks ago. It has not yet been completely finished, but I am sure it will all be perfect in the end. They'll fly back on Sunday, and at the airport we will switch them for my mother who, after our wedding in Cairo, first flew back home to Rotterdam with my father.

We were able to chat a bit on the wedding day itself, of course, but not nearly in enough detail, in the eyes of my nosy mother. So she decided to come over for a week. There are enough rooms here to accommodate her, even though she will have to share a bathroom with Nefret, located between their two bedrooms. Erica and her daughter are doing that as well now, and it works just fine.

The two girls have really grown fond of each other, and our Egyptian foster daughter has even made plans to visit the Netherlands for a week before the end of the summer.

Erica fetched the white wine from inside to fill up the glasses for Luna and me. My love has her phone in her hand already again, constantly chatting with our three friends in Cairo. She doesn't mind at all that the two have a lot of time with the prince, though she also doesn't hide the fact that she thinks it is far overdue for our prince to spend time with his other two brides and give them some much-needed, longed-for attention. Elena and Nailah regularly tease her with naughty remarks or raunchy pictures.

My assistant has figured out by now that I'm in a special five-way relationship, and is most of all happy about how it has changed me personally. Especially my relationship with her and her daughter has greatly improved, just as it has with my mother.

My father is happy for me too, admitting, though, that he sometimes misses his old Juliette, who was just as business-tough as he is. He was always proud when his daughter fought hard as our shipping company's lawyer. He does realize, however, that I am far happier now than I was back then.

'Did you tell her already?' my Luna asks teasingly, knowing very well that this is not the case. I stick out my tongue and say I will get to that.

Erica, who doesn't know it is about her, has witnessed this teasing from my young wife for a few days already and always has to smile. She did ask me twice what it was. I then just shook my head and didn't answer her question. This time she doesn't ask anything, apart from whether we know what we want for dinner this evening. She spoiled us a few times with excellent home-cooked meals. Erica, however, is on holiday too, so I propose we go to a restaurant with the five of us.

Luna immediately agrees and says the girls will be given the choice, as long as it is not fast food. She walks over to ask them. Of course, the two first pull her back into the jacuzzi again.

Erica and I watch the playing trio, sitting side by side. When they are wild like this, there is barely any difference between my twenty-three-year-old love, and her nine-years-younger foster daughter and her friend. Erica says her daughter will miss all of us, including me. When they flew to Cairo, the girl had been nervous. I was always so strict. But she loved joining her mother on this trip to this warm country.

Erica told her beforehand that a few things had changed with me in the weeks prior to their flight, but she never expected me to be this friendly and kind. The past few days, she has repeated this at least a hundred times. Also, with Luna and especially with our little Nefret, she gets along really well.

Still, the honesty of Erica's daughter has made me think a lot. In fact, I have already made my decision. The new Juliette, or Julia, as I have come to call myself lately, thanks to Luna, doesn't want to be a lawyer anymore in the hard world of my father's shipping company.

I think my father has known this for a while already. As the only heir to the company, I do not actually need to work there myself anyway. My mother never did either, hence her husband taking over management from her father. Even my grandfather always had one or two partners for the actual work, as he used to call it. My mother has always lived her life without worry or care. At least, that is how I looked at it before, and I couldn't understand it as well as I do now. My father does have a partner as well, only three years older than I am. This man is perfectly suitable to take over in a few years' time.

Briefly, I think of Patrick, the man I was engaged to before he suddenly fell ill and died. We had always hoped that he and I would take over the company together. Things are very different now.

I have found my love here in Rome, and after all the events of recent weeks, I am planning on doing completely different things with my life. I don't have to keep working for the income anyway. A major part of it has always come from shares. That smaller percentage, coming from my salary, I really don't need to live comfortably. Furthermore, I have quite a few additional sources of income lately, when I think of what awaits us from Egypt and what I managed to win with poker during the last few weeks. No, I am sure. I will tell my father that I am quitting my job at the shipping company. I don't fear that conversation at all. I will also have to tell Erica. That is what I find much harder.

Which is exactly what Luna keeps teasing me with. Because she is already convinced that what I have arranged for Erica will be received very well by my secretary. Still, it remains a conversation I dread.

Erica looks at me for a while, saying nothing as she drinks her wine. Okay, here goes nothing. I ask if she wants to join me inside. I want to show her something on my laptop, which is better done out of the sunlight. She walks along.

I see Luna looking at me from the hot tub, giving me a wink. My love knows I will now finally do it, and she will be there for me. I feel her energy warm me, giving me strength, as I kiss my ring. I have a whole order in my head of what to say first. As happens in these kinds of conversations, things go differently than I imagined beforehand.

On my laptop is a picture of my apartment in Amsterdam. When we sit down, I ask her if Lieve, her daughter, is still planning to enroll in that school in Amsterdam next year, and whether she would also live there, as traveling from the town of Pernis would take a long time every day. Erica nods and looks at the picture. Then she looks at me and asks if I want to offer her daughter a place to stay with me.

Luckily, my Luna is much better at these kinds of conversations. We have practised a few possible scenarios over the last two days. So I smile and tell Erica she is almost right. I click on the image. A floor plan appears. Inside the large bedroom her name is written, and in one of the two guest rooms, the name of Lieve.

She raises her eyebrows and looks at me again.

I tell her that I want her to keep working for me from my apartment, where she can live as part of her salary, over the next few years, as long as she and Lieve would like to do so. 'On the condition that Luna and I can come over and stay there when we visit the Netherlands.'

Erica still says nothing and patiently waits for my next words.

I explain that I will remain here, living in Rome, probably for years to come, and I trust no one but her to take care, in the background, of my affairs in the Netherlands. As my personal assistant, who, just like me, will no longer be working for the shipping company.

She puts down her glass and asks me if I really want to quit.

I nod and tell her my thoughts. 'I do not want to run the company without Patrick by my side. My father's partner can do a much better job than I can. Just like my granddad and my mother, I will be connected to the company anyway, by name and shares. But I want, again, just as my mother did, to start doing my own things. I would love you to come along.' Another click shows her the draft contract I made for her.

She reads it carefully. Every now and then I see a tremble. She shakes her head a few times, and I see her eyes glisten with approaching tears.

I wrap my arm around her. I whisper that she has done so much for me over the years, and especially over the past month, that she deserves it all. Also because I do not want to lose her, as I can't explain to anyone, nor do I want to, what I am doing and why things are as they are. I only want her. And if she were ever to decide to choose a different path, I want her, and no one else, to train her successor.

'What about Luna?' she asks carefully. After all, she took care of my wife's contract herself, not even that long ago.

'She will quit as well, of course, together with the two of us. I think she is even still within her probation period, so that will not be a problem at all. Now that Luna is my wife, everything that is mine is hers as well, so she won't be needing that salary from the company.'

Erica asks me why I am letting her live in my apartment too.

I answer that I wanted to keep that apartment anyway, just not live there myself anymore, at least not for a few years. 'I remember well how you told me about the fight you had with your landlord last year.'

She admits that I did not seem to be interested at all back then.

'That is something I truly feel ashamed of,' I try to convince her. 'I am different now than I was then. I have been there for you far less than you have always been there for me. But that will change from this day forward. Yes, I want you to work for me, but I also want to see you as my wise friend. This is about your happiness in life as well. And that of your beautiful daughter.'

