

# Golden Link



# Golden Link

Joseph Roelands

**\*\*WARNING\*\***

Dear reader,

This novel was originally written in Dutch as *Gouden Link*.

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.

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# 1 road trip

**Wednesday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>**

Prince Luciano Borghese looks calm and focused as he steers the dark-tinted car out of Monaco, up the steep, winding road into the hills. The car actually belongs to my beautiful Italian wife and me, but on this road trip, alongside the only man in our group of five, I am more than happy to let him take the wheel.

I look back at the palace on the peninsula, now far below us, where we spent the last two nights as guests. We left Rome last Monday.

Luna, who normally sits behind the wheel, is starting her final year at university this week. She made it clear that she is completely fine with the fact that I will be travelling with our prince on my own for a while. Nefret, our foster daughter, is starting her school year as well. Together with Maria, our housekeeper, the three will manage just fine.

The other two brides of Lucio, who form the second married couple in our group, have obligations of their own at the moment. A former colleague of Elena is getting married in New York, so Nailah and the princess already flew there on Saturday.

This leaves the prince and me as the only two who are free to do whatever we like. Although the invitation was meant for all five of us, for now it is just the two of us who are accepting it. Since we are not expected to arrive before Saturday, we take our time and travel to our final destination in the most relaxed and luxurious way possible.

We are in the south of France, on our way to a monastery in a village near Carcassonne. At Luna's birthday party, now some six weeks ago, Sabrina, the mother of Lucio and Elena, gave us a letter written by one of her dearest friends. The writer, who is the mother superior of that monastery, has heard many stories from her Italian friend about the adventures my group has had. That is why she finally gathered the courage to ask us to visit her sometime, to see whether there might be something the five of us could help her with.

She did not want to elaborate too much in her letter. According to her, however, the matter at hand is closely related to what we have already been doing.

'From an Egyptian pharaoh, via a witches' coven, to a monastery. I look forward to finding out what the similarities will be,' Luna whispered yesterday when we said our goodbyes.

Through our phones we will, of course, remain in close contact, as well as with our two loved ones in New York. For now, however, I am on a lovely trip with my prince, almost like a holiday. Everywhere we go, he introduces me as his wife. That is not a lie as such, yet it still makes me smile every single time.

Lucio glances sideways. 'Daydreaming again, Julia? Or have you already figured out what we'll be doing?'

I shake my head. It is not a strange question at all. Ever since we read the letter, I have been expecting a new series of dreams to force their way upon me, just as they did before. That has always been how things unfolded. But there has been no dream. No vision. Nothing. Like everyone else, I am completely in the dark.

Even Princess Sabrina swore that she truly has no idea what her friend has in store for us. She asked more than once. The answer never changed. Whatever this is, it can only be explained once we are there.

And so the appointment was made, and this freshly married couple, after all, our weddings were only three months ago, decided to turn it into a holiday as well. We are enjoying ourselves, exactly as a couple should. We discussed which car to take on this trip, and in the end the wife's voice was the deciding factor. I refused to arrive at a tranquil monastery in a flashy, bright red Ferrari.

Besides, this family car of ours offers far more comfort. Luna hardly uses it in Rome anyway. For her birthday we recently bought her a scooter. In Roman traffic, two wheels are simply more practical. Late on Monday evening we arrived at the luxurious Monegasque royal palace after driving up the Italian coastline. The prince of Monaco himself had invited us. Lucio has known him for decades, and the two share many interests, among them fast cars, women, and poker.

Our husband cannot complain about beautiful women. He has four of them, and all, if I may include myself as well, are quite stunning.

The day in Monaco has become one that I will not easily forget. As one could expect, his friend wanted to show off a little. Hence, we did not lack anything during our stay. Even better, we are leaving this country with a bit more wealth than we entered it thirty-six hours ago.

Our host had apparently forgotten that Lucio, when we met him in Las Vegas, won a poker tournament. But, a visit to Monaco is not complete, according to him, without spending a few hours in his casino.

While I was strolling around, taking in all the gold and glamour, my lovely husband managed to win a handsome sum of money again. Of course, nobody realizes that he can do that, because I can, without even having to be nearby, predict all outcomes and guide him through the game without any problem.

When we got dressed this morning, Luna had already sent both of us a message with two thumbs up. She saw the amount that was added to our bank account. 'Well done, both! Rest assured; I will do my best to make sure some of that money gets spent!'

Today will only be a short drive. Tonight, we will stay in Saint-Tropez. Tomorrow, Lucio then has one final surprise for me before we drive to our final destination on Friday. The prince tries to avoid the main roads as much as possible. On the winding coastal roads, we enjoy the extremely prosperous district. Villas are everywhere, one even more stunning than the next, and small villages are full of expensive hotels. Twice, we stop for a drink on a terrace.

We call New York and my home front. It really starts to feel more and more like an actual holiday together.

In the early afternoon, we already arrive in this famous seaside town. Lucio parks the car in the underground garage and hands the keys to the receptionist, so our luggage can already be brought up. Like newlyweds, we walk through some busy shopping streets and along the harbour with beautiful yachts, arm in arm.

Although my family has a shipping company, buying a yacht like this has never even occurred to me. It is a very luxurious way of travelling, but somehow it has never appealed to me. I do still enjoy looking at these large vessels, some of which appear to be even larger than the Borghese family's mansion in Rome. Several stories high, with swimming pools and sometimes even an on-board garage.

Next to one of the yachts, Lucio stops. It is not the largest one in this row, but for sure one of the more impressive ones. Sleek and modern, and unlike most others here, painted in dark blue. The black tinted windows are like mirrors. On the rear deck, an impeccably dressed gentleman with flowing white hair watches over the quay.

As soon as he spots Lucio, he starts walking down the gangway, waving his hand. The prince walks up to him, and the two men greet each other in the friendliest fashion. 'You are perfectly on time,' the man cheerfully says in English, with a strong French accent.

Lucio turns to me and introduces me to Bernard, a good friend of his, who has invited us onto his yacht today. I see a special kind of twinkle in my husband's eyes, one I have only seen there a couple of times before. I immediately understand that the true reason for this visit is a surprise for me. 'We will have a lovely, festive dinner on board while sailing on the Mediterranean Sea. When we wake up tomorrow, we'll be back here at this quay,' the prince quickly explains the idea.

We follow our host onto his yacht, and are welcomed by Veronica, a beautiful Spanish lady who introduces herself to me as his wife. Just as with Bernard, the years are showing, but she still has the powerful appearance of a flamenco dancer. Lucio is welcomed by her with a kiss. Then she embraces me and gives me a kiss as if we have been best friends for years already.

The owners of the yacht lead us toward the bow, to a beautiful salon, where we are introduced to the other guests. We meet a variety of people, from different nationalities, ages, and relationships. In short, our group of five would fit perfectly. We receive a glass of champagne, which is clearly not the first drink of the day for some of the others. A few toasts are made, to love and to a lovely evening together.

It is clear that we are considered the guests of honour. The host spends many words on the prince and me. Every now and then, Egypt and Scotland are mentioned as well. These people are aware of who and what I am. I listen only half attentively to the stream of words and look at my ring. Who and what I am.

