

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 6 – All That Glisters

**“All that glisters is not gold—  
Often have you heard that told.”  
— William Shakespeare**

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Liz realised the problem with opening the vault door, at about the same time as Laura.

“Fire your guns.” Said Laura. “Don’t hit anyone, fire at the ceiling if you like. We need to keep the police on the back foot.”

The vault door was now several tons of buckled metal, there was no way it would ever close again. Liz’s main concern had been keeping Laura and her people alive, by letting air into the vault. As for the police and security guards waiting outside the vault ? Liz was banking on them being startled and confused, at least for a while. Firing their guns was a good idea, it would buy them a little more time.

“We can’t stay in here forever.” Said Patsy. “Like it or not, we will have to fight our way out.”

“Can you become that creature again ?” Asked Jim.

“I might not need to.” Said Liz. “Though to be honest, I’m always partly that creature.”

Now she was in the vault with them, Liz could see the problem. It was sentient, though not really alive. Old, very old.....Maybe older than the Gods themselves.

“You have something in the pocket of your jeans, Patsy.” Said Liz.

“Oh, the snake.....It’s just a tiny gold snake.”

“All that glisters, Patsy. It’s not gold and it’s blocking Laura’s ability to move through the abyss. Give it to me.”

Jim and Ronnie were firing the occasional shot at the ceiling above the ruined vault door, yet Patsy was hesitating.

“It’s just a tiny coiled up snake.” Said Patsy.

“Give it to her Patsy, let Liz work her mojo on it.” Said Laura.

“I won’t damage it and you can have it back later on.” Said Liz. “I know letting it go is hard, but you have my word.....You will get it back.”

Liz put her hand out and Patsy dropped the snake onto it. It probably liked Patsy, but it didn’t like her. Not really alive in the usual meaning of the word, but it didn’t like being held by a creature of the darkness. Perhaps that was why it was blocking Laura’s use of the Egg ? Liz had no real idea, though she had a pretty good idea how to stop the tiny object from causing any further problems.

“Get close to Laura and ready to leave.” Said Liz. “I’m fairly sure this will work.”

Not a very confident or inspiring thing to say, but Liz knew the next step would hurt, probably a lot. The part of her that was human, needed a full set of internal organs. The creature of darkness didn’t and it could heal anything she destroyed. Liz created a patch of darkness on her skin, just above her left lung.

“Shit, I’d only do this for a good friend, Laura.” She said.

Liz pushed the coiled snake artwork into her body. In deep, right into her lung. She immediately regretted it, when it felt as though the thing inside her, was using a blowtorch to burn itself out. Liz encapsulated it in the flesh of the creature of darkness and felt the pain diminish, but not stop. "Go, go now.....Somewhere I know." Said Liz. "Go to the house in Hornsey and I'll join you when I've dealt with this thing."

Several sets of scared eyes looked back at her, until Laura pressed the Egg in her side. It worked, they vanished as if they'd never been there.

"Drop your weapons, you can't escape." Shouted a voice outside the vault.

Liz smiled as she imagined the poor police, as they tried to explain to their boss why there was no one to arrest. Several bags full of priceless antiquities gone, with no thieves on the premises. Some of them might end up on traffic duty.

"The last man in Uundenvelt." She muttered. "The Lost Artisan....He'll know what to do with it."

Dropping into the Underworld in mainly human form brought risks, but only minor ones. Anything silly enough to not recognise her and stupid enough to attack her, wouldn't live long. The Lost Artisan knew her in human form and she had no idea how he'd react to her as the guardian of the last gateway. She'd missed the ideal spot, but she'd managed to pull herself into a tunnel quite close to the ruined City of Uundenvelt.

"Another year, another layer of dust and rubble." She muttered.

There were places where the Underworld had once existed alongside the world of men, though such places were now few. Uundenvelt had been a large and thriving city, a very long time ago. The only living man there was the Lost Artisan, though some would question whether he was truly alive. He had invisible friends to talk to, a complete family with a devoted wife and two children. He'd talked to them when Liz had last been there. On that occasion she'd needed information about an arcane device. The artisan seemed to know everything there was to know about ancient arcane devices, which meant he was certain to know something about the snake. Liz liked the artisan, mainly because he never showed the slightest fear of her. Across the filthy central square and down a side alley. There was a light on in his workshop, probably the only light for hundreds of miles. Through a doorway, up a flight of stairs and there he was, smiling at her.

"I feel it.....Something very old and quite powerful." Said the artisan.

His language was very guttural, half of it seemed to come from the back of his throat. By some gift of the Gods, she could not only understand him, she could get her own vocal cords to make similar sounds. She could talk to him, a proper conversation. It was one of the strange gifts she'd ceased to question or wonder about. Too much pondering on the imponderable, could lead to madness.