Erica whispers that ever since Cairo, Lieve can't stop talking about how much I have changed. She likes me so much better this way. Apart from her love for Luna and Nefret, of course.

I nod. I know it has never been anyone else's fault but mine, all these years.

'Did she sign already?' my wife asks, drippingly walking in, with the two girls following directly behind her.

'Sign what?' Lieve asks curiously, and Erica asks her to join us and sit between us, in front of the laptop.

She tells her daughter that she will quit working for the shipping company. The girl looks shocked and asks if I have just fired her. We both start laughing, put her at ease, and tell her that I offered her a job, working for me personally, as I myself will be leaving the shipping company as well. She still looks confused. Her mother calmly explains that Luna and I will be living in Rome.

'Juliette can therefore no longer work for the company. But she still needs an assistant in the Netherlands, who will take care of things there for her, and she asked me to do just that.'

'She's firing me at the shipping company too!' Luna smiles, sticking her tongue out at me.

Nefret laughs, though she cannot fully follow everything yet. She always enjoys her "older sister" teasing me.

Then I show Lieve the floor plan of the Amsterdam apartment.

She doesn't recognize it immediately, though she does see the two names of her mother and herself on the drawing. Erica nods and says that they will be moving out of their current rental place, from that 'asshole'. Her daughter chuckles when she hears her mother use that word and asks where they will be going. When she finds out they will be moving into my Amsterdam apartment, close to her new school, her eyes light up. She stands up to give me a long hug, pressing her still-wet body against me, and says that she thinks the new Julia is the kindest woman on the planet, apart from her own mother.

Erica laughs and cries at the same time and then gets a hug and a kiss from her daughter as well.

'And to celebrate, we will all go out for dinner tonight,' Luna says, and the girls enthusiastically shout that they have already chosen where we will be going, but that it is a surprise.

I am fine with everything, and while the three of them go to take a shower and get dressed, I discuss with Erica what she should do once she arrives at the office on Monday. First of all, resign for all three of us and take care of the paperwork around that. I will inform my father, although, knowing my mother, it will not come as a surprise to him. Then clear out both our offices and have all personal belongings sent to my home in Amsterdam. She was working for no one but me anyway, so there will be no issue with how quickly we can wrap up our activities there. We will be able to leave immediately.

After that, she can take her time to get all contractual and financial matters sorted. Access to all my accounts at banks and insurance companies, and so on. Also register as a new inhabitant of the city of Amsterdam, moving into my house, and everything else she feels she will need to take care of things as my representative in the Netherlands. I also ask her not to try to save money when it comes to the move.

‘Just make sure you already live in my apartment and are settled in Amsterdam before cancelling your current rental contract. That way, that lovely landlord can’t do anything unpleasant, and everything can be taken care of remotely. If needed, you can also hire a lawyer, which I will pay for, if he gives you a hard time.’

Before we get dressed for dinner as well, she has one more question. She doubts whether I will have enough tasks for her without my own job at the shipping company.

I tell her not to worry about that. I know it will never be forty hours. Probably, even during the busier periods, some twenty hours, and most weeks less than ten. Still, I will hire her full-time nonetheless, as compensation for the odd hours and weekends when I will call upon her services, and for the fact that she will take care of my house.

She radiates and says I know all too well that her living there is more to her advantage than it is to mine, but that she will not complain about it. She gives me a kiss as a sign she accepts my proposal.

For the first time, in all the years she has worked for me, that kiss feels like one from a close friend. There is so much less distance between us now that I even feel comfortable stroking her hair and telling her how happy I am that she will continue to take care of us.

She sighs and says she loves doing it and is very grateful that I did not forget about her when I decided to leave the company. She would not have dared to expect that, a month ago, if I would ever leave. Just like her daughter, she too is very happy with the new Julia and thanks my sweet Luna for making this happen.

While we get up and walk upstairs to the bedrooms to get dressed for dinner, she asks whether the rent for my apartment will be higher than what she pays for her house now.

Briefly, I look at her in anger, but then notice her smile. She of course understood that I do not expect any money for it. I sigh that I should not let her and her daughter spend too much time around Luna. I have my hands full enough as it is, with a foster daughter who loves being taught by my wife how to tease me.

‘We love Luna,’ she says, as my love just comes walking out of the bathroom. Erica gives me a wink before she walks into her room.

‘Who doesn’t?’ my darling answers, as she kisses me and pushes me backwards into our room.

I turn her around to give her a loud smack on her naked butt.

'Julia!!' I hear Nefret shout in the hallway, having heard that her foster parents were 'at it' again, followed by Lieve's careful laughter.

The restaurant the three picked for tonight is a surprising choice. It is more like a pub diner, where you can also enjoy some karaoke on the second floor. That is apparently the reason they chose this place, as the girls each take the stage at least four times. Our table is not even the loudest one in the room, and Erica can't resist taking a long, thoughtful look at me a few times.

I know exactly why, and I can't blame her for it. Less than two months ago, you would never have found me in a place like this, and it would have been impossible to lure me in. Now I am simply enjoying everything about it. However full, rich, and luxurious my life has always been, there are clearly many things I have missed out on. That is why I enjoy them twice as much now.

Nefret even manages to make me grab the microphone once myself. Despite kissing the ring before I step onto the small stage, it is immediately clear that singing is not one of the abilities I have been blessed with recently. Back in my seat, stealing more fries from Luna's plate, I think of all the things I am able to do and how unrelated it all seems to where I am now. Is it, though?

When I really think about it, this is also a world I am getting to know thanks to my love for Luna. It is the same love that led me to find this ring in the past few weeks, granting me the ability to do things I would have dismissed as fantasy not so long ago. Although I have given myself a break this week, after the wedding on Saturday, I know I will soon be using all these possibilities again.

Without anybody else noticing, I cut my own finger and show it to Luna. She smiles, licks up the few drops of blood and kisses the wound away. She gives me a wink and knows I just wanted to test if all is still there. My wife too cuts herself now, much deeper than I did. A short glance at the wound from me, is enough to have the bleeding wound completely disappear. My love blows me a kiss and turns her eyes back to our Nefret, who is on stage again.

Erica is the only one not persuaded by her daughter and Nefret to sing a song on stage. Every now and then she looks over to me for help. Funny how my assistant needs to get used to this kind of environment even more than I do.

When we are finishing the evening with a large ice cream for dessert, the girls deliberate what we will do tomorrow, on their last day here.

Lieve should be the one to choose, our Egyptian girl thinks. All kinds of alternatives are discussed, from the zoo to the Vatican. In the end, they decide on shopping.

Without having to look to her right, my love sees, just as I do, the worried glance in Erica's eyes. So Luna says that this is an excellent idea and that she, because they are our special guests, will of course pay for everything. 'Protests will not be successful. Not even from you, Erica,' she emphasizes, who briefly looks at me gratefully before giving Luna a kiss on her cheek.

Then the two teenagers climb onto the stage one last time together for a false duet, after which they bow deeply to receive the cheers and applause from the other tables. Some even wave at us when we leave the room and walk back downstairs a few minutes later.