Something that has changed dramatically over the past few months. Partly because of this ring, which once belonged to an Egyptian pharaoh, and because of the powers bestowed upon it by a goddess, images rise inside my head of our first adventure in Egypt, where our group of five came to be. Luna, my love, who carries the powers of this goddess within her as well, stands beside me, supported by the triangle of Lucio and his two other brides, Elena and Nailah.

We are a special group, one that grew even closer in Scotland, when this divine energy turned out to be something witches use as well.

Elena herself has even been initiated as a witch, just like her own mother, and mine. More and more people in our environment are becoming aware of this special bond that is evolving in and around our group. At Luna's birthday in July, and again at my own mother Eloïse's birthday just a week ago, it became clear that the circle around us is growing larger all the time.

Not many people know almost everything. Apart from my own core group, there is this so-called second circle. Many others, however, know enough to feel drawn toward us, and especially toward me. They sense what I could be for them, and perhaps even what I might mean to them. I still need to get used to this role of something like a guru.

Particularly Luna and Nailah are doing wonderful work in keeping people at a distance and answering many questions on my behalf. I may step more into the foreground myself when I feel ready. For now, nobody seems frustrated or rejected. Everyone is understanding and patiently awaiting what will come next.

Now we are on our way to something new. For the first time since our trip to Scotland. Only because Sabrina knows the writer of this letter personally did I agree to see what I might be able to do for her.

I look up from my train of thought and notice that Bernard seems to have finished his monologue. Everyone is staring at me.

Lucio turns to the group with a smile. 'Her three wives and I have grown used to this daydreaming of hers. Please don't feel offended. Julia simply lives in her own world every now and then.'

Blushing, I ask what is expected of me, aware that I indeed missed the last part of the conversation.

The host's wife, seated next to me, whispers that her husband, with permission from my prince, asked whether I would honour them by showing them a glimpse of my powers.

Once again, I feel myself blush. Not from shame, but from the sudden sensation of being put on display, like a monkey performing a trick, so rich men can say, 'Look how well she can do that.' Even as the thought arises, I realize that neither Lucio nor this couple have such intentions at all, and I steady myself again.

When I stand up, I look around the table. Without any warning, all champagne glasses held by men shatter into pieces. A brief shriek follows, from women who did not expect anything like this.

When the glasses reassemble themselves, the men stare at their intact but empty glasses. The contents have been relocated into those of the women, who now see their glasses filled to the rim. It did not cost me much effort at all. Applause breaks out. Glasses, full and empty alike, are raised in our direction. With one final gesture of my hand, the champagne redistributes itself evenly again, and now, after the next toast, everyone can finally take a sip.

Our host steps closer and whispers an apology for putting me on the spot. He saw from my reaction that I was startled and uncomfortable. I take his hand and tell him he does not need to worry.

‘My prince should know by now that I always need a bit more time. He will be punished appropriately tonight.’ Lucio looks playfully guilty and says that he realized too late that I had not been listening.

Bernard assures me that nothing else will be asked of me during our stay. We are guests of honour. No further requests will be made.

Dinner will not begin for another three hours, when we are already on the open sea. Until then, we are free to spend our time as we wish. I ask Lucio what his preference would be. He checks whether I would mind if he joined a few of the other guests for a relaxed game of poker. Without my help this time.

I have no objections and ask whether there is a swimming pool or a jacuzzi on board. ‘Just follow me,’ my beautiful neighbour says with a smile as she takes my hand. The men walk away, laughing and talking. Veronica leads me outside. It is clear that none of the other guests follow us right away. It seems we will indeed be respectfully left alone.

On the upper deck, at least twenty meters above the waves, a beautiful swimming pool glistens. Surrounded by railings made of the same dark glass as the windows, you can sit, lie, or swim here in complete privacy. Unless a larger ship passes by, or you are docked in a harbour with tall buildings.

We are already underway now, and the young lady further along, sunbathing naked, will feel completely unobserved. A man, wearing only swimming trunks, is swimming laps in the pool. Right next to the sunbather, a jacuzzi bubbles, recessed into the deck. For a moment I look from the woman, whose eyes are still closed, to Veronica. She merely shrugs and lets her dress slip from her body.

She had nothing on underneath. With a smile, she lowers herself into the water. I take a little longer, since I have to get rid of my dress as well as my shoes, bra, and panties, but soon I settle into the warm water beside her. 'Everything is allowed here,' she whispers in Spanish. 'You are among friends and completely safe.'

I thank her in her own language and think back to how I spoke almost the same words to Cate, when she first stepped into our group in Rome. I hope the Scottish woman felt just as good back then as I do now, after the kind words of my hostess.

Fully relaxed, I feel almost like I am with Luna in our own jacuzzi. In my mind, I look in on my love. She is deep in discussion with Carlo and two other fellow students. There is some sort of scale model between them. I enjoy the fire with which I see her speak. I love her passion.

Veronica allows me to daydream and orders a tray with various drinks from a passing attendant. Even such a small gesture of "leaving me be" is something I appreciate deeply. She does not want to disturb me by asking what I want, but simply makes sure I will have a choice.

I look at her and say 'sorry' for drifting off with my thoughts again.

She reassures me by saying that Lucio already warned them about this last week. She knows I do not only think about other things, but can also see other things that are happening somewhere else at that very moment.

I nod and explain that I briefly checked in on my wife, who is at the moment working on her studies in Rome.

'Does she feel it when you think about her like that?' Veronica asks, genuinely interested.

'Most of the time,' I answer, 'if there isn't too much distraction.'

I take a glass of orange juice from the tray the young man brings over and take a sip. Incidentally, that distraction is quite often present for my flirtatious Italian. Although I worry zero, absolutely zero, about her love for me, she is the most open, within our close-knit group of five, to all forms of attention from others. Including sexual attention. The other three and I are fine with it. Her heart belongs to us, of that we are certain. But Luna remains Luna, and that is a very good thing.

Once again, the Spanish woman allows me to drift peacefully into my own thoughts. Her eyes are closed by now. I kiss my ring and let myself sink beneath the water.

This experience in the water was one of the first new things my Luna and I discovered that I can do. Remaining submerged for long periods, sometimes for hours. Enjoying the most curious sounds of this underwater world. The tones soothe me. From time to time, another person can join me and share in the experience. Some of my powers, especially this one, I can temporarily share with others.

I look at the body of the woman beside me. She is more muscular than I initially thought. Perhaps I did not notice her muscles right away because I was paying too much attention to her curves. She has an athletic build. My first impression of her as a dancer was probably not far from the truth. This is a woman who is still very much in shape.

Through the surface of the water, I see her looking at me. She knows that I am admiring her. I gesture with my hand for her to come down as well. Without hesitation, she joins me. Her hairstyle and make-up dissolve, giving way to her natural beauty. She does not seem to be surprised that she can stay with me for so long. After ten minutes, she gives me a kiss and resurfaces. I follow her shortly after.

