

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 18 - Malta

"It was a tough scramble down, over rocks and rubble. Nature had planted weeds, which had become bushes, which had eventually given enough soil for trees to take hold. What had once been the elaborate entrance to somewhere underground, was now a hidden hole in the rocks."

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Of course, Patsy Smart knew the three-date rule. Her attitude was that if it felt right, it was right on the first date. On the other hand; if it felt wrong, it would still be wrong after six months of dating. Dave had understood, after she'd sat him down and been honest about it.

"I'm still getting over my previous boyfriend." She'd told him. "I can understand if you want to call it a day, but I need a little more time. What we do is wonderful, but that's as far as I'm comfortable with going, for now."

Oral sex, lots of oral sex and dry humping. Often, they'd both been naked, yet Dave hadn't tried any guerrilla sex tactics. No putting it in her when she wasn't expecting it. Dave was a good guy, or maybe he was a desperate guy who'd never really dated that much. She'd expected him to drift off and find a girl with fewer hangups, but he hadn't. Dave had told her he'd respect her decision and he'd be patient. He hadn't even set a time limit on his patience. Was Dave too damn good to be true. "And the socks, Dave." She said. "Everything has to come off."

Laura had a thing about guys who left their socks on. It was as though they had somewhere to rush off to, after getting their oats. At first Patsy had chuckled about it, but Laura's bit of a thing, had turned out to be contagious. Dave took off his socks and he was naked, as was she. Both of them were sat on her bed and about to have penetrative sex for the first time. No condoms, Patsy had decided that when they did finally do it, spontaneity was important. Besides, from what she knew of him, Dave didn't screw around.

Dave Benton, fully qualified heating and ventilation engineer. Her next lover, if thing worked out. She'd given poor Dave a bit of an interrogation over a Chinese takeaway. All with the aim of finding out about him. She'd once slept with a guy at college, without knowing his second name. Patsy had felt like the biggest slut in the world the next day, especially as she'd been drunk at the time. No repeat could be allowed though she still hadn't signed up to the three-date rule. She'd come up with a list of essential precoital information, that included a full name and date of birth. Dave had looked surprised at being asked about his date of birth, so she'd told him why. He'd smiled at her and held her hand. He'd actually put her hand to his lips and kissed it. At that moment, Patsy had decided she was about to do the right thing. They'd come up to her bedroom, leaving the Chinese food unfinished.

"I don't know why, but I feel a bit nervous." Said Patsy.

"Me too."

Their usual routine was her going down on him, then him doing the same for her. Then rinse and repeat until they both felt they had no unfinished business, or fell asleep. There was usually a lot of kissing and touching, but their sex tended to be as clinical as it sounded. Dave was hard, he'd had a huge erection ever since his boxer shorts had come off. Patsy was wet with anticipation. Not as wet

as when she'd been a teenager, but still.....Pretty wet. As far as she could tell, they were both ready to go, aroused more than enough to get down to it. Patsy lay back on her bed.

"No more routines, Dave." She said. "Do whatever you want."

He did and it was obvious what he wanted, when he thrust his dick into her. It went in deep and Patsy wondered why she'd gone without the pleasure for so long. The thrusting felt wonderful, like rediscovering an old friend, albeit a slightly different friend. After a few minutes, the waves of pleasure, began to flow up from between her legs. Up they came, right up over her stomach.

"Oh, that feels so good." She said.

No three pumps before it was all over, or a strange aggressive style, or any of the other relationship killing quirks she'd been dreading. Dave Benton knew what he was doing and he was doing it well. She'd probably never love him the way she'd loved Simon, but Dave was there, doing his best to please her. On the other hand, Simon was in Italy, trying to please the lovely Juliana.

"I've been wanting to do this for so long." Muttered Dave.

Later she'd ask him if it had been worth the wait, but that could wait. Patsy was feeling a little light headed, the way good sex always made her feel.

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"We're going past Malta anyway. It's Donna, she insists that we visit Misraħ Ġħar il-Kbir. She told me how to enter the place of truth, the place of belonging."

Niña had guessed her words over breakfast a few days before would cause trouble, but even she'd been surprised by the resistance to even landing on the island of Malta. Captain Galeoto had run into trouble on one visit and now refused to use the main port at Valetta. He'd grudgingly agreed that it was possible to use a boat to get ashore on the south side of the island.

"Safest, and I can get you ashore just a short walk from Misraħ Ġħar il-Kbir." He'd told them.