In the taxi home, Luna lies against me on one side and Nefret on the other. On the seat across from us, Lieve takes the same position, leaning against her mother.

Erica looks over at me and gives me a smiling wink.

I know she totally enjoys watching how happy her Lieve is here with us. I have decided I will invite them over, at least twice a year, to stay with us for a few days or even weeks.

At home, the girls go upstairs to watch a movie together in Nefret's room. It is Erica's and my turn to claim the hot tub for a few hours and enjoy the evening. Luna, who has been in the water more than enough today, takes a chair and sits next to the hot tub, spoiling us with snacks and wine. Erica and I talk Dutch, but my gorgeous Italian does not mind at all. She is chatting on her phone with Elena.

Erica thinks I must be getting tired of this. She does feel the need to emphasize one more time how happy she is with her renewed boss.

I fully understand what she means. She has always given herself fully in providing for me. Knowing me better than anybody. I told her more than I told my mother or any of my own friends. Still, there was always distance. She was never really able to come close to me, and that was not at all her fault. When she joined us in the jacuzzi for the first time, three days ago now, after Luna invited her, I saw her for the first time in something other than her usual stylish office wear.

I am ashamed to have never looked at her as an actual woman, quite a beautiful woman even. The next day she joined breakfast dressed in a pair of jeans. We decided then and there to burn all her office suits in some sort of ritual soon.

I wrap my arm around her and say that she, in turn, will probably get sick and tired of me saying this all the time too. 'But I am really, truly sorry that I have not given more to you and your Lieve. I simply didn't see it. Now I feel guilty about that lack of insight. We cannot get that decade back. From now on, however, I see you more as my best friend, who will be spoiled rotten by me, and who coincidentally also happens to work for me.'

She takes my hand, which is resting on her shoulder, and briefly kisses it. My mother always told her that it really is inside of me and that one day it would come out. She was right. 'And all thanks to your little moon goddess,' she says out loud, so Luna can hear her.

My love looks up from her mobile phone and beams proudly. 'And sex goddess,' she adds.

Erica starts laughing. The latter is indeed maybe a bigger change in me than my improved social skills. The fact that this gorgeous Italian woman has turned me into a warm-blooded lady, who fully enjoys the admiring glances and sexual attention of many. That was completely different in my "Patrick days". In that respect, I am more like my mother now as well.

Erica has indicated a few times already over the past few days that my mother and I are similar in many aspects, and this is one of them. I do not see my own mother like that at all. So that will be interesting talks over the next few days, even though I do feel a bit nervous about that time. Talking about sex with your parents is always a bit weird.

Side by side, Erica and I look over the river to the lights on the other side. Below us, some neighbors are talking, though we are completely private here. This little piece of paradise, close to the center of this vibrant city, my secretary has found for us. A true one-in-a-million find. And despite the fact that we only lived here for one week now, this is, more than any other house from the past, my home. Mostly because of Luna, of course, but also thanks to the perfect taste of Erica.

She gives me another kiss on my cheek and gets up to climb out of the jacuzzi. 'It is midnight, and if we will be shopping all day tomorrow, this old lady needs her rest now,' she smiles.

Luna helps “grandma” out of the tub and asks if she should quickly fetch her walker. Erica gives her a kiss as well and rushes inside through the cooling air of the evening.

I submerge myself fully into the water and kiss my Pharaoh ring. It changes into its real appearance, and I enjoy the total silence of my underwater world. I see the legs of Luna climb in, and a few seconds later her face comes close to mine.

She knows she can do this as well when she is with me, and together we remain there for many minutes, kissing each other. My gorgeous, naked, tempting wife again. No longer the older sister who plays along with our daughter and friend. She has so many faces. Each of them is true and real. Nothing is fake about her. She simply is all in one.

I think of our wedding night. When Elena, Nailah, and I were already crawling into bed together, trying to get at least a bit of sleep. She went on for hours more with Lucio. He slept in until 1 p.m. the next day. Luna, however, was joining us again for breakfast at 9 a.m.

I project the image in her head of how we watched from the other bed, what she did to and with our Lucio. Luna gives me a wink and kisses my neck. Then I follow her up to the surface. ‘No need to turn me on even more,’ my love whispers as she crawls onto my lap.

From the window above us, to the right, we hear a soft giggle, and I see Nefret and Lieve quickly duck as I look up.

Luna’s eyes are smiling. She gets up, and together we climb out of the hot tub to retreat to the privacy of our own bedroom. My wet bikini is quickly taken off, and I fully enjoy the feeling of her softly sucking lips around one of my nipples.

Although we always hold back a little because of the noise, we know by now exactly what the other one likes. A sweet combination of pleasure and pain, where we do not have to hold back, as we can simply heal each other again if we damage one another a little in the heat of the moment. It makes it far more relaxed to fully enjoy the pain as well, without worrying about marks that are left behind.

The orgasms my wife gives me during our play are incomparable with any sex from the past or the present. Of course, we also enjoy the other three, but the intensity of our own sex is absolutely unique and far better, for both of us. An impressive number of intense orgasms later, it is already past 2 a.m. when we finally decide to get some sleep.

Saturday, June 6th

Luna and I are the last to join breakfast, and I see Nefret giving a quick wink to Lieve. The latter secretly laughs a little, but her mother, who notices it as well, says she deserves a spanking for making fun of us.

'Who knows, she might like that,' Luna says, throwing all intentions of any decent upbringing overboard, and Lieve blushes.

Erica shakes her head with a smile and gets us some fresh coffee.

I ask if the girls have already decided where we'll go first, when we start our trip. They both nod and show me a list, and even a map, with the order of shops and the route. They have prepared well.

In the kitchen, I hear Erica talking with Maria, our housekeeper, whom my secretary found for us when buying this house. She comes over three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A friendly lady, one year older than Erica, who lives on the other side of the Tiber River. She can even see our apartment from her roof, if she tries.

She has indicated to Erica a few times already that she does not need that many hours each week. But we are very happy with her and don't mind the fact that she is earning a bit more than the hours she actually works, so she won't have to take a second job next to this one.

In return, she doesn't mind at all coming in a few extra hours when we need her. Like today, to receive all the parcels we will send back to the house after our shopping spree. Tomorrow, she will also be here for another hour, to change the bedcovers before my mother arrives.

She did, however, have to get used to the fact that we are a household with three women. Not that she is judgmental about it, we do not get that vibe from her, but it is simply not something she has had much contact with in her life. Luna and Maria get along really well, and she has even started teaching Nefret her first Italian words. When she then also found out we were befriended with the Borghese family, she was over the moon.

Today, she has brought along her grandson, whom she takes care of a few days a week. It is the second time I see the little guy. He simply adores our foster daughter. He is only six, but can look at her with so much love in his eyes. Now he is on the couch, in between Nefret and Lieve, laughing as he is being tickled and hugged. He will not be able to play with Nefret a lot today, as she will of course join us shopping. Fortunately, he loves watching cartoons on the big living-room TV.

When the taxi pulls up, Luna asks Maria if there is something we can buy for her or her grandson. The old lady, of course, says this is not necessary. She clearly does not know my wife very well yet, let alone my assistant.