Standing next to the pool, her husband is watching us. He gives me a compliment on having persuaded his wife to put her head underwater, something she rarely does. She likes to look perfectly groomed at all times. I look at his wife. Her black hair, with a few charming streaks of grey, hangs wet in soft waves along her face. She is radiant.

Especially now, with this blissful smile on her face, she needs no adornment at all to be a dazzlingly beautiful woman.

Only now do I realize that her husband has been watching me intently as well. That I do not mind his gaze may be the greatest change of all that has happened to me over the past few months. I even enjoy his wandering look, aware that I do not look unattractive.

'Would you like to join us for another drink before dinner?' Bernard asks. He gallantly helps us out of the hot tub.

Automatically, I reach for my clothes. But when Veronica slips her arm through her husband's and walks away with him, naked, I follow her example at his other side.

In the salon, a calm, convivial atmosphere reigns. The company is in various stages of 'coverage'. Lucio and several other men have been playing poker, and their appearance has not changed at all. The man from the pool has wrapped himself in a towel.

The sunbather is still naked, just like Veronica and I are. Two other women come in sweaty and almost naked, clearly just back from the sauna, with only a bathrobe loosely draped around them. Most striking of all is a couple dressed in nothing but underwear, she in beautiful mint-green lingerie. I look into their minds and see that they have just returned from their bedroom.

No one seems to pay any attention to these differences in clothing. Mingling freely, the guests stand chatting and drinking calmly. By now, I am standing next to my prince, his arm around my waist. He pulls me comfortably against him. Every now and then, his hand slides down to stroke my behind. No one finds that strange either. I begin to wonder what kind of evening this will turn into.

It soon becomes clear during dinner that my suspicion was correct. Some of the couples feed each other playfully, while here and there other combinations are already forming. As the evening progresses, more and more items of clothing are tossed into some corner. I enjoy all the openness, love, and sexuality that I see around me.

I stay close to Lucio and feel no urge whatsoever to go along with the flow. Fortunately, my love notices this. The prince keeps giving me gentle kisses while we both enjoy the spectacle unfolding around us.

It's not that I couldn't imagine enjoying active sex in public, especially if that sex were with Lucio. But the energy I am receiving now from all the lovemaking around me is more than satisfying. It amazes me that no one is bothered by the fact that we are not actively participating in the orgy developing around us. Now and then, there is a wink or an intense look. Sometimes someone sits down close to us for a moment, almost like a pause, to chat briefly. No pressure, no invitations. Everyone accepts that this is what I want right now.

Still, I am glad that Lucio and I are not the only ones who are keeping some distance. An older couple, the man of whom could easily be Bernard's brother, is also sitting quietly watching. He, like Lucio by now, is wearing only something on his lower body, and she is the only woman who has remained fully dressed. She lies with her head against her husband's chest and glows. She is enjoying what she sees. Her hand teasingly strokes his leg.

It is also clearly visible what the sight of all this warmth and the actions of these people are doing to Lucio.

I know that he would like more with me. That will certainly happen again in the coming days. I close my eyes and look at the connection between all these people.

To my surprise, I see that they are consciously sending much of their love and erotic energy toward me. That is why I feel so good. That is why I gain so much energy from it. They are literally giving it to me. They have created this orgy especially for me. Even from the couple who are not participating, waves of sexual love flow in my direction. This is what my prince has arranged for me. A dinner at which I am being fed in more than one way.

I open my eyes and look into his. 'Thank you, my love,' I whisper, 'what a beautiful gift.' I give him a kiss.

He knows that I understand. The kiss does not stop. Until I even reach a small orgasm, without any activity from my side, because of all the energy that is given to me. Savouring the aftermath, leaning against Lucio's chest, I close my eyes and fall asleep.

### **Thursday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>**

The yacht is lying still again when I wake up the next morning. I am lying in a comfortable bed. I cannot remember anything concrete about the night after the orgasm, but I do feel that the party must have gone on for hours afterward. The stream of energy flowing toward me never diminished during all that time. I feel stronger and more energized than I have ever felt without Luna by my side.

Lucio is sitting with his back to me at a small table with his laptop. Next to me in bed, I see Veronica lying there. Apparently, she spent the night with us. When I close my eyes, I see that nothing happened between them apart from a few kisses. Although she certainly would have wanted more, Lucio's attention remained focused on me.

Still, she lies here beside me, deeply content. I kiss my hostess, and her lips curl into a smile. She is dreaming about him.

I get up and walk over to my prince. Pressing my naked body against him from behind, I kiss his neck.

'Good morning, sleepyhead,' he whispers, turning around to give me a proper kiss. I see that the prince is video-calling with Luna, Elena, and Nailah. I wave to the three women, and Luna blows me a kiss.

Because Veronica is still asleep, we keep the sound off and continue chatting by typing. Luna asks whether I enjoyed Lucio's gift and says that she secretly likes the fact that I have once again been more faithful to her than she is always to me. Elena and Nailah laugh, as do I. Yes, a party like this is something Luna would never let pass without active participation.

I tell them how I experienced it. We chat for a while longer, until Lucio remarks that we should go shower and get dressed. He has another surprise planned for me today. I can tell from their eyes that my three brides already know what it is. After one last kiss toward the camera, I close the laptop and walk with the prince to the shower.

While we gently soap each other, I suddenly feel unfamiliar hands stroking me from behind. I do not have to turn around to know that Veronica has woken up and has slipped in under the shower with us. Without the intention of going any further than cuddling, we spend an intimate quarter of an hour beneath the warm streams. Afterward, Veronica hurries off to her own cabin, wearing only a towel. Lucio and I take our time getting dressed.

'Bernard wasn't available last night,' Lucio explains with a wink, 'that's why she asked whether she could sleep with us.' I close my eyes and see her husband in bed with the sunbather and the swimmer. To my surprise, I sense that our host was a gift from the young woman to her partner, not the other way around. It is also clear that they have not been asleep all that long, Bernard lying between them.

'You have a remarkable group of friends,' I compliment the prince. He laughs and repeats once more that absolutely no one in the group minded that we remained passive.

On the contrary. All the guests experienced it as a wonderful evening. They felt honoured to do this for me.

I feel a light blush rise to my cheeks. Although accepting all these forms of admiration is slowly becoming easier, I still need to get used to the fact that people want this. Still, I can feel in everything that the feeling is genuine.

Rarely, and Luna and I always sense it immediately when it happens, is there some other motive, or are people drawn to us by our wealth. Almost always, there is simply a sincere desire to be near us, and through us near me, and to experience spiritually what I am.

At breakfast, it is quiet. Most of the guests are still asleep. Only the older couple, who also did not actively take part in the sex party, and we are seated at the table when Bernard walks in. Vera woke him with a kiss and pulled him away from between his young bed partners so he could act as host for us. Everyone is dressed. If someone were to look at this breakfast now, no one would suspect what took place on this yacht during the night.

While we finish our last cup of coffee, a few others slowly join us. It is clear that we will not be able to say goodbye to everyone personally. I thank our host and hostess for the fantastic reception.

They insist, however, that I am the one who should be thanked. Even the older couple, with whom I have only now spoken for the first time at breakfast, says with conviction that my presence was the highlight.