Juliana had been on her side and keen to visit any historical sites they might come across. The mere mention of the ancient city of Misraħ Ġħar il-Kbir, had Julianna looking ready to swim ashore if she had to. Simon was against it at first, until Juliana had pulled him away from the group, for a private word. Dominicho Colombo, Juliana's father, had agreed to finance the expedition to North Africa, and an unspecified number of future trips to further his daughter's theological interests. That meant Juliana being guaranteed a place in all their future expeditions. Clever girl, Niña had been quite impressed with her. There was also talk of an engagement in the spring. All combined, it meant Juliana had a lot of leverage. After their private meeting, Simon agreed to go ashore on the south side of Malta.

"As Simon knows, I've had a few personal problems with the Crown of Aragon, who currently rule Malta. I'd rather avoid the entire cursed place." Giovanni had said. "You all seem keen to visit Misraħ Ġħar il-Kbir and if Niña thinks this is important....."

"It is." Niña had added.

"Well, then I agree to go, though we should avoid contact with the local population."

Juliana had brought two maids, of course she had. They weren't going to land on Malta, so they had no vote. Similarly, the hired men who were good with either sword or shovel, didn't get a vote either. None of them were setting foot on Maltese soil.

"Donna said that the place of belonging is just for us." Niña had told them. "No maids, no guards, none of the crew of the Mermaid.....Just us."

There had been cliffs to scramble up, but they'd all clambered up them safely. Not an easy climb, as they were all carrying at least a bag. Simon had a shovel, while Giovanni had brought a pick. With no

guards or diggers in the party, they might have to get their hands dirty. Niña was currently looking across a flat landscape, with some ruins not that far away.

“Galeoto told me no one comes here.” Said Juliana. “It seems the place has a bit of a bad reputation.”

“Good, we can come and leave again, without being seen.” Said Giovanni.

They came to an area of rocks with long deep grooves in them, as though an impossibly heavy cart had been pushed up and down for an immeasurable number of years. Everyone seemed disappointed that she had no idea what had caused the grooves.

“Can’t be natural, nature doesn’t do straight lines.” Said Simon.

“The wheels of the Gods.” Muttered Giovanni.

Easy to have laughed or made a sarcastic comment. But, as Galeoto had told Juliana, the place had a reputation. A reputation for what ? After the things Niña had seen in Sicily, she didn’t need to ask. There was a feeling about the place.

“Over there, the place Donna described.....I see it.” Said Niña, pointing.

To the left of the main ruins and not very impressive. Just a few stone slabs among the bushes. Giovanni actually snorted and asked if, she was sure. They all followed her though, as she walked between two of the bushes.

“Sorry, another scramble.....The entrance is down there, behind the tree.” Said Niña.

“All I can see is rubble.” Said Giovanni.

“I see it, a shadow where no shadow should be.....It’s an entrance.” Said Simon.

It was a tough scramble down, over rocks and rubble. Nature had planted weeds, which had become bushes, which had eventually given enough soil for trees to take hold. What had once been the elaborate entrance to somewhere underground, was now a hidden hole in the rocks.

“I’ve got one lamp in my bag, who has the other ?” Asked Niña.

“Me.” Said Simon.

Filthy things, the oil seemed to infuse everything with its stench. Precious to Galeoto, so they were grateful for them. He’d also given them a few tallow candles. They had a worse odour than the oil though and were being kept for emergencies. A bit of a smell on the open ocean, was something truly foul in an enclosed space. Niña was still learning something new, many times a day. It seemed Giovanni was the expert with steel and tinder. He had them equipped with two working lamps, in no time at all.

“I need to go in front.” Said Niña. “There should be no enemies where we’re going. The danger will be time and natural decay. Watch out for loose stones underfoot and anything likely to collapse on you.”

“Ahhh, so inspirational.” Said Juliana.

“Just remember that no one has been where we’re going, for thousands of years.” Said Niña.

“You all heard her, be careful.” Added Simon.

Her at the front, with Giovanni at the back. At first the gap in the rocks was too narrow, far too much of a squeeze to be comfortable. Then it widened out and there were stairs leading down. Someone had been there, probably the local population looking for anything worth taking. They’d left things behind, a broken shovel and several candle stubs wedged into cracks in the wall.

“Someone seems to have beaten us to get here.” Said Juliana.

“Not to where we need to go, the way is hidden.” Said Niña.