The girls have decided to start a few miles outside the city center, at a large shopping mall, modelled after the big American examples, with all sorts of shops and boutiques. The advantage is that everything we buy there can be temporarily stored at the reception area, to be delivered all at once.

The first two shops are clearly focused on our eager daughters. They buy jeans, shorts, tops, and summer dresses and are having a ball, trying everything on and letting themselves go completely. Luna guides them through it all.

Erica and I keep a little distance and watch from the side. Every now and then, I see Erica glance at me, checking whether I think her daughter is taking too much advantage of the situation.

Reassuringly, I tell her that Luna is perfectly capable of guarding those limits. These are not the most expensive shops anyway, and what Luna has paid so far is not shocking at all. The girls are already delighted with their purchases.

Next is a large shoe store. Luna and I browse there as well, and even Erica surprises herself by finding two pairs of shoes too. If you walk into a well-assorted shoe shop with five women who have too much money to spend, you shouldn't be surprised that we eventually walk out with seventeen boxes.

Luna and Nefret push our first two shopping carts, already filled with items from the first three shops, to the reception area, while Erica takes her Lieve into a game store. Her daughter adores nerdy fantasy board and card games and wants to see if they sell anything here that is very hard to come by in the Netherlands.

I give Erica my credit card and insist she not be modest about what she can or cannot get. I sit down on a terrace, right across the corridor, have a drink, and watch the people walking by while waiting for the first to return.

After the first sip of ice-cold fruit juice, I feel a slight tingle building inside my head. An all-too-familiar sensation, even though I have not experienced it for over two weeks already ...

... the bitterness of the wine from the silver chalice makes me drowsy. I put it back next to the bowl on the altar and look around. The chapel is almost empty, yet all the candles are lit. Apart from myself, I see only two men in the room, staring at me from the back. It feels as though they think I should not be here, but they do not come any closer.

Spread out across the surface of the altar are many pictures. Mostly people dressed in long white gowns. Every now and then, a naked woman. They remind me of witches from LARP games I saw on TV, with flowers in their hair and the most weird and wonderful necklaces.

When I look up again, the men are just leaving. From outside come the clear sounds of a large party, muffled again as soon as the door falls shut. I feel the ring vibrate slightly on my finger. Briefly, I wave my hand through the air. All the candles are extinguished but one.

In the back, on the right, stands an older woman I did not notice before. She holds the only burning candle and looks afraid when I float over to her. I try to ease her mind. She closes her eyes in prayer. I glance back at the altar. Behind it, I see myself sitting on some form of throne. I look down and see the floor through my own body ...

... Luna looks at me calmly. Nefret drinks her coke as if nothing has happened. Erica and Lieve have not returned yet, so I can't have been gone for long. How many minutes, my love can't say, as they just arrived two minutes ago and found me like this. She asks if I had a dream again, as it looked a bit different than before. More like staring, with my eyes open.

'It also felt different,' I reply. It did not seem to be even remotely connected to Ohfizja.' Our two guests are approaching, and I indicate that I will tell her more later.

Erica hands me back my card. Lieve looks extremely happy with the things she was able to buy. None of her friends will have this stuff.

I am happy for her, especially since she will soon be starting to build a new group of friends in Amsterdam. Having a few unique items might be very helpful in that effort.

My secretary notices that something happened, and I quickly explain that I briefly fainted again, just like a few weeks ago when it happened regularly. She knows the stories and understands this is neither the time nor the place to talk about it.

We all have a drink and continue our shopping spree in the large mall.

In a toy store, the two girls buy a lovely present for Gabriel, Maria's grandson, and Luna finds a large wooden rosary to hang on the wall for our kind housekeeper. This old Italian lady has been telling us since day one that we should have one in our entry hall as well, so my wife even buys two. They are not my favorite pieces of wall art, but I am completely fine with it if they hang one of them there.

After lunch, we go to the center of Rome to continue our shopping. Luna and I don't buy much, although we regularly look at each other when we fancy something we will have to come back for another time. This is definitely not the right moment to buy some lingerie or erotic toys we see in a few shop windows.

Of course, Nefret and Lieve see these too. Our little girl immediately asks, with a giggle, if they should wait outside.

I do buy two dresses, and Luna finds three revealing tops for herself.

Mostly, however, this day is for my secretary and our daughters. As time passes and Erica better understands how relaxed we are about what is spent, she allows herself to pick out a few more things as well. The last thing we buy this afternoon is a suitcase, as they will need at least one extra to get everything back to the Netherlands with them.

To make sure it doesn't get too late for Maria, we decide not to go out for dinner and drive back home at the end of the afternoon.

Gabriel is sleeping on the couch, and his grandmother is reading a book next to him. The girls kiss him awake and give him his present. Maria smiles happily as she sees her grandson unwrap the toy firetruck, after which he gives Nefret a long hug to thank her. When our daughter points to Lieve, explaining that it is her present too, he seems a little shy at first before giving her a warm hug as well.

Maria thanks the girls and then receives the lovely rosary from Luna. Tears well up in her eyes. She truly thinks we are spoiling her far too much. When we explain that we have one for the hallway in this apartment as well, she radiates even more and promises to bring a nephew along tomorrow, who will hang it up beautifully.

Erica and Lieve say their farewells to the two, as we will already be at the airport tomorrow when Maria arrives back here to prepare the guest bedroom.

As soon as they have left, we order food for the five of us, and while we wait for the delivery, Nefret and Lieve climb into the jacuzzi again.

Erica takes a long, warm bath upstairs, and Luna starts adding up all the receipts from today. Although she knows I am completely fine with it, she does show me the total amount: €13.694,93. 'My bride needs to play poker again soon,' she teases with a smile, knowing that this is, of course, not needed.

We sit down at the fireplace, and I tell her about the new dream I had this morning. She quickly says 'sorry,' admitting that she has completely forgotten about it. I don't blame her at all. After all, it hasn't happened for quite some time. I tell her about the chapel, the pictures, and the fact that I appeared to be a ghost.

We wonder whether this dream will develop over several episodes and if it will be the start of another adventure in our real life as well. As there seems to be no connection whatsoever with Ohfizja, apart from the ring on my finger, that does not seem very likely yet.

Luna repeats all the details I shared, gets up from the couch, and lights a candle a few meters away from me.

I activate my ring with a kiss and wave my hand through the air. The candle extinguishes instantly.

'It is connected,' Luna says confidently. She is convinced that this dream is a continuation of my story, as it has already revealed a new power to me in the very first episode.

I nod and wave my hand once more. The candle lights again. That is something I did not even do in my dream.

'Many will fear her...' Luna mumbles the words of Ohfizja.

We talk about the woman who seemed so scared of me. 'Well, I would probably be afraid too,' Luna says. 'Seeing the ghost of someone approaching whom I also see sitting there a few meters away. Maybe that's the reason those men left so quickly as well.' For now, we can't do anything more than wait and see if there will be a second dream.

We get up to set the table for dinner. The two girls return, still in their bikinis, and sit down. While they talk to Luna, I walk upstairs to see if Erica has fallen asleep.

I softly knock on the door of the bathroom, followed by a louder one.

'Yeehees,' I hear the impatient voice of a mother who thinks her daughter is knocking on the door.