Lucio puts his arm around me when he sees me blush again. We promise to return soon. Perhaps next time with our other wives as well. As we walk back over the gangway to the quay, we are waved off by everyone on the boat who is already awake.

Our car is waiting for us, fully packed and ready. After one last short honk of the horn, we slowly drive along the quay toward the road. A police officer greets us politely as he briefly holds up the rest of the traffic so we can pull out. We are on our way to the next surprise.

'You could have given Veronica what she wanted, darling,' I say to the prince as he drives through the centre of Saint-Tropez.

'She's already had that once,' he grins, 'but last night wasn't for that. And she agreed, by the way.'

I take his hand and squeeze it. I do not need to tell him that I love having sex with him and that we will certainly do so again soon. He knows that as well as I do. The way he arranged this evening on the boat differently is special. I am genuinely grateful to him for that.

We continue our journey along the southern coast of France toward the Pyrenees. We have a late lunch just past Marseille, and around four o'clock we turn south again near Arles, heading back toward the coast. Apparently, we are getting close to our destination, because the map shows that we are on a dead-end road that ends at the coast in the town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

The prince smiles when he notices that I realise we are almost there. Slightly to the east of the village, we suddenly turn off onto a campsite.

I look at him in surprise. What on earth are the two of us doing on a campsite? The last time I went camping was more than twenty-five years ago.

As we drive across the large grounds, it immediately stands out that many of the groups here are not using the usual campers and caravans one sees everywhere in the Netherlands and Germany. Instead, these are more traditional wagons. The people walking around are dressed in the colourful clothing you would expect with such wagons. Then Lucio turns into a courtyard formed by about half a dozen wagons arranged in a circle and parks our car next to several others.

As we step out, I hear someone call out happily, 'Luciano!' A small elderly woman with jet-black hair and a brightly coloured shawl comes toward him with her arms wide open. Lucio bends down to receive her hugs and kisses on both cheeks.

He then introduces me to her, and I am embraced just as warmly. She speaks broken Italian and introduces herself as Bonita. From her words I understand that she has known the prince since his childhood. She taught him and his sister how to ride horses when she lived with her family near Rome for a while. They stayed in touch throughout the years, and both Elena and Lucio still visit her regularly.

They are a Roma family from north-western Spain who come to this village for several months every year. In summer, there are many festivals here that are very important to them as Roma. It starts with a Marian celebration in May and ends with a horse-related event in October. After that last festival, they return to Spain to spend the winter months there.

So when the prince knew that we would be passing nearby on our way to Carcassonne, he was determined to introduce me to her.

She consistently calls me Juliana. Meanwhile, we are pulled inside one of the wagons. We are introduced to people of various generations. Some clearly already know Lucio well. Others look at him with a touch of admiration when she tells them he is a real Italian prince.

I am seated next to two children on a bench and handed a glass of cold wine. I think about the contrast between the palace in Monaco, yesterday's yacht, and where I have now ended up. The difference could hardly be greater. And yet, this is probably more in line with what awaits us at the monastery than the excess of the past few days.

All around me, statues of saints gleam, and everyone, young and old alike, wears crosses on chains around their necks or in their ears.

One of the two children, dressed in an extremely simple outfit that is little more than an oversized T-shirt, has overcome her initial shyness. She starts chatting cheerfully with me while showing me a drawing. In a dialect I cannot place, she tells me that, like many of her aunts and cousins, her name is Maria. She is seven years old and made a drawing for the prince. But because she did not know I would be coming, she now gives it to me instead, because she likes me better. Her mother, who appears to be Bonita's daughter, offers to translate if needed.

I smile at the girl and her mother and reply to the child in her own dialect. I tell her that I think it is a beautiful drawing and that it is now partly for the prince as well, because we belong together. She nods happily and says that at least now she does not have to make a second drawing. She is not at all surprised that I speak her language. All the older people in the wagon, however, look visibly astonished.

Lucio lets out an exaggerated sigh and takes the floor. He explains that I am simply a little unusual and that I seem to understand every language I hear and can speak it straight away. He is used to it by now, he says, though sometimes it might actually be more convenient if I did not show it so immediately. It always makes people more curious than we really want them to be.

The girl stands up and pulls me to my feet, asking whether I would like to come and see the horses. I glance briefly at both Lucio and our hostess. They both nod, and I walk off with Maria. Passing between two wagons, we reach a small grassy field where about fifteen horses are calmly eating from large troughs. She explains that the ones with a yellow handkerchief tied to their harness belong to them. The animals with other colours belong to the surrounding groups.

Without fear, she steps over the slack rope, which in the Netherlands would certainly not be considered an adequate or safe boundary for a pasture. Maria pulls me along by the hand between the horses. Here and there she gently pushes one aside with her small hand, until we reach her favourite horse.

'This is Princess,' she says proudly, and tells me that a few days ago she was allowed to ride her all by herself for the first time. 'She is a little sick though, because she hasn't been eating much for days.'

The girl takes a small handful of oats from the nearest trough and presses it against the horse's nose.

Behind me, I hear a short snort. I have to admit that I feel less at ease among all these powerful animals than my little friend does.

Maria takes my hand and places it against Princess' neck. 'She likes that,' she says softly, and then firmly pats the clammy, warm skin of the animal a few times with my open hand. When she lets go of my hand again, I much prefer to switch to gentle stroking.

I look into the horse's large, dark eyes. They look sad, and I close my own eyes to feel whether she really is ill. I flinch when I realize that the horse seems to become aware of what I am doing and now almost literally tells me what is wrong. Tears well up in my eyes. I will not tell Maria about this, but I will tell the others later.

I promise Princess that I will try to help her and fervently hope that she understands my reassurance, at least a little.

'Can you talk to horses too?' the young gypsy girl asks, glancing up at me from the corner of her eye. She seems to notice that I am making contact with her favourite in my thoughts.

I shake my head, but say that there are many things I do not yet understand or fully know about what I do, or appear to be able to do.

'Just like mama's old grandma,' she whispers admiringly. 'She could do that too!'

Back in the wagon, Maria happily resumes playing with her little brother on the bench.

I take Lucio aside for a moment and tell him what I felt with the horse.

The prince asks whether I want to share it with his friends, knowing that it will put me back in the spotlight again.

I understand what he means, but I promised Princess that I would help her, so I nod.

Lucio asks Bonita to come outside with one of her sons, so the children will not overhear us. We walk to the edge of the pasture. Princess, seeing us approach, immediately comes toward us and presses her head against my shoulder. The two owners look at the behaviour of their horse in amazement.

'Maria told me that her favourite horse is a bit sick and hasn't been eating much,' I begin to explain in their own language. In his thoughts, I include the prince, so he understands exactly what I am telling them.

'Don't ask me how,' I continue, 'because this experience is new to me as well. Somehow, Princess made it clear to me what is wrong with her. She is carrying a dead foal and knows that this makes her weak. It has been there too long, and she cannot expel it without your help.'