"The artefact isn't mine." She said. "It's important that it isn't damaged, I gave my word."

"I understand....Give it to me."

The Underworld tended to be mostly home to human looking creatures and the artisan was no exception. He had four arms though, the second set coming out about a foot below his arms in the usual place. Liz had no idea why he had the two extra arms, or even whether it was natural or something done to him. It definitely made it easier for him to move items around and examine them. She gave him the snake, hoping he didn't damage it. If he did, Patsy might never talk to her again.

"Oh, this is.....So old, it hurts my mind to think about it." He said. "Do you want to sell it ? I have gold and precious gems."

"No, it's not mine to sell."

The artisan turned and carried on with a conversation Liz had never heard. The wife was his usual invisible friend, though sometimes the children joined in. It had crossed her mind that his family might be ghosts only he could see, such things weren't unknown. Her own view though, was that the artisan was nine parts crazy.

"Yes.....Yes, stop pestering me my dear." Said the artisan.

He looked at Liz with red eyes that sometimes appeared to glow slightly. She was often glad they hadn't come across him while she was still mostly human. There was something about his gaze, very mad, bad and dangerous to know.

"She wants to know if you'd like some tea?"

"No, I'm fine."

She always said no, she'd once looked in the kitchen, with its mass of filthy crockery. Sometimes the artisan came out of there with a cup of some filthy liquid in an equally filthy cup.

"Can I keep it for a while?" He asked. "I can ask around; I still know people. I can get you a full history.....It's so staggeringly old."

"How old?" She asked. "An estimate will do."

"It's at least four million years old, maybe five."

"So, it's not a human artefact?"

"Of course it's not human.....Please let me keep it, just for a few days." He said.

"It's stopping a device working, a device made by the Gods."

"Oh yes, these things will do that."

"I need you to put it in a container that will stop it, doing that. Can you do that for me?" She asked.

"Yes, easy.....I'll do it for free if you leave it with me for.....Four days."

He was too keen to keep hold of it, the red flags were there. He was on his own in a seldom visited part of the Underworld though. It was unlikely he had many visitors. Besides, it was just some kind of enchanted pieces of art, what harm was there in letting him keep it for a few days? Liz had a weird vision of herself and Mabina, counting dead bodies, somewhere she didn't recognise. The golden snake was a nuisance though, a nuisance the artisan was offering to deal with, for free.

"Alright, you can hold onto it, but just for four days." She said.

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Cyril H Carter had no middle name. It was just that he'd envied all the kids at school with a middle initial, so he'd given himself the H. In his mind he'd decided on Hugo as the H, until he'd mentioned it to Susie Clarke, when they'd both been about fourteen. He'd been in love with Susie, in the extreme way only young teens can feel love. Susie had laughed at the idea of him being a Hugo, so he'd been Just Cyril H Carter ever since.

"I want everything to be ready, Janet." He said. "Then you can have the rest of the morning off."

Janet was his housekeeper, a wonderful find who kept his home running like clockwork. There was a maid too, a cook who came in weekends and a man to look after the garden. Not the largest domestic staff in the world, but Cyril was still proud of having people to look after his home.

As a child, a friend of his father, had told him he'd never amount to anything. A dreadful man, who'd passed away a good fifteen years ago. For some reason though, Cyril was still trying to prove that dreadful man wrong.

"It's a hot day, I've left the food in the fridge." Said Janet.

There had been a Mrs Carter once, though she'd decided to run off with one of his best friends. If he needed female company, he had a few numbers to call. All discrete young women, who charged for

their services by the hour. No moods, no headaches and one or two were quite good at pretending to be in love with him.

“Good idea, Janet. I’ll get it out when they arrive.” He said

Janet left and Cyril was alone in the house, waiting for Harry Beck, who was a little late. Harry had done well for himself; a knighthood was on the cards. Up through the ranks with the Metropolitan Police, until he’d been noticed by the great and the good. Harry had a knack for dealing with situations, a knack which many valued. Still officially a copper, though the current commissioner had to come running when Harry called.

He’d arrive with a driver who remained in the car and someone fairly junior, who sat in the kitchen, while they talked in the dining room. Cyril hoped it was Burnett again, he quite liked the young copper. There had been a few favours for Burnett, the deposit on a decent flat in a good area and a few other things. Enough favours to guarantee young Burnett would never tell a soul about anything he might hear. Cyril heard the car on his gravel drive.

“Ten minutes late, that is rare.” He muttered.