I look around the corner and see her lying in the bathtub with a wet cloth draped over her eyes. Though the bath must have contained foam at some point, it has all but disappeared.

I walk up to the tub and look at my loyal friend. From business suit to naked in four days, I think, and enjoy the view of her beautiful body. Especially for a woman of her age.

‘What is it, love?’ Erica asks, thinking her daughter is entering.

I say nothing, kneel beside the tub, and give her a kiss on the lips.

‘Thank you, darling,’ she smiles. ‘Has dinner arrived?’

Because I remain silent, she lifts a corner of the cloth and looks startled at my smiling face.

She then grumbles something about me being like my mother and places the cloth back over her eyes. She clearly does not mind me seeing her like this at all.

I whisper that the table is set, that dinner can arrive any second now, and I give her a longer kiss. This time she answers it, and, satisfied, I leave the bathroom to walk downstairs. My secretary is now definitely a very close friend.

‘Did you kiss my mother?’ Lieve asks in English, so the other two can understand my answer. Luna has made a bet with the girls. She felt I kissed Erica, and the teenagers were giggling but did not believe it to be true.

I ask what the wager is.

Nefret explains that she needs to kiss Lieve if Luna is correct, and if not, Luna has to give me a deep French kiss.

I start laughing. ‘In that case,’ I say slowly, building up the tension, ‘you will have to kiss each other, just like you did yesterday, after watching Luna and me in the jacuzzi.’

Lieve’s face turns a deep, dark red, and our Nefret, who is getting more and more used to Luna and me, has the biggest smile on her face.

Erica’s daughter carefully asks how I know this, but I say that I have been young too. It is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.

Luna crosses her arms in front of her chest and stands next to the girls to check whether the kiss is satisfactory. The first kiss is far too careful and therefore dismissed.

The second one is already more like it, and then Nefret, who has a role model in her young stepmother when it comes to being bold, tenderly takes Lieve’s face between her hands and gives her girlfriend a genuine, long kiss. Which makes her blush even more, though she answers it with visible pleasure. The two really like each other.

Moments later, Erica comes down, and although there is no kissing, she sees her daughter's face and looks from one girl to the other.

'They lost a bet,' my wife briefly explains.

When my assistant, although she should know better, asks what the bet was about, Luna also takes Erica's face between her hands and kisses my secretary tenderly on the lips for a good ten seconds. My secretary is now nearly as red as Lieve.

Nefret looks at me with naughty eyes, giving me a wink. She loves teasing others as much as my darling wife does.

'I am glad we are going home tomorrow,' Erica teases the girls back, even though I know for sure she does not mean that at all. When she sees Nefret looking sad because of her words, she quickly apologizes, wraps an arm around her, and explains that it was just a joke. Our girl knows that and whispers she will really miss Lieve. Erica kisses her forehead, and Lieve sits next to her friend and cuddles up against her. It is touching to see how close they have become.

I blow my assistant a kiss from across the table, and she radiates, feeling part of the family now. And she sure is.

Luna has taken her seat next to me and, as usual, is throwing some fuel onto the fire. 'I don't blame you, darling,' she playfully forgives my unfaithfulness. 'Your secretary does have the perfect lips to kiss.'

Erica starts laughing and wants to give a swift reply when a loud ringing sound comes from the hallway.

'Saved by the bell,' Luna shouts and runs to the door. When she returns with our food, everybody sits down calmly at the table.

'Can you make it a bit more cosy, love?' Luna asks, pointing at the candles in the middle of the dining table.

I stick out my tongue at her, but don't mind being put on the spot. I wave my hand, and the three candles immediately start burning.

Nefret claps her hands enthusiastically, and Erica looks a bit worried at her own daughter. She knows a little about my powers herself, but to Lieve it is all just magic tricks.

Luckily, she considers it one too and applauds. 'You should go to Las Vegas,' the fourteen-year-old says in admiration.

I tell her that I will travel there for sure one day, but for a different reason, not to be on stage.

Nefret whispers something in her girlfriend's ear, who turns red once more.

‘No, Nefret, not just for sex either!’ I laugh, and Luna gives her foster daughter a slap on her bikini bottom. She adds that our girl must stop her naughty behaviour, otherwise she will have to go to bed without any kiss from her Lieve this evening. Which makes the Dutch teenager burst into laughter again and keeps the mood very relaxed, with some teasing back and forth.

The food is tasty, and when Erica and I clear the table and bring the dishes to the kitchen, the three are on the couch, watching TV.

‘You’re a good mother, just like your mother,’ Erica whispers while we fill the dishwasher.

I think about it. My mother and I indeed had a nice bond when I was younger. It lessened only after I met Patrick. Not that I blame him for any of that, but it was me who changed back then, not my mother. Now I seem to be more like I was as a child. Something I recognise in Luna, Nefret, and Lieve. There are no regrets about my life with Patrick, on the contrary. Still, it feels like I was not myself for over fifteen years.

Erica watches me think and keeps me company in the kitchen. She whispers that Patrick was a decent guy. ‘Luna, however, is clearly what you need in your life, and you make a lot more people around you happy now than you ever could have before. That is exactly what you are doing. I see that every day again. In Luna, in Nefret, in my daughter, in myself, in Maria, in your mother, in Elena and Nailah, in Lucio, in your grandfather. The list goes on and on.’

‘It feels double,’ I admit. ‘How happy I am now, with my sweet Luna, somehow feels like a betrayal to Patrick, when I think of how all these things could not have happened with him in my life. Nevertheless, he is still a man I truly loved.’

Erica nods. ‘Sometimes what you love is not what you need,’ she says. ‘It is a good sign that he is still this deep in your heart. That love has been real too, and you should cherish it. This new love, though, gives you riches in your life that go far beyond that.’

She wraps her arms around me and wipes away the few tears I have. Feeling more like a mother to me now than a friend. Age-wise, she is closer to my mother than I am to my wife.

I look into her eyes and thank her, one last time, for all those years of loyal support and for all future years of friendship. With those words, I kiss her. Filled with love. Like a daughter can kiss her mother, in utter worship and gratefulness.

She feels the value of that kiss and accepts it with all her heart.

I kiss my ring and make the tears disappear, the red in my eyes returning to normal.

Erica shakes her head and says she can't comprehend all the things I can do. I ask her if she wants to experience another one of my powers. She does, and I project into her head the image of Lieve and Nefret kissing about an hour ago. 'Thank you,' she says, understanding the feelings Lieve has towards our daughter much better now.

Back in the living room, we find her daughter sleeping on Luna's lap, who is asleep herself as well, sitting upright. Only Nefret is awake and gives us a wink. I take a blanket out of a cupboard in the hallway and cover the two, after which my daughter joins us upstairs.

Outside her bedroom, I give Erica one more kiss, and so does Nefret. Tenderly, Erica strokes the girl's hair. When she closes the door, we walk to my bedroom together, and I have her crawl into bed with me.

Comfortably, she curls up in my arms, against my naked body, and soon falls asleep, no doubt dreaming of her Lieve.

Through the glass ceiling, I look at the stars. I listen to the silence in our home ...

... I kiss the praying woman on her forehead and float back to my own body. Calmly, I settle back into it and open my eyes. I get up and look down once more. Apparently human again, and at least still alive.