Following a brief nod from Bonita, her son runs off, returning shortly with an older man carrying a worn doctor's bag. With a small handheld ultrasound device, he examines the horse's belly, which Princess calmly allows.

After only a few seconds, he confirms my story. He exchanges some brief words with the mother and son, he leads Princess away. The son explains that he will give the horse some labour-inducing medication and remove the foal tonight or early tomorrow morning.

Still in shock, but very happy, he shakes my hand and says they would never have realized in time otherwise. Horses often die from severe blood poisoning in situations like this, before their owners understand what is wrong. He adds that his grandmother also had a similar bond with horses, like I seem to have. She too could avert such situations on many occasions, both for their own herd and for those of their friends, preventing serious suffering. 'The prince has chosen a very special woman,' he says, before following the other man with Princess.

Bonita now also shakes my hand at length and murmurs prayers, thanking God for sending me into their lives, wishing me all that is good, and also a large number of children.

Those last words bring tears to my eyes, because since our journey to Egypt I know that I am infertile. The prince briefly explains to his startled friend why this prayer affected me so deeply.

Hundreds of apologies follow at once, but I reassure her and say that I certainly hope for many children. They just will not be my own, and that I still value and gladly accept her good wishes.

We walk back to the wagon, where the other adults are informed about Princess' condition. Including my role in it, and that the problem will likely be resolved. Glasses are raised.

I flop back down next to Maria on the bench. Can not a single day pass in a somewhat normal way? Without hesitation, the girl climbs onto my lap, wraps her little arms around my neck, and whispers in my ear, 'Thank you for helping my Princess. The grown-ups think I don't hear anything, but I listen without ears as well.'

Her words invite me to look into her soul. There I see the multiple ages that I have by now grown accustomed to seeing in people with a paranormal gift. I give the girl a kiss on her cheek and whisper back that I was happy to do it. I tell her that in the future she might become just as special as her mama's grandmother.

'I know,' she answers again, surprising me once more, 'she already told me that.'

Once again, I update Lucio inside his head and tell him more about this remarkable girl. He nods and gives me a wink while glancing at Bonita. I understand that she is aware of this. The adults simply do not pay too much attention to it right now. They let her be a child for the time being, and I agree entirely with that approach.

When the warm late-summer day begins to cool a little, we go outside. In the central square, large tables have already been set up where we will all eat together. Festively dressed people sit intermixed. There are more people here than just the family from Bonita's wagon circle. All the children sit together at their own table and are spoiled there by several of the older ones with delicious food and drinks.

The division of roles is fairly traditional. While the men and the older women happily eat, drink, and talk, all the women between about twenty and forty years old move back and forth, constantly making sure that everyone has what they need. I am the only woman in that age range who remains seated.

When I ask one of the busy women whether I can help as well, because I like to be useful, she laughs, gives me a kiss, and says that honoured guests obviously do not work, but that she very much appreciates the intention. That word again. Honoured guests. I know they all sincerely see it that way, but I still find it difficult to accept without question.

A few speeches are given, and the prince also takes the floor once more to pass on the warmest greetings from his mother and sister to the family. Of course, he has also brought a gift for his friends, on behalf of all of us. From beneath the table, he pulls out a small box that I recognize as something that had been lying in the back of the car and that I had been wondering about earlier.

Bonita opens the box. Inside is a golden statue of Mary with a glistening crown, seemingly set with tiny diamonds.

She gives Lucio a few spontaneous kisses and then immediately comes to me as well, to thank me for the beautiful gift, which will receive a place of honour in her wagon. With a private smile, I wonder where on earth it could still fit. I do not believe there is more than a couple of centimetres of free shelf space left in there.

The party continues, and no one seems inclined to go to bed. The children dance and sing along cheerfully, while to me it already feels as if it must be well past midnight. At a certain point, the veterinarian walks into the group. Even before he reaches Bonita and her son to share the good news, he gives me a thumbs-up. Everything has turned out fine with Princess.

Once the news reaches everyone, glasses are raised in my name, and I receive handshakes and kisses from all sides. Little Maria has tears in her eyes and looks at me from the children's table with a tender smile.

The women now walk back and forth less with food and drinks. Here and there, people start dancing. Even Lucio joins in, dancing between two women. My charming prince, however, cannot quite match the graceful, seductive movements of his beautiful partners.

Just like yesterday, I remain a little more on the sidelines here as well. More an observer than a participant. And thankfully, once again, no one disapproves of this or finds it strange. Only when the men, with a bit too much alcohol in them, start showing off and trying to outdo each other with various stunts, do I get up once.

One of them, a true circus artist with knives, challenges me to take the place of his own girlfriend in front of the wooden board. They had expected that I would not dare to do so. But what could happen to me? Even if he were to hit me with a knife, I could easily heal myself. Yet another power that I have developed over the past few months.

The knives fly into the wood to the left and right of my arms and head. Not once am I hit. After the extensive applause, I raise my hand.

'Because this has become such a special evening, and because I feel so very much at home with you,' I begin, naturally again in their own language, 'I would like to issue a challenge as well. Which one of you,' and here I look especially at our knife thrower, 'would dare to throw a knife straight at me, so that I can catch it?'

Everyone turns to look at him. Both he and his girlfriend, who herself also seems to be highly skilled at throwing knives, hesitantly raise a hand.

Before moving, they both glance at the prince, who merely lifts his thumb with a laugh. He, too, is not worried in the slightest.

The couple walk toward me and ask whether they should perhaps use blunt knives, just to be safe.

I shake my head. 'Trust me. The sharpest knives you have, please.'

They nod and each walk a few meters away from me, one to the left and one to the right, each holding a knife. I take my position in the middle and stretch both hands outward at shoulder height, sideways toward them. Fingers pointing upward, palms facing them.

Then I say loudly and clearly, so that everyone present can hear me, 'My hands are your target. Throw your knives so that, if I do nothing, they will pierce straight through my palms. Do not hold back. If you do anything different, I will not be able to react properly.'

Everyone falls completely silent. Most people stand up to make sure they do not miss a moment of the spectacle. I close my eyes and bow my head. I feel the energy of the throwers. They are nervous, but they follow my instructions perfectly.

Almost simultaneously, I feel the knife points drive deep into my hands. The pain is sharp, far worse than I expected. Somewhere nearby, I hear a scream. Still, despite the pain, I feel that I have the situation fully under control. I open my eyes and look left and right at my two pierced hands. The throwers are staring at them with their mouths open as well. Neither of them comes toward me, because I appear so calm and show not a trace of panic.

I then extend my hands toward them and ask the two to come closer. After complimenting them both on their perfect throw, I ask them to very slowly pull each other's knife out of my hands.

That pain is extreme as well, and I feel it create an arousing effect in my body, something I have by now learned to recognize when I do things like this. When the knives have been fully removed, not a single drop of blood has flowed. Both blades are completely clean, and there is not even a scratch on my hands. In disbelief, the two throwers stare at my palms and then lift them up for everyone to see.

A deafening cheer erupts. Everyone comes rushing toward us to look at my hands for themselves and express their admiration. Behind the crowd, I notice Lucio calmly talking to a radiant Bonita. He has explained more to her, I think.