Not that Harry would apologise. He’d reached a point where Cyril doubted if Harry had needed to apologise to anyone for years. The doorbell rang and Cyril left it for a count of twenty before walking slowly towards his front door. No looking too keen, it looked desperate and no one respects desperate people. It was Burnett at the door.

“Hello, where’s the boss ?”

“Just finishing a call.”

Once Harry had claimed he’d been on a call to Downing Street. The annoying thing, was that he probably wasn’t bull shitting. Like him, Harry Beck was getting on a bit, that polite way of saying they were both getting old. His old friend and one time adversary, now used a stick to walk.

“Oh, I need a long cold drink.” Said Harry. “It’s looking like being one of those days.”

“More trouble in Downing Street, Harry ?” Asked Cyril.

“No, our youngest daughter is expecting. No husband in sight, but as I keep telling my wife, that seems to be the new normal.”

“It’s a different world now.” Said Cyril.

“It is, it really is.”

Cyril knew he had a nice home, he was proud of what he’d achieved, even if a good part of his wealth came from crime. Cyril’s Petit Champignon was his company, which had taken a while to take off. It’s true to say that without the cash from criminal enterprises, the world might never have tasted the fake meat Cyril believed in.

‘Everything we sell is 100% Organic and Vegan.’

Said the large notice he still had on the wall behind his desk. Fungus really, though avoiding that word was company policy. Burgers that tasted like real meat had taken off and Cyril had found himself making enough money to go completely legit. It wasn’t greed that had kept him in the role of the top crime boss of London. It was just that running a food company was fun in the beginning, but boring once he’d made a success of it. Where next, his own chain of burger joints ? Cyril had done it and that too, hadn’t excited him as much as going to the breakers yard in Erith, to discuss the old days with Tom Ives. Cyril loved being a criminal and accepted that he’d be one until they planted him in the ground.

“Do we go straight for the single malt ?” Asked Cyril.

“Yes, it’s been a day for starting early on the hard stuff.”

Drinks poured, and there was always a glass of the good stuff for Burnett these days. Then the young copper helped him bring the food through into the dining room. Usually there'd be a culinary masterpiece that just needed nuking in the microwave. In hot weather Janet put together some cold, but delicious nibbles. Of course, Burnett was left with a plate full of food in the kitchen.

"Oh, you should marry that housekeeper of yours." Said Harry. "Before someone else does."

"We've never discussed it, but she was married once. I get the feeling she doesn't fancy repeating the experience."

More small talk, it was how every meeting began. To an outsider it would look like two old friends sharing a meal and some decent liquor. In reality it was a summit meeting, with the top man in the police, meeting the top criminal in the land. It was big, it was huge, even if it did happen four or five times a year. Their current meeting was unusual, it had been requested outside of the normal routine, by Harry.

"Is everything alright, with the pension fund?" Asked Cyril. "I do check the bank transfers and everything looks fine."

"Oh yes, no problem there. I noticed it comes from a bank in Honduras now. Always there though, Cyril and it always arrives on time."

At one time an up-and-coming Harry Beck had been paid enough in a year to buy a villa on Mustique. Now the pension fund, as Cyril called it, could probably buy the entire island of Mustique. Not that Cyril begrudged Harry a penny. The kind of protection from prosecution Harry could provide, was priceless. Cyril refilled Harry's glass without asking.

"Always nice to see you Harry, but you did ask for this meeting." Said Cyril. "I take it there's something specific you want to discuss?"

"It has been noted by the local CID, that Simon Atherton has gone and been gone for some time. As he's your organisation's equivalent of a nuclear deterrent, that's worrying. He kept the East European gangs under control. We can't go back to submachine guns being used in night clubs and mobsters taking body parts as trophies. Where is Simon, Cyril? I don't want to know details, but is he dead?"

"No, he's not dead." Said Cyril. "I have heard from the lady he lives with and he's away at the moment."

"For how long?" Asked Harry. "I've never let anyone dig into Simon's past, mainly because I was scared what they might find. I don't care if he was an ex-spetsnaz, or a Mexican cartel sicario, he got the job done. You need your nuclear deterrent, Cyril."

Cyril had once straight out admitted to a murder in front of Harry. The problem was knowing how far to go with Harry and how much to tell him. There was the potential for too much detail, to end in a long prison sentence. Cyril never forgot that even bought and paid for cops, were still cops.

"Simon's long time girl friend is an option. Her name is Clara and Tom said his guys are more wary of her, than they were of Simon. There was a problem with a Russian gang two years ago. No details, but from what I heard, she did some serious damage."

"A woman, Cyril." Said Harry. "I know women tough guys are the thing now on TV, but in real life....There's the whole strength and weight thing."

"Clara is tough, trust me." Said Cyril. "The condition of some of the cars she's brought in for crushing. Blood and worse than just blood."