The praying woman looks at me and sees me rise to my feet. She sinks down on her knees and makes the sign of the cross.

I walk towards her. My footsteps sound hollow in the empty chapel. Only then do I recognise Luna's mother.

She is frightened and thought I had died. I take her in my arms and comfort her. She whispers that a powerful force is protecting me and thanks the souls that guard me.

Looking around, I see no angels. Not sure what she saw, apart from my spirit, but I say that I am indeed blessed with a divine power. Luna's mother bows her head and allows me to help her onto her feet. I give her another kiss on her forehead, and she looks warm and happy again. While she takes her seat, I walk towards the exit to leave the chapel.

One more time, I turn around and see the picture still on top of the altar. I pick them up and open the door to the outside world. The noises from the party die out as I step outside. I hear my own breathing ...

Sunday, June 7th

... Luna and Lieve have joined us in the large bed. During the night, they came upstairs as well. When Nefret was not in her room, Luna took the girl with her to our bedroom. They crawled into bed with us. Lieve was very nervous about doing so. Mostly because she saw I was naked and Nefret almost as well. She decided to keep her shirt on, but Luna, of course, did join us naked and lay down behind Erica's daughter. My love has her arm around her, and the two girls between us are very close to each other, face to face.

I watch the eyes of my wife slowly open. They start radiating to me, like they do every morning. Carefully, we both move backwards out of bed and meet each other next to the footboard. We kiss and look at the two in our spot. Luna takes a picture with her phone and sends it to Erica, who is already preparing breakfast in the kitchen downstairs. It doesn't take long before she replies with a heart.

My Italian beauty walks into the shower, and I slip into a bathrobe to walk down first. On the clock on the wall next to the winding stairs, I see it is eight o'clock. We have plenty of time. Their check-in is at half past two. My mother will then land over an hour later.

In the kitchen, Erica greets me with a kiss. I can't suppress a smile. Wonderful, to be having this bond with her now. We're drinking coffee together when Luna comes down.

Her hair is wrapped in a towel and, just like me, she is dressed in only a bathrobe. 'Finally!' she says while pouring herself some coffee, and she explains that she has gotten her period.

Although I understand her relief, it does briefly make me sigh.

My love presses herself against me from behind and hugs me tight. She knows that, after our adventure in Egypt, I am convinced that I will never have another period again in my life and am infertile. With her, it would only be a brief pause, which turns out to be true now.

I am not just happy for her, but for both of us. If we ever want to have kids, she at least can have them. 'Lucio will also be pleased to hear this,' I say, also letting her know how truly happy I am for her.

My love chuckles and starts writing to the prince at once.

We don't have to wait long for a reply, and on top of that, the answer is surprising. She shows me the messages from both him and his sister.

Nailah and Elena have started their period today as well. The three women are synchronized!

I concentrate on all four of them and project a thought into their heads, that I am looking forward to having Lucio to myself for a few days once every month. He sends me a thumbs-up and a heart.

All three girls say that there is no reason to ignore them sexually during those days.

Erica, who can't follow all the details, looks at us questioningly.

I briefly explain the situation to her.

'Why did I ask?' she wonders, and then walks upstairs to continue packing and to check whether her daughter is still asleep. Halfway up, she already bumps into Lieve and Nefret, both in their bathrobes and both with wet hair.

I look at them and see that they have indeed taken a shower together. It is clear Erica realizes this as well, even though she says nothing and walks on to the upper floor, glowing.

The two give me, and Luna as well, a kiss and then go to fetch themselves some breakfast. Meanwhile, they are touching each other more often than Luna and I did during those first days in Rome. Which was only a month ago. It feels like my darling has always been there.

I look at her. She is teasing her friends in the chat. I get up and stand behind her. I kiss her neck, whisper that I love her, and sincerely hope our prince will have a child with her someday.

She nods, barely noticeable, but I feel that it is what she wants too. She puts away her phone and turns around. The kiss does not stop until Nefret puts down her plate on the opposite side of the table with deliberate force.

Luna laughs, and I see her eyes glow with happiness. Calmly, she then turns to the two teens behind us and says they should be kissing more themselves if they do not want to watch us doing it.

Lieve blushes a bit less than she did yesterday and even dares to say that she thinks that is an excellent idea.

I see how she squeezes Nefret's hand under the table. Then I give my lovely wife a final kiss and head upstairs to the shower.

There, I do not think of the future child of Luna and Lucio, but of the fact that I have not yet told my love about the second dream. I know why that is. Her crying mother might worry her too much. Still, I cannot and do not want to keep these dreams to myself, nor do I want to keep parts of them a secret.

Getting dressed after the shower, I look at the crystal on top of Luna's dressing table. The triangular-based pyramid that has become the symbol of our group of five. Luna's ruby glows brightly at its center. I close my eyes and see the relentless amount of love she sends to my upper corner. Of course she sends it to the other three as well. All our friends are dear to us, but what I receive from her is incomparable.

I send a thought into her head and ask her to come upstairs.

With a slightly worried face, she comes dashing in. I have never called her this way before. I take her hand in mine and, together, we sit down on the bed. Calmly, I tell her about last night's dream and how sorry I am that I waited this long to share it with her.

Luna kisses me and says she completely understands the reason, as it is indeed painful to know that her mother cried and was afraid of me. 'Of the ghost version of you, at least,' she adds at once, easing my mind. 'We should try not to draw conclusions too quickly. There can be a hundred reasons for this. We simply know too little about this new dream. Maybe it just indicates my mother is afraid of your powers. That could be true, which is probably why we have not shared much about this topic with my parents yet.'

My Italian girlfriend kisses me again and says she is very happy with her powerful bride. She loves the fact that I wanted to protect her, but she would rather do it all together. Just like our first adventure.

'You think these dreams will lead to another adventure?' I ask her.

She nods. She was already fairly sure after the first dream, but now that there has been a second one, she is completely convinced. It will be related to those photos, that I decided to take along as well. Even before walking to the altar, my love continues to analyse it all.

I tell her I can't imagine that these are types of power I will ever be able to develop.

Luna wonders why that would not be possible. 'It's not any weirder than taking crystal fragments out of a solid cube or melting them together.' She has a very good point. Some of my powers, which I seldom use, are indeed just as absurd, unexplainable, and unlikely as pulling pictures across a distance. Maybe we should start practising again, with all of my abilities.

Luna thinks that is a great idea. We agree that we will get back to training as soon as my mother has left and we are alone again. Just the two of us. With our three friends back in Rome as well.

Then we hear the sound of breaking glass from below.

I am startled, but Luna starts laughing. 'Or you can start practising right now already,' she grins, and we quickly hurry downstairs.

A shaken-up Lieve is standing next to the dishwasher, holding a few pieces of a wineglass in her hand. She looks at us with wide eyes when Luna and I come rushing into the kitchen.

We immediately calm her by saying that we do not mind the glasses at all. I ask whether she herself is okay and gently take the shards from her hand. She has only a small cut on one of her fingers.

Nefret explains that they wanted to help by filling the dishwasher and that two glasses fell down.

I can see it is only half the truth, I do not look to find out exactly what happened. They must have been playing a too frolic, I presume.

Luna dabs the blood from Lieve's finger.