When I sit down again, I feel that the day has cost me a great deal of energy. I received a lot as well, just like yesterday, so I am not worried, but it does make me tired.

Maria's mother comes to sit beside me and whispers that the prince had already announced that I was truly very special. None of them, however, had even the faintest idea of just how special that actually is. They had thought he was simply boasting a little about his wife, just as he had also bragged about having four of them.

I look at her and see that she does not entirely believe that part of his story either. I give her a kiss on the cheek and whisper in her ear that it really does not matter to us who believes what. I can assure her, hand on heart, that the prince has not boasted about anything at all.

She looks at me with wide eyes. 'Four?' she whispers.

I nod, and she tells me I should definitely not tell her husband. She would become wildly jealous and chase the other women away from him. I choke on my drink and tell her that less than half a year ago, I had thought exactly the same way. Now, however, I would not want it any other way. Even though I do not expect anyone to understand it, let alone aspire to it themselves.

'What's more,' I conclude, 'I do not think there are many people, men or women, who would be able to do it. No matter how tempting it may sometimes seem, especially for men.'

She hastens to assure me that she certainly does not judge it, but that it is very far removed from their own traditions and customs.

I understand perfectly what she means and briefly tell her about the witches we met a few months ago. Their traditions are also very different, and far removed from ours, or from those of the Roma. And yet, beyond the energy we experience, we all share one essential common ground. Respect for our surroundings and for one another.

She nods. This, she says, is exactly what she has often spoken about with her grandmother. Although this elderly woman had been given titles such as prayer healer and the like, she herself always felt closer to the witches than was customary in their circles.

'It has to do with belief or religion,' I explain to her. 'It is not the people themselves who decide that there are differences between them. It is often a belief that prefers to emphasize those differences, in order to present itself as unique and the only true one.'

‘Exactly what my grandmother always used to say as well,’ she says with a broad smile. ‘Catholicism truly is a beautiful faith. It’s just a shame that it was turned into a religion.’

Her remark makes me laugh, though I am well aware that it perfectly captures, at its core, where so much intolerance comes from.

Once more, she whispers that she is very happy to have met me and that she hopes our paths will cross many times in the future. Then she stands up, and Lucio takes her place.

He asks whether I am enjoying myself a little. He already knows the answer, but as proof I give him a long, deep kiss, thanking him for the fact that he introduced me to his friends.

Bonita comes over to us and takes us to her wagon. An extra bed has been prepared there, into which we are laid without a single word being spoken. ‘They’ll go on until sunrise,’ she says as she kisses us goodnight. ‘You still have a long journey ahead tomorrow. Sleep well.’

I snuggle up close to my prince and kiss him, while my hand slides down over his stomach.

‘Good night, Luciano and dear Juliana,’ Maria’s voice calls out. Apparently, she has been put to bed in this wagon as well, a little further along.

‘So much for our privacy,’ I whisper, and the prince and I decide that we might as well go to sleep straight away.

### **Friday, September 4<sup>th</sup>**

Maria kisses me awake, and I see that Lucio is already crawling around on the ground with her little brother. ‘You have to leave soon, he says,’ she whispers, while her small hand points behind her. She pulls me to my feet and leads me to a small shower room, where clothes have already been laid out.

I feel completely at ease. In this environment just as much as in the excessive luxury I am used to. This experience makes me considerably less nervous about our time in the monastery.

When I take my seat at the breakfast table, Bonita is standing there, fresh and lively, in full dress, arranging all kinds of delicious things. Clearly accustomed to short nights and to taking care of guests. Her children are nowhere to be seen yet.

Her grandchildren, however, are very much present, chattering cheerfully and eating breakfast with us in their pyjamas. Slightly behind Maria, I see the statue Lucio gave as a gift yesterday, proudly displayed in a glass cabinet. I am surprised that it still fit in there.

Before we are actually allowed to leave, Maria insists on taking me to the horse field one more time. She makes no effort to get dressed first. In a nightgown that is a size too big, she runs ahead of me.

There stands her Princess, already waiting for us. The noble animal seems just as happy to see me as she is to greet her owner, Maria. The energy is completely different now from yesterday. I am so glad she has come through the procedure well.

Only now does Maria decide that I am allowed to leave.

Back at the car, I first receive more than a minute of hugs and kisses from Bonita. Then I finally get in. Lucio looks at me with a grin and waves his arm out of the window as we drive off, without honking, through the still-quiet park.

Just before we reach the motorway, more than half an hour later, does the traffic around us grow a little busier and does he begin to talk.

'You left an indelible impression there,' he says. Admiration rings in his voice, even though he knows my gifts well.

'They did on me too,' I reply honestly. I see a satisfied smile on his face. It is unmistakable how dear this special Roma family is to him. He is happy that I have taken them into my heart as well.

'Too bad you closed your eyes when catching those knives. You should have seen their faces when those sharp things stayed lodged in your hands. Weren't you afraid?'

I shake my head and say that I trusted they truly would never want to hit the wife of their beloved prince in her head, or anywhere else. They handled those weapons very well.

Lucio tells me that Roma children develop such skills as handling weapons from a young age. Knives, whips, bows and arrows, and the like. Some of them perform in travelling circuses, but most of it is playful, purely for amusement and to enhance their own colourful festivities. 'Didn't it hurt terribly?' he asks.

'Quite a lot!' I admit. 'You know what pain does to me, and that feeling of arousal then actually makes it easier to ensure that I keep the healing of my hands completely under control.'

He now understands as well why I cuddled up so contentedly against him in bed afterwards. The children did, however, put a stop to any further intimate activities in the wagon that night.

I think of sweet Maria and her open smile when she gives Princess those affectionate pats. I really do not mind at all that she and her little brother slept in the wagon with us. Though I do think that in a monastery we will probably not be able to indulge ourselves much in an intimate sense either.

Lucio sees me thinking about sex and bursts out laughing. 'Hey, on Bernard's yacht you had the chance to let yourself go,' he teases me, 'now you'll just have to wait and see when we can make love again. The chances of orgasms among the nuns will not be much higher.'

I protest that I could not possibly have known where he would take me the next day. 'As if I could have guessed that crawling around on the floor with a four-year-old boy would be more fun for you than satisfying one of your wives.'

Lucio's eyes gleam. He growls that that is an exaggeration.

I place my hand on his thigh and stroke teasingly, slowly upwards.

The prince pretends to close his eyes and stop paying attention to the traffic.

'A good way to cause an accident,' I whisper in his ear, and bend down to give a deep kiss to the bulge in his trousers. My lips feel that he is more than ready. Satisfied, I sit upright again and keep teasing him with my caressing hand. With my other hand, I take my phone to call Luna. First I film where my left hand is at that moment. Then I switch the camera to myself and see her laughing face.

'Lovely, isn't it,' she begins, 'to have him all to yourself?'

I grumble that he should at least pick locations where we have some time alone and tell her that our last night, before we're sleeping in a monastery, we shared a wagon with children.