They’d probably descended several hundred feet of stairs and passages, when they found the bodies. A fight of some kind, with several broken swords and decomposed bodies. There had been a

lot of hacking at the far wall, probably with picks. The stairs had brought them to what appeared to be, a dead end. Niña noticed something on the clothing of one of the dead.

"I know that symbol." She said. "Some of these people were members of the Brotherhood, when they were still alive."

"Alberti never mentioned this, though there was no reason why he should." Said Simon. "We never intended to come here."

"I can get us through the door, though you will need to be patient." Said Niña.

"What door?" Asked Giovanni.

"You'll see....Have a rest, this might take a while." She replied.

She couldn't see the door, but she could sense where it was. Niña was sure of one thing. There'd be no point in Donna leading her there, just to leave them with a dead end.

"Donna.....Where next?" She mumbled.

There was someone with Donna, somewhere between the worlds. A Djinn, a God, maybe even an Angel. There seemed to be so many strange and wonderful beings involved in Simon's great quest, that nothing would have surprised her. It was the same presence she'd seen in Alberti's chambers. One thing Niña was sure of it, the presence was there to help, rather than hinder. A hand touched her shoulder.

"Sorry, but it's been a while." Said Simon.

"I drifted away for a while." She said. "How long was I just sat here?"

"About an hour, or maybe two.....We'll be alright, but Juliana needs food and water. If you need a long time to do this, we need to come back with more supplies."

Niña understood and there were those awful candles if the lamp oil ran out.

"No, we'll be fine.....I see the door now." She said.

Heavy, though just a touch of her hand made the door go back. There was the sound of old stone running over millennia of grit. So loud, the sound of grating hurt her ears. Eventually the door was fully open and her lamp showed a passageway, going off into the distance.

"Quickly.....Follow me." Said Niña. "The door will close behind us."

Not easy for them to rush, Juliana looked to have been sleeping. They made it through though, before the dreadful grating sound began again. Giovanni was the one to ask the obvious question.

"How do we get out again?" He asked.

"This isn't the only way in, or the only way out." Said Niña. "The place of truth will show us the way to the surface."

"It smells as though something died down here." Said Juliana.

"Something probably did." Said Giovanni.

The walls looked smoother than in the higher corridors and passages. Doorways had carved stone frames. It was like a different world, one where artisans had used their skills to produce a place of beauty. They never did discover anything dead and decaying, as it took them at least an hour to reach another apparent dead end.

"No problem here, I can see the doorway." Said Niña.

A large blank wall and nearly half of it rolled backwards, as she gave it a light press with her fingers. No gritty grating noise, the section of wall almost glided backwards. Beyond it was a large, high chamber.

"Same procedure, get through before it closes." Said Niña.

It really did feel like being sealed into a tomb, as the door closed. No handles, no way of opening it from that side. Niña trusted Donna and the strange entity, she knew there was a way out. Even so, she was anxious, so she could appreciate how the others had to be feeling.

“At least there’s no bad smell in here.” Said Juliana.

“So, what do we do now, Niña ?” Asked Simon.

They followed her, as Niña took them over to the chairs. Simple seats carved out of the solid rock, there was a circle of about two dozen chairs. Niña sat in one and waited for them to join her.

“This is the place of truth, the place of belonging.” She said. “We sit here and talk for a while. When the moment seems right, they will link our minds. We will all know everything about one another....Everything.”

“Who are these....They ?” Asked Juliana.

“I’m not really certain, but they’ve been here for over six thousand years.” Said Niña.

Simon had stood up, obviously agitated about something. Niña had a pretty good idea why he was worried. Knowing everything had to be a huge thing for a vampire of his age. Especially as he had a human lover, with no idea he was a Nosferatu.

“Everything....We’ll all know everything about each other ?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“It sounds fun, let’s do it.” Said Juliana.

“It will solve so many problems, Simon....Think about it.” Said Niña.

For a moment she thought he might refuse. Then Simon nodded at her and sat down next to her. Giovanni was no fool, he must have understood the implication of that word....Everything. He smiled though and remained seated.

“So, what do we talk about ?” Asked Giovanni.

“Anything, everything and nothing, trivia will do.” Said Niña.

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Cairo time was only two hours ahead of London. Not that there was any alternative to arriving there in the middle of the night. Cairo now almost encircled the Giza Plateau, with its lights and tourists. There were guards at night, but Laura was certain they could be avoided.