Erica enters the kitchen as well and asks what has happened. Shaking my head, I tell her that a few glasses broke, nothing more. Nothing to worry about. Her daughter still looks a bit shaken.

I ask Lieve if I can make her smile again. 'How?' she asks.

I take her hand from Luna and look at the small cut. Not huge, but quite deep. 'The bleeding won't stop quickly. A piece of cloth won't be enough,' I say to my wife, who answers with a knowing wink.

Erica and Nefret watch us tensely.

I kiss Lieve's finger and lick away the blood. The cut vanishes.

In disbelief, she looks at her own finger. Then at her mother, whose eyes are filled with tears. Next, Lieve looks at Nefret, who proudly glows and smiles at her.

'Now you are truly family,' Luna says as she gives Lieve a hug. 'And this is a little family secret, okay?'

The girl hugs both Luna and me and suddenly gives our daughter a long kiss in front of everyone. She then embraces her mother, who can only smile happily at the rest of us.

'Thank you,' Erica whispers to me, before she walks upstairs with her daughter to finally finish packing.

'Now she knows it's not just tricks,' Nefret says as she helps Luna carefully throw away all the shards.

I won't repair the glasses. We will simply buy a few new ones.

As I leave the kitchen, I hear our girl whisper to Luna behind me that it was her fault Lieve dropped them.

She had sneaked up behind her and kissed her friend's neck unexpectedly, just as she had seen us do so often. It took Lieve completely by surprise, which made her drop the glasses.

Luna once again reassures her that we really don't mind about those. More important is whether Lieve liked the kiss on her neck.

Nefret does not yet know, but she most certainly did.

Our final lunch with the five of us is very festive. The girls can barely refrain from touching each other. Erica pretends, just like we do, that she doesn't see anything and allows them their little moments.

Luna has farewell presents for our guests. She asked a jeweler friend to make a number of pendants on silver chains. They are mini versions of our crystal, without the ruby inside, of course. At first, the idea was only meant for Nefret, because she, as our daughter, is not part of our special group around the prince, yet is always close.

It quickly became clear that the second circle around us would grow rapidly, so Luna ordered many more. Among others, she wants to give one to Carlo, her dear friend from university, who was also our wedding photographer, for his birthday next month.

Now, the first two are for Lieve and Nefret. They hang them around each other's necks and thank one another extensively with a kiss, almost forgetting to thank Luna until Erica gently reminds them.

After that, Erica receives a pendant as well. Hers is slightly larger, and she of course immediately thanks Luna with a tender kiss. To me, she simply winks, and that is more than enough.

The taxi van has arrived, and with two more suitcases than they came with a week ago, we all get in. Erica and I sit side by side and use this moment to talk about what she will arrange at work and with whom.

'In any case,' I promise her, 'I will call my father tomorrow, together with my mother, so he will already be prepared for the upcoming resignations. After that, you can start preparing everything around our working relationship and your move to Amsterdam. As I don't know if, or how well, I will be reachable over the coming period, I will empower my mother to sign things on my behalf if there are urgent matters that need to be settled.'

The last thing I still have to tell her is something Luna and I discussed earlier this week. 'We will also pay for Lieve's education. You are both family now, after all.'

One last time, Erica struggles to keep her tears from flowing as she gives both Luna and me another kiss. Her life will change completely from now on. A new boss, a new city, a new home, and everything she and her daughter could wish for.

At the check-in desk, there is a lot of hugging and crying. Especially Lieve and Nefret have a hard time saying goodbye, despite being happy about the fact that they will soon see each other again. As our guests walk through border control, the girls blow each other one last kiss, after which our girl hides herself in the safe arms of Luna.

We remain seated on the bench for a while until she has calmed down a bit. Then we walk to the arrival hall to wait for my mother. She won't be here soon, so we have a drink first.

Knowing very well that Luna will not be able to say no because she is sad, Nefret insists on going to McDonald's, where she orders a large shake. We both take one as well. It has been a long time since I had a drink like this. In fact, the same is true here as it was yesterday at that karaoke restaurant. Not even half as bad as I always convinced myself it would be. I'm sure we'll enjoy this as a family more often now.

On the screens in the hall, I see that my mother's plane has a ten-minute delay, so there is no need to rush, and we calmly walk to the indicated exit.

Nefret quickly buys a rose to give to my mother. Although I know she doesn't even like flowers that much, the gesture is so very sweet that I am sure my mother will appreciate it just as much as I do.

We watch the people coming through the same exit my mother soon will. Of course, I hear many voices speaking Dutch around me. Then, finally, she appears between the sliding doors. I feel an intensely warm happiness surge inside me as I see her again. Even though it has only been a week since we last saw each other in Cairo. There were times in previous years when months passed without seeing her at all. This time, I am simply, profoundly happy that she is here.

First, she walks up to Nefret and gives her a long hug, followed by an extra kiss when she receives the rose.

After that, she kisses my Luna on the lips, slightly longer than might be considered normal between a mother- and daughter-in-law.

Finally, she walks over to me. Her eyes glow, as I know mine do as well. At the wedding, we did not have much time together. Now we do.

On top of that, I see that she is just as happy to have her daughter back as I am to be regaining this bond with my mother. She kisses me. Lovingly. For minutes, we stare into each other's eyes without our lips ever parting.

Luna stands close and whispers that she loves us, realizing how special this moment must be for us. Even Nefret joins in and wraps her arms around my mother and me. We enjoy one another like this for a while, not bothered by all the eyes around us, staring at us in surprise.

My tears are flowing freely by now, and my mother tastes them on her lips. 'Sorry,' I say softly as our lips finally separate. I know she understands exactly what I mean. I have missed her. But, and that is much worse, she had to miss me.

Fifteen minutes later, we walk to the exit together and take a taxi home. I sit between my mother and Luna. Nefret sits across from us, smiling along. While we drive, I want to ask my mother to call my father as soon as we are home.

She shakes her head. 'I already told him you will be leaving the firm,' she whispers, giving me another kiss.

Maria is waiting for us at home and proudly shows us the rosary her nephew put up. She then politely introduces herself to my mother and wishes us a pleasant evening. We will see her again tomorrow.

Nefret shows my mother her room for the coming days, and Luna sits down with me on the large balcony.

'I love your mother,' she says softly, squeezing my hand. She adds that I resemble her so much that she can already see how much she will still love me in twenty-five years' time.

I can only acknowledge that I am much more like my mother than I ever realized or even thought possible. As a child, I adored her completely. When I went to university, and for a long time afterward, I considered her little more than a hippy, living a carefree life, barely seeing her as an adult. Now, I want nothing more than to live just as freely as she always has. She has become my role model.

To emphasize that hippy image a bit more, she comes walking down the stairs with our daughter, both dressed in bikinis.

They climb into the jacuzzi, busy chatting with each other in Arabic, not even noticing that we are there.

I look at my Luna. We don't need words, and ten seconds later we climb in with them, both of us stark naked.

Nefret shakes her head to show that she thinks her foster parents are being far too frivolous again, then starts laughing when my mother throws her bikini top over her head onto the balcony. She sighs and takes hers off as well. Still a bit shy at times, but already very accustomed to the way we treat one another here.