My beautiful Italian beams and tells me I should start getting used to a bit of celibacy. After that she continues about her first days at university. And what she hears every evening from Nefret about the start at her new school. They are doing well, though they both miss me. 'Nefret might miss you even more than I do,' she says with a laugh, and turns the camera slightly so that I see Carlo waving beside her.

I look into her mind and see that they spend a lot of time together. Nothing has happened yet, although I would not mind at all if it had.

Their short break is almost over, so after one last kiss we end the call.

I send Elena and Nailah only a text message. Those two have a busy, full schedule today and tomorrow, so I do not call them now. I do immediately receive a photo in return, of the two of them together on top of the Chrysler Building. They look radiant.

When I put my phone away, I only then realise that my hand is still absent-mindedly rubbing over the prince's crotch. The hard bulge in his trousers is impossible to miss. While I put on my sunglasses and calmly look out of the open window, so that the drivers we overtake do not notice, my fingers fidget with the fastening.

A moment later I am enjoying the feeling of his erection between my fingers. Now and then I glance over to him. He keeps concentrating on the road as if nothing is happening. For minutes I look outside and enjoy the landscape that we're driving through, the sun and feeling his excitement in my slow moving hand.

When his breathing becomes deeper, I quickly bend over and let him cum inside of my greedy mouth. After carefully cleaning him with my tongue, I put his impressive manhood back and zip him up.

When I straighten up again and look out of the side window, I see, very close by, the laughing face of a young woman driving alongside us. I glance back at the prince, who grins at me and then accelerates. He has deliberately not fully overtaken her.

'Maybe you should drive for a bit,' Lucio suggests, with a smile that betrays his intention to reverse the roles. That does not seem like a good idea to me. My orgasms, especially the ones he gives me, do not combine very well with driving. Besides, it would not be the first time I fainted shortly afterwards. No, he can spoil me again later.

During lunch, in a small restaurant on a picturesque little square, he teases me now and then under the table, knowing that my desire for him grows with every passing minute. But I do not let myself be tempted. We are in no hurry. Besides, I actually enjoy walking around with this feeling. It sharpens all my senses and makes everything so much clearer.

Around three o'clock, we leave the motorway a few kilometres before Carcassonne and drive south through the beautiful, rolling countryside. Here we stop teasing each other, because Lucio needs all his concentration on the winding roads.

He has to avoid tractors, cyclists, and goats roaming freely. It seems the back roads are busier than the motorway. When we finally drive into the valley of our destination, however, the bustle appears to be over and, apart from a few goats, we encounter nothing at all.

The yellow gravel of the driveway crunches under the wheels of the heavy car. Lucio parks the vehicle in the cooling shade of a gigantic oak tree, and we get out.

Silence. Deafening silence and calm reign here. Only a very soft breeze occasionally makes a few leaves above our heads rustle. In the distance, I hear the bell of one of the goats. There is no one in sight. No welcoming committee, no sisters or brothers hurrying towards us. You could almost think we have arrived at the wrong monastery.

I take the arm Lucio offers me and we walk towards the complex of red-brick buildings.

Some parts are noticeably more modern than others. The builders have clearly done their best to keep everything in the same style as the original buildings from the early ninth century. This is one of the oldest monasteries in this part of France and is even said to have been founded on the foundations of an even older predecessor.

As we walk through the gate into the inner courtyard, an impressive church stands before us. It forms the heart of this complex, which is almost the size of a small village. The only activity we hear comes from a barn-like building on our left. From there come the unmistakable sounds of hammer and anvil from a blacksmith.

We walk towards the open double doors and see a man at work. He is dressed in a kind of blacksmith's version of a monk's habit, with a leather apron and gloves, but if he were to take those off, I think he could step straight into the church.

It takes a moment before he notices us, but then he immediately puts his hammer down and walks towards us. He introduces himself, and I tell him in French that we have an appointment with Sister Lucretia, the mother superior of this monastery.

He nods and says it would be better if we went to sit somewhere, because all the sisters are in the church at the moment. They will certainly be occupied for another half hour. Only the brothers will be seen walking around here and there, as they are currently all at work. They will go to the church for their prayers afterwards.

Apart from the three daily meals and occasional special celebrations, the nuns and monks do everything separately.

I ask how large the monastery is.

He tells me that at the moment they have twenty-three monks and thirty-seven nuns. Ideally, both groups should number thirty. But too few men join. For women entering the order, on the other hand, there is even a waiting list. He asks whether we would like something to drink, but I say that we do not want to keep him from his work and ask if it is all right for us to wander around a bit. That is no problem.

Even before the prince and I step back into the sunlight, we already hear the first hammer blow behind us.

As we walk around the church, we hear the devout singing of female voices inside. Via the large cemetery, we reach an opening in an old, partly crumbling wall, behind which the farmland begins. In the field, we see a number of monks at work. They apparently do a great deal themselves here.

I am struck by how impressively large the vineyard seems to me. I have always found it remarkable how many monasteries have grown wealthy through the production of beer or wine.

We sit down with our backs against the wall. When the wind falls still, we can hear the nuns' choir from the church. In front of us, we watch the monks at work. Lucio's hand rests on my upper thigh.

Behind us, on the other side of this wall, lies the cemetery. I think back to our previous adventures. In both cases, the puzzle revolved around a grave. I do not think that will be the case this time ...

*... at the grave, three girls are standing. They appear to be roughly the same age. Yet they look completely different from one another. The only thing they have in common is a dark red hair colour.*

*So dark that it almost seems black, but it is not quite. It really is red. The darkest red I have ever seen. Not like the red-haired people I know from the Netherlands or other Northern European countries. No, this is a shade that perfectly suits the regions around the Mediterranean.*

*All their other physical features are different. The shape of the face, the mouth, the nose, the build of their bodies.*

*Apart from the hair colour, you would not say that these three are related at all. And yet, I believe that they are. Partly because they are standing together at one single grave.*

*I cannot read the text on the gravestone. Behind them I now see three women standing, patiently waiting for the girls to finish their prayers ...*

... the sisters have finished praying and singing, because one of them is now standing with us. She does not seem worried that I faded away, and when she sees that my eyes are open again, she gives Lucio a brief nod. He turns towards me and whispers that I was gone for about twenty minutes. He asks whether I had the first dream.

I nod and whisper back that, if the pattern repeats itself, the trigger for this dream must be nearby. I look at the woman standing before us. She helps me to my feet. As Lucio rises as well, she introduces herself as Sister Lucretia. She is a friend of Princess Sabrina.

'Welcome to our beautiful monastery,' she says now in Flemish Dutch, laughing when she sees my surprised expression. 'I grew up in Doornik,' she tells me, although she has been living in this area for more than fifty years now. 'Shall we go to my office for a moment, before we eat?'

Together we walk to the main building, and the prince and I follow her through a maze of corridors and staircases to a tastefully furnished office. Although everything here radiates a serene medieval calm and is steeped in religious symbols and objects, this really is a modern workplace. With a laptop, a printer, and all the usual conveniences.

She invites us to sit down and begins to speak. First of all, she thanks us for accepting her invitation. She has tried to follow our adventures as best she could through the media, but thankfully her Roman friend was able to share a few more details. Otherwise she would never have thought that I might be able to mean something for them.