“Sunrise in Cairo is at about six local time, four here.” Said Laura. “We need to get there before the damned tourists wake up and start trudging about.”

“I have no problem with early starts.” Said Akiva.

“Alright, Laura.” Said Liz. “We know you’ve a good reason for getting us all here nice and early.”

Tim just smiled at her and the dragon seemed to be taking a nap. Only his head fitted into the kitchen in Hornsey, but the head was gently snoring. Liz touched Karkengara’s snout and an eye opened.

“I was just resting my eyes.” Said the dragon.

Laura wondered if the dragon spent his nights curled up in Liz’s house. In the lounge, like an overgrown tomcat. She was curious, but it was definitely a question for another day.

“We were in France and had to get up before the crack of dawn, if that helps.” Said Tim.

“I thought Hornsey would be an easier journey for most of you.” Said Laura. “And to be honest.....This house still feels like home.”

“Alright we get it....You’re sorry for getting us here so early.” Said Liz. “I’m fine with that, though I’d like more coffee.....If there’s time.”

Laura fancied more coffee too and another bacon sandwich. There wasn't time though, despite them going to see the God of time. Hoping to see Huh, to be accurate. There was a chance she'd need several tries, before being allowed into his realm.

"Sorry, we really need to be leaving." Said Laura. "I'll take Akiva and Tim, while Liz can bring Karkengara."

"I need to touch you; it makes finding you far easier." Said Liz.

It felt weird, having Liz run her hands over her face. Laura didn't mind though, if it helped. Liz had to be using a hand cream of some kind, her fingers had the smell of coconut oil. After touching her, Liz ran her hands over the dragon's face.

"Alright, ready to go." Said Liz.

Everyone had a backpack, apart from the dragon, who still refused to be used as a pack horse. Everyone had clothing suited to the heat and the cold. Laura had given them all a list of what to bring, based on things she'd needed during past expeditions, but hadn't remembered.

"Tim.....Akiva....Get a good tight hold of me, not my clothing." Said Laura.

"I remember." Said Akiva.

No being diverted for a talk with Horus. A few seconds after pressing her elbow against the egg, they were stood close to The Great Pyramid of Giza. The lights of Cairo filled the area with light, far too much illumination for people not supposed to be there. When Liz arrived, she was stood next to a full size Karkengara.

"Relax, but be ready to leave." Said Laura. "The next step could be quick, or.....We might be here for a while. If guards arrive we leave, no fighting them."

"Your mission, so your coin in the slot." Said the dragon.

"Who the hell taught you that?" Asked Liz.

"This isn't my first time in your world. I befriended a mobster once, in New York."

"Who?" Asked Akiva.

Laura tuned out the conversation, but it was useful. If Karkengara kept the story interesting, they'd all be less inclined to wander about. Laura felt for and found a residual door to the realm of the Gods. A little more concentration and she recognised it as a door she'd once used, to gain access to the realm of Huh. Very carefully and slowly, like reaching her hand out to stroke a stray cat, she nudged the gateway. The idea was to gain Huh's attention, without annoying him.

"Heh, something just touched my arm." Said Tim.

"Minions, Tim." Said the dragon. "Minions of the Gods....We're surrounded by them, but you can't see them."

"Is this a good thing, Laura?" Asked Akiva.

"Yes, now stop bothering me."

Laura felt a mental connection with Huh and there he was, in her mind. Sometimes the image was of a toddler still in nappies. At other times he was a frail old man in a loincloth. Rarely, he was as he appeared in her mind at that moment. Huh was a young man, dressed in expensive clothing. She heard his voice in her head.

"Laura, I was expecting you." Said Huh.

"I'd like to talk to you, if it's a convenient time?"

"Ahhh, I can always make it the convenient time." He chuckled. "You've brought Liz I see, a creature of pure chaos. Karkengara too, who really shouldn't be welcome here. I will allow you to bring them here, if you consider their presence is essential?"

"They are....I give you, my word." Said Laura.

There she was doing it again, offering more than was asked. She did it with Horus and it had caused her so many problems. There was something about talking to them though, the living Gods. Now she'd given her word, she'd be responsible for the good behaviour of Liz and her dragon.

"Very well, bring them to me." Said Huh.

Of course, guards had seen them, it was going to be one of those days. As Laura came out of a trance, there was a lot of shouting going on, most of it in Arabic. Tim was stood over her, looking worried, while Akiva was doing most of the yelling.