My mother wraps an arm around her and kisses her cheek. Nefret cuddles up against her, resting her head on her grandmother's breasts.

I realize it has been a long time since I have seen my mother like this. We often took long baths together when I was younger, even up until right before I met Patrick. I was only slightly older then than Nefret is now.

My mother notices me watching and gives me a wink.

I feel myself blush slightly and suppress the feeling that I enjoy watching her nakedness.

As always, Luna is a bit bolder and compliments my mother on her beautiful body. 'If I hadn't married your daughter, I would absolutely have tried to seduce you.'

'You would certainly have succeeded,' my mother replies, making Nefret giggle. Somewhat surprised, I look at the flirting between my own mother and my wife, as well as at the fun our little girl is having while watching this game.

We all fall silent. I close my eyes and look at the energy flowing between us. There is nothing to be worried about. Yes, there is attraction between the two of them, but more than anything else, they both radiate love and desire toward me.

My blush deepens when I notice the intensity of my mother's longing for intimacy with me. Not sex, like the desire I feel from Luna, but intimacy nonetheless. I sigh ...

... the crowd stares in disbelief when they see me walk out. All but Luna. My darling stands slightly to the side of the main partying group, talking to a woman in a long white gown. She gives me a wide smile when she sees me, over the woman's shoulder.

Here and there, people begin to clap and sing. The two men I saw earlier in the chapel walk up to me, carrying a chair, and invite me to sit down. One of them wears a stethoscope, like a doctor, and listens to my heart and breathing. He confirms to the crowd that I am indeed no longer dead.

Even though I understand what he is saying, I try to determine the language he is speaking, as it does not sound familiar at all. By now, Luna has walked up to me and sits down on my lap. Like me, she is completely naked and does not wear a white robe, unlike most of the others, men and women alike.

For a moment, I think back to the youngsters of the circle in my previous series of dreams. These people are all much older, most of them older than I am, I think, but there is the same kind of adoration directed at Luna and me. It carries the same freely flowing, erotically charged atmosphere as back then. Now and then, one of them approaches and briefly caresses Luna or me ...

... her hands softly trace the curves of my breasts. I smile and open my eyes, looking straight into the face of my mother.

She kisses me gently and says that Luna and Nefret will soon return.

As I look into her eyes, I feel that her hands are still resting on my breasts. Something inside me wants to push her away, and I realize that part of me is still the old Juliette. The new Julia, however, savors this attention from her mother, and without quite realizing it, I bend forward to kiss her. Not a kiss between mother and daughter, but a real kiss, like the ones I share with Elena or Nailah, filled with passion.

Her response is just as intense. When I pull back, slightly confused, I see Luna and Nefret smiling at us from beside the jacuzzi, both holding a tray of food. 'She's a good kisser, isn't she?' Luna laughs, and even Nefret nods in wholehearted agreement. They explain that they got to know each other a bit better while I was sleeping. According to my mother, that works best when you exchange a few kisses.

'Don't worry about it,' my mother whispers in English, so the other two can hear her. 'This is love, not sex.' She explains that she has learned it is possible, in a relationship based on love, to kiss passionately without it becoming sexual. 'That's why I can also kiss Nefret without feeling ashamed. It made the bond between the four of us much more intimate and intense, without becoming awkward.'

I consider her words and nod. Without fully understanding why, I did the same with Nefret in Egypt. Those intimate kisses, without further intention, strengthened our love for one another. I realize that I now have more questions for my mother, about her life and who she is, than she has for me about the past month.

'We need more than a week,' I sigh.

Luna fully agrees, and my mother is convinced we could keep talking for an entire year. 'We'll see how it goes. We're not in a hurry. This bond won't disappear again.'

Those words make me happier than I can explain. Apparently that feeling radiates outward, because she smiles at me through tears.

'Welcome back, July,' she says hoarsely, then turns to Luna to thank her once more, from the bottom of her heart, for everything she has done for me. 'You gave me my daughter back,' she whispers, kissing my Luna at least five times.

Her first granddaughter receives a few hugs and kisses as well.

We eat in comfortable silence, simply enjoying each other's presence. When we're finished, despite it being only eight o'clock, Nefret asks if she may go to her room. She wants to chat with Lieve. She gives the three of us a kiss and whispers in Arabic, into my mother's ear, that she is happy in our family.

Her grandmother tells her that this feeling is completely mutual and gives her a kiss on the tip of her nose before stepping out of the tub.

We decide to follow her example and, dressed in our bathrobes, the three of us go inside to sit together on the large couch. Luna fetches drinks and snacks from the kitchen, and we begin the long, overdue catch-up that we have all been longing for.

At my mother's request, she starts at the beginning to keep everything chronological. She tells us how, during her college years, she became interested in esoterica, even while she was already with my father. At some point, she joined a witches' coven and was initiated there.

My thoughts turn to my dreams, and I see Luna briefly glance at me.

My mother notices it too and smiles. We both know this part will have to wait, but we will come back to it. 'So when your grandfather asked me, after my mother passed away, to take over his wife's role in a spiritual adventure, I didn't hesitate for a second. I said yes. That was when I found out my mother had been a witch too.'

She explains that her interest always leaned toward the feminine side of spirituality. 'In hindsight, I regret that I never discussed these things with her before. We lived our lives too separately for too long.'

I look at her face and see that she is thinking the same thing.

Luna notices it as well and gently takes both our hands, squeezing them.

She continues her story. 'Although the adventure has given me many things and made me stronger, spiritually, I was never able to solve the Egyptian mystery. Moreover, as is becoming clear now, solving that puzzle even turned out to be the key to some powers I never even considered to be possible.'

To wrap it up, she tells us about the bond she developed over the years with Lucio's mother. Yes, that bond is intense and sexual. Still, she thinks it is incomparable with what we have as a group of five.

Before I have Luna tell our story to her, there is something I still need to ask her, something I have pushed away many times. 'How did this work with Grandpa and Berini?' I ask carefully.

My mother bursts into laughter and shakes her head. She explains that from the stories the two men told them, it was clear there had been a very liberal attitude between the two men and both of their wives. 'It was the sixties and seventies, after all. But there is no need for you to worry about that sort of intimacy between the generations.

However, I did form a far more intimate connection with my father, more so than ever was true with my mother,' she continues. 'All that time together led to having barely any secrets from him. Just like we had in the jacuzzi, there was a kiss every now and then, and there it stopped. The same is true for Lucio's mother and Berini. An intimate relationship developed, without the sex.

Between us two women, however, there was an abundance of sexual activity,' she laughs. 'The men were regularly witnesses to that. Both gentlemen nevertheless always kept a respectful distance, despite the fact that the women gave them a hard time doing so.'

I smile at the image of the two women making love, regularly teasing the men in their Egyptian tent.

'We simply were not the right generation,' my mother concludes. 'My parents were much closer to Berini and his wife as part of this quest than the princess and I could ever be with these two older men. Their own husbands, the princess had not been a widow yet, had no interest in the puzzle whatsoever.'

That is why their last hope was placing it with Lucio and me. Then this little sex goddess came along, as Lucio regularly calls my Luna. Thanks to her, the group of five came to be, and together we were able to find the grave and give me the powers I now seem to possess.

Luna beams proudly and begins to tell our story, in Italian.