"No details Cyril, please no details. I'll trust your judgement. Do you think she'll accept the job?"

"Money is always the key. I'll offer her enough to guarantee she says yes." Said Cyril.

“Look, if she needs to assert herself, I will understand. Things can get messy for a while, though not for too long. Long term we need the peace and stability we’ve had in the past.” Said Harry.

Cyril topped up his own glass and leant across to fill Harry’s. His guest usually muttered something about his wife making him take his health more seriously. Harry always had the third glass of single malt though, always. This time Harry put his hand over the glass.

“No, I can’t go to the palace a little tipsy.”

“Are you kidding me ?” Asked Cyril.

“As if I would old friend, as if I would.”

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Ronnie had been a little frustrated, when Laura had insisted, they all went into the kitchen for coffee and something to eat, before emptying their packs.

“Coffee and bacon sandwiches, guaranteed to ground us.” Laura had said. “Things will need doing and we’ll be more organised after relaxing for a while.”

It made sense and Ronnie felt herself relax after her second mug of coffee. She’d thought Jim had died in the vault, yet there he was, munching at his bacon sandwich. There was still their hefty footprint in the north, mainly vehicles and accommodation. It all had to be properly dealt with and Laura had been right. It all felt much more doable after sitting and relaxing for a while. Patsy went into celebration mode first, though they were soon all smiling.

“We did it, we fucking did.” Said Patsy. “Best of all, we never had to hurt anyone.”

“Or get hurt ourselves.” Said Ronnie. “There was a moment back there in the vault. I thought Jim looked bad, really bad.”

“You can say it, I thought I was going to die.” Said Jim. “It was a bit wild for a moment or two, but we’re all fine now and.....We’re all very much better off than we were yesterday.”

“We should definitely give Liz something, she almost certainly saved our arses.” Said Ronnie.

“Yes, definitely something has to be given to Liz.” Added Patsy.

“How much Jim ?” Asked Laura. “You gave everything the once over before it went in our packs. A rough idea is fine.....How much is it all worth ?”

Jim finished his sandwich and emptied his coffee cup.

“It depends how much we agree to get melted down.” He said. “Plus, Laura threw out my calculations by carrying so much.”

“Come on, rough ball park, Jim. How rich are we ?” Asked Ronnie.

“No, you’ll all moan when I get it wrong.” Said Jim. “We’re all fed and watered, so let’s do it now.”

The packs were in the hallway, where they’d arrived in the house in Hornsey. Two thick coats were there too, and Jim’s gun was on the floor where he’d dopped it. Anyone coming to the front door would have seen it all.

“First thing, it all needs moving into the lounge.” Said Laura.

It must have been the adrenaline in her system then, the backpack hadn’t felt that heavy when Ronnie had been wearing it in the vault. Now, just picking it up was a major effort. Laura had the biggest pack, containing the heaviest solid gold artefacts. It had to weigh as much as a binge eating sumo wrestler, yet Laura carried it with ease.

“We’ll do one pack at a time; I have a system.” Said Jim. “Where do you want us to put everything ?”

“The floor, the sofa, anywhere you want.” Said Laura. “There’s a clear area of floor near the window.”

The curtains were closed, lights turned on and Jim began his system. Mostly he pulled priceless antiquities out of packs, while muttering to himself.

“Yes, middle kingdom gold sceptre....Very rare.” He mumbled.

The rest of them were just there to carry items about, while Jim pointed at parts of the floor and occasionally a chair or the sofa. At one point he scribbled numbers into a notebook, before crossing them through and beginning again. It seemed to take a long time, until Jim was happy with his notes and the pile each item had gone into.

“Ok, the melting down pile is quite small, but gold is at a record price right now.” Said Jim. “It’s a pity to melt anything down, but we’ve all got bills to pay. There will be commission charged by the people I know, but even being cautious with my calculations....We should each get half a million pounds. Or the equivalent in euros or dollars, they are quite flexible.”

“Half a fucking million.....Just for the worst bits.” Said Ronnie.

“None of the items are bad.” Said Jim.

“My mum and I do alright on my pay and her pension.” Said Patsy. “But yesterday I had about fifteen hundred pounds in my bank account and a pile of bills to pay. Half a million in cash.....It’ll change my life.”

“How about the good stuff, Jim.” Said Laura. “I’m interested in the pile with the sceptre and the statue of a winged Horus. I know they’re priceless. Can we find a buyer and if so, what will they sell for ?”

“Ahh, you’ve a good eye, Laura.” Said Jim. “I promised I can find a buyer for every item and I can. The sceptre, the statue and.....Let’s add a nice gold scarab into the group. It’s