"I told them we're lost tourists." Said Akiva. "But the damned fools are still waving their guns at us."

"No problem, we're leaving." Shouted Laura. "Everyone gather around me, we've permission to enter Huh's private realm."

"The guys with guns look pretty serious." Said Tim.

Guards hired to stop anyone defacing the ruins. It would have been quite comical, if they hadn't been armed. Only handguns, but they'd do the job if aimed right. The guards didn't need to be killed, just made to run away.

"Dragon.....Show yourself to them." Yelled Laura. "Scare the crap out of them."

"I was waiting for someone to ask." Said Karkengara. "I could just as easily deal with them."

"No, just scare them."

Laura guessed that the two men waving guns, probably weren't paid that well. Judging by the speed they ran away; their pay wasn't worth dying for. Everyone congratulated the dragon, while forgetting he'd ignored the problem until asked to help.

"Group around me." Said Laura. "Even the dragon and Liz. We're travelling by a different method this time."

"Do we need to touch you?" Asked Akiva.

"No, just gather close to me."

It was strange to be at the snout end of a dragon. Laura hadn't even been sure dragons really existed, until she was told Q'uq'umatz was really a dragon. It seemed feathered serpents weren't necessarily always serpents. Some, the most powerful, were dragons. Laura felt for Huh and said they were all ready. The world around them seemed to be broken apart by a whirlwind. Laura closed her eyes and opened them when the hurricane wind appeared to have ended.

"Hello Laura Selway....Welcome to my world." Said Huh.

He was in the form of a frail old man again, dressed in just a loincloth. At least Huh was always in human form. Most of the other Ancient Gods, favoured looking like their totem animal, or having an animal head on a human body. Horus usually looked at her out of the head of a falcon. Huh's old man persona was wonderfully normal and a little comforting. The others were with her, all looking awkward and unsure what to do.

"We have so many things to ask you." Said Laura.

"I know and I know what I will tell you." Said Huh. "I am the God of time, so I'm rarely surprised by anything. I knew the Bringer of Fire was with you. The first task is for him to agree to an oath."

"Why would I do that?" Asked Karkengara.

The last thing Laura needed, was friction between her group and the Old Gods. She had been warned though and to be honest, she was curious about how the dragon had fallen foul of Huh.

"You promised to look after Lilleth." Said Huh. "An ephemeral child with the ability to walk between time lines. A precious, rare creature. You abandoned her.....Would you like to hear how she died?"

"I already know.....Fine, tell me the oath I need to give you?"

The Old Gods had a thing about gold. Everything in Huh's realm seemed to be made of the precious metal, or gilded with it. The air had a golden aura, which suddenly became far more intense. Was Huh cleansing his home, or building up to an act of violence? Laura didn't know, but she knew that even a dragon deity had to be careful around the God of time.

"Not to me.....Never to me." Yelled Huh. "I need to hear you give an oath, to protect Laura, until I release you from that oath."

"I follow Liz, my loyalty is to her." Said the dragon.

Huh seemed to grow to several times his original size, though that might have been an illusion. He pointed at Karkengara, who appeared genuinely scared.

"Very well, I'm not unreasonable." Shouted Huh. "I just need you to prove you can make an oath and keep it. Otherwise the next time you're imprisoned, I may well leave you there.....For eternity. Your choice then Bringer of Fire, an oath to protect Laura, or Liz. The choice is yours."

"I'm fairly indestructible already." Said Liz. "I'd prefer it if you'd look after Laura."

"I'm not exactly harmless, or helpless." Added Laura.

"Q'ug'umatz doesn't intend to eat me." Said Liz.

Poor Karkengara, he didn't look happy. An oath to protect Liz or her, might well mean him having to fight the great feathered serpent. Laura was beginning to have a resigned feeling about the whole thing. The protection of a dragon deity would be nice, but it was definitely icing on the cake. She already had Liz on her team and Akiva was pretty tough. Even Tim had shown himself surprisingly useful in a fight. On top of that, Mabina was hinting at help from the Gods of another world.

"We can toss a coin, Dragon." Said Laura. "If that makes the choice easier."

"Quiet.....Dignity Laura, a little dignity." Said Huh.

"I can see the way this is leading." Said Karkengara. "I will give my oath to protect Laura, until I'm released from my oath, or death releases me."

"Good, but such an oath from a deity, needs to be correctly given." Said Huh. "Etiquette matters in these things, as does a lack of ambiguity in the wording."