Before she can explain more about that, which will be tomorrow, she wants to briefly discuss how things work here and what she asks us to take into account. Although the brothers and sisters, of course, live strictly separated, except during meals, the monastery does have a guesthouse where married couples, such as the two of us, may simply stay together overnight.

Lucretia gives us a small wink at those last words, because she knows apparently that the situation is somewhat more nuanced.

During meals, however, Lucio will be asked to take a seat at the table of the brothers, while I will sit among her sisters. The same applies if we wish to attend a church service.

Those are held separately for the brothers or sisters. We may, just as we did earlier, walk around together freely. During activities with members of the community, however, she asks us to observe the strict separation of the sexes. That will not be a problem for either of us. I feel Lucio's joy, because, like me, he is relieved that we may at least spend all nights together.

Sister Lucretia continues and says that, apart from a few sisters, the brothers and sisters here are not aware of what we have come to do. They will not ask us about it either. Guests come here more often, and there is a rule not to interfere in matters that are not one's concern. The two nuns who do know, we will meet tomorrow.

In addition, seven lay workers from nearby villages are employed on the grounds, including in the kitchen and housekeeping. One of them, a young man named Fabrice, is assigned to assist us and will take care of the guesthouse during our stay. He will be able to help us with many things at times when she herself is absent.

Communication may sometimes be difficult, because Lucretia will regularly be unavailable for hours at a time. She wishes to disturb the rhythm of the monastery as little as possible. All this time, not a word has been said about the assignment itself.

When mother superior asks whether there are any questions at this moment, before we walk to the dining hall, I have only one.

'Is it about the kinship of three girls?'

For a few seconds Lucretia looks taken aback, but then she bursts out laughing. Sabrina had already warned her that this might happen. I am, in fact, completely right. Still, she will only tell us more tomorrow. My question has, however, made her even more convinced that I will truly be able to help.

She stands up and asks whether we would mind if Fabrice takes our luggage to the guesthouse already. Lucio nods, and after she presses a button, a young man appears shortly afterwards, introduces himself politely, and takes the prince's car key.

We follow the mother superior to the large dining hall, which is wedged between the residential wings and the church. It is a very lofty space. I see many decorations and two long tables. I am given a seat at the table of the sisters, close to the head of the table, Lucretia's place.

At the head of the men's table sits a balding monk who leads the male group. Lucio takes his place on a chair next to him. Everyone is silent, and I wonder if this is a monastery where silence usually prevails.

After a brief nod from Sister Lucretia, the elderly head monk stands up. He leads us all in prayer. Although I know a few of the prayers, only in Dutch, I do not join in and simply remain respectfully silent. I am not a church-going person, so I am not going to pretend otherwise now. Luckily, no one seems bothered by that.

When, after the 'Amen', the soup is served, my suspicion proves unfounded and everyone begins chatting cheerfully. I look at Lucretia and see her gaze sweep the room with quiet satisfaction. These are moments when conversation is permitted. Because of this, everyone seems to savour the exchanged words all the more.

The sisters sitting near me at the table, introduce themselves briefly. One of them, Sister Carmilla, who is seated to my right, continues talking with me. She asks all kinds of questions about where I come from and similar things, repeatedly saying that I only need to answer if I feel like it. And, just as Lucretia had announced earlier, not a single question is asked about the purpose of my visit.

Carmilla tells me that she herself comes from the north of Spain and that she was initiated here just over fifteen months ago.

The food is excellent, and the company even better.

After dessert and a final prayer, Carmilla gives me a brief nod with a friendly smile. Everyone leaves the hall in silence once more. The sisters return to the church.

Lucio and I are then taken to our accommodation by Fabrice.

The house stands slightly behind the smithy, offers a wide view over the fields and, according to the young Frenchman, was once built when a member of the French royal family entered the monastery here as a novice.

In recent years, it has been used by dignitaries such as the Pope or a bishop, as well as by important guests like us.

'Why are we important?' I ask him.

He cannot answer that. Normally, guests such as visiting family members of the residents stay in a hotel in the village. Only important guests are allowed to remain on the grounds. So he knows that we are considered important, even though he has no idea why.

He shows us the entire house and proudly tells us that the room he has prepared for us has already been used by a Pope four times, most recently by the current Pope just a few months ago.

During our stay, he will be at our disposal every day from eleven in the morning until eight in the evening, after dinner. So he will be back tomorrow morning from about eleven o'clock. With a final question about whether we need anything else, he takes his leave. He wishes us a pleasant evening, and two minutes later I see him cycling away and leaving the grounds.

'Why would the Pope have been here recently?' Lucio wonders aloud. 'Could it be related to our mystery?'

I do not know either, and after the prince fetches some coffee for us from the kitchen, we sit down at the large dining table in the living room. We contact both Luna and the women in New York.

The latter two only say a brief 'hello' and want to be brought up to date later. They do not have time now, as they are with the bride, heading for several activities on her last day as a single woman.

I wish them a great time and say how pleased I am that I secretly arranged all of our marriages, so that no one could surprise me with such a day. I sometimes see large groups of these kinds of hen parties walking through Amsterdam, especially British ones. That sort of excessive entertainment is certainly not for me.

After Elena and Nailah hang up, I tell both Lucio and Luna about the dream. The prince then gives my wife a few more details about our welcome at the monastery.

Naturally, he teases her a little by telling her about my action in the moving car, saying that the skills of my hands are starting to come quite close to Luna's.

'Well,' Luna replies wittily, 'she's learning from the best,' and blows us an airy kiss.

After that, we continue talking about the possible reason for our visit here, although we do not get much further with the few clues we have so far. When Lucio mentions that the Pope also slept in this room not all that long ago, Luna suggests that the girls might be his daughters, by three different mothers. Or perhaps by a well-known bishop. I have to laugh at how her mind works, but actually it is not such a strange thought at all.

With what we know now, something like that is the most logical explanation we can come up with. We will have to wait and see.

'May I?' I hear Nefret's voice, patiently waiting to talk to me as well. Luna beckons her closer.

Our daughter, already in her pyjamas, tells us about the first week of school she has just completed. She has already made lots of new friends, although none of them is as sweet as her own Lieve, whom she has just been on the phone with again for a very long time.

In a few subjects she is already a little ahead of her classmates, and they are all happy to help her with her Italian. That does, however, mean that she can now swear in that beautiful language as well.

Finally, she tells us that Luna can also be a very good mother, although Maria is sometimes stricter than Luna. After one last kiss, she disappears from the screen and we say goodbye to my wife as well.

Luna wishes us a lovely day tomorrow and of course wants to hear from us again once we know more. She is off now to her "own prince" and, with a wink, wishes us a pleasant night.

I close the laptop and Lucio grumbles that he still has to get used to the fact that all the women in his immediate circle, from young to old, have called their vibrator "their prince" after him.

'It was that or cloning you,' I say without mercy.

Then we go to bed as well. Although we have complete privacy and no one would blame us, we do not make love and, after some kissing and whispered conversation, we both fall asleep.