Huh took the dragon to the far corner of the chamber. There was a lot of muttering from both Huh and Karkengara. Eventually they returned and Laura appeared to have gained a new protector. Time was something Huh could never run out of, Laura had noticed he rarely seemed to be in a hurry.

"It is done, the Bringer of Fire has given his oath to protect Laura, with his life." Said Huh.

"Good, I'll sleep easier now." Said Tim.

Everyone fussed around her for a while, as though she'd just been voted into office or something. Laura wasn't sure if she should feel happy, or insulted. As she'd already told them, she wasn't exactly helpless, or harmless.

"We can now get down to the matter that brought you all here." Said Huh. "Firstly, the help of the Gods from other worlds, may not be permitted. I see no difficulty, but my fellow deities can be jealous Gods. I can help you though and even Q'ug'umatz has to obey the laws of time. I have a plan that just might help you defeat him....."

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Juliana had known quite a lot about Simon, before entering a strange kind of dreamworld. There had been lunch with Anna, who'd had no qualms about saying what she knew about Simon's past, warts and all. He was a henchman for the Medici, prized for his ability to make awkward people disappear. Giovanni was the same, though he wasn't considered clever enough to reach the top. As for Simon? Anna was a Medici, the daughter of the man who ran their key banking operation. She thought Simon was destined for great things.

"If not with my family, the Brotherhood may give him Alberti's position." Anna had said. "Alberti hasn't looked well for quite a while, there are constant rumours about him being close to death." Juliana had been shocked by the implied brutality of some of his actions, though Anna might well have been overdoing her descriptions. One thing had been certain then though, Simon was still a good catch. It was unfair, but men could marry down and still have hugely successful careers and lives. In fact, she often thought men could marry a monkey, without it effecting their social standing. For women on the other hand, marrying down was social suicide. Simon was still a good catch, an almost perfect marriage for her. Plus, and it was a big plus, Juliana still loved him. Strangely, she still loved him after seeing his entire life, as his memories had briefly been hers.

So, he was a vampire. There had been rumours about a few people in Florence, a few might even have been true. One of her own cousins had been accused, after one of his friends had been found dead, with every drop of his blood drained away. A family guard had thrown the cousin outside on a particularly sunny day. Not bursting into flames, had been accepted as proof of his innocence. A poor test for vampirism it seemed, as Simon seemed unaffected by sunlight.

"Oh, I feel as though I've slept for days." Said Giovanni.

"My lamp is still full.....We can't have been out for long." Said Niña.

"Did you dream about my life ?" Asked Giovanni. "I dreamt about yours, Niña."

"To me, it was as though we only had one mind, everything combined." Said Simon.

"Yes, that's how it felt." Said Niña.

Juliana didn't know whether to join in, she was an outsider now. All three of them were vampires. They'd killed humans after drinking their blood. Juliana wasn't scared of them, but she was definitely the outsider in the group. Details were fading, though she knew the main events in Simon's very long life, would be in her mind forever.

"Are you alright ?" Simon asked her. "Out of all of us, you've probably had the most surprises."

"I now wonder if my cousin wasn't innocent after all." She said.

"Ahh, the one thrown outside on a bright day.....He wasn't one of us." Said Simon. "Giovanni looked into that and your cousin is a normal human."

"That's a relief.....Not that I mean there's anything wrong....." She said.

"It's alright, you're bound to feel awkward around us, for a while. You have nothing to fear from any of us, I give you my word."

"I saw everything Simon, everything." She said. "You met Clara, I saw it all. We will need to talk about that, and that conversation needs to be quite soon."

"How do we get out of this place ?" Yelled Giovanni.

"Call me eccentric, but we could use the doorway." Said Niña.

"Heh, that wasn't there before." Said Giovanni.

Simon was looking at her and all Juliana could think of, was seeing him rutting with Clara in some grubby stable. She'd get over it, she knew that, but not until she'd given him hell over it.

"We will talk.....It's over with Clara." Said Simon. "That was our final meeting, the big goodbye."

"A farewell fuck." She said. "Come on, Niña has the best lamp."

"Are we alright ?" Asked Simon.

"No.....I need time. Probably quite a bit of time."

They hugged for a few moments, before following Niña and Giovanni.

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Clara enjoyed meetings with Cyril H Carter, the ultimate boss of the criminal empire she worked for. Tom was fine, she genuinely liked him. But there was only so much that could be done with

prefabricated buildings beside the river in Erith. She felt shallow for even thinking it, but decent offices meant a nicer working environment. The offices of Cyril's Petit Champignon had decent aircon in the summer and proper heating in the winter. Clara had often wondered why no one had ever had frostbite in Tom's yard, during a tough winter.

"Mr Carter is expecting you Clara, go straight up."

Said Irene, who was the usual receptionist for the building. There was a huge sign over the elevators, which Cyril also had on his office wall, 'Everything we sell is 100% Organic and Vegan.' There had been a little bad press, with some saying his artificial meat was over processed. Clara had seen the stories, but had never really followed them in detail. The public still seemed to like Cyril's meat free burgers and his company was still making sizable profits. Her boss could have probably gone fully legit, but he seemed to enjoy the life of a crime lord. No one to meet her as the lift took her to the top floor, though she knew where she was going.

"Good morning, Agu." She said.

"Morning, Clara."

Officially it was Cyril's office, though he rarely used the expensive looking desk, or the rows of filing cabinets. Agu was a large Nigerian guy, infamous among the street gangs in his native Nigeria. With him were two men who'd probably have weapons somewhere. All legally registered and above board. Having connections in the Met Police had its perks. Officially the men were Cyril's legal team. In reality they were there in case one of his business rivals tried something naughty, as Cyril liked to put it. Not rivals in the meat business of course. There were a lot of gangs eager to take over Cyril's criminal empire.

"Do you need to frisk me ?" She asked.

"As if I'd dare." Said Agu.

Through a side door to Cyril's official office and she was on the flat roof. Only a short distance to walk, though it could be a shock to the system on a cold February morning. Cyril's rooftop hideaway had once been no stronger, or better defended than a garden shed with aircon and decent heating. A few East European gangs had hit a few clubs a while back, so the security had been upgraded. Double-glazed bullet-proof glass and the frame of the building had been toughened. Cyril liked to boast that his home away from home, could survive a direct hit from an antitank missile. She heard the door unlock, before her finger reached the keypad.

"Thank you for coming, Clara." Said Cyril.

He looked older than when she'd first seen him, but that was par for the course if you were a vampire. Testosterone levels dropped with age for men. That caused subtle changes that most people wouldn't notice, but she did. Blood never changed though, his would taste just as sweet as the blood of a sixteen year old virgin. Not that Clara had any intention of feeding on Cyril.

"Sit.....I'm making Earl Grey tea and there's fruitcake." Said Cyril.

Cyril was a good host, though she expected there'd be a task for her to perform, once the niceties were out of the way. Another Cyril word, he was a stickler for the niceties. Clara sipped at her tea and nibbled at the delicious fruitcake.

"Everything is fine, no problems at any of the clubs." She said.

"Yes, I heard.....Tom is very happy. I wanted to talk to you about a few issues in our distribution network. I know Tom wants to forget about the problem with the Koreans."

"They do give us a good price." Said Clara.

"But.....I heard they intended to kill you, Clara. Is that correct ?"

"Yes, it is."

Cyril ate his cake and simply looked out of the window for a while. It was all for effect, he'd have made his mind up long before their meeting. The Koreans would be forgiven, for now. Or, she'd be given the job of assassinating their top people in Britain. There was no middle ground in organised crime. Litigation wasn't possible and violence was the only way to settle serious disputes.

"They approached our shipping people in Cyprus." Said Cyril. "They obviously want to take over our designer drug operation. I know Tom likes his margins with them, but.....I want you to eliminate them, Clara. Wipe out everyone in their organisation, who's above the rank of street dealer."

Clara was actually excited. There was certain to be a chance to feed.

"I can do that for you." She said.

"I'm sure you can." He said, while giving her a large padded envelope. "This is just a little extra, to show my appreciation. You're now earning more than Simon ever earned with us."

It never had been a competition, but that still pleased her. If she ever saw Simon again, she would definitely tell him.

"Thank you, Cyril. I won't let you down." She said.

"I can give you a file with names and a few personal details." Said Cyril. "The difficulty will be that our friends in the police, don't want too much blood on the streets. No decapitations or assault rifle fire in good old London. If this is too messy, we may lose a lot of their help when we need it. I want you to eliminate the Koreans, without making it messy. Can you do that?"

"Oh yes, I definitely can." Said Clara.

Years as a vampire, quietly disposing of those she fed on. Of course, she could make a clean job of taking out the Koreans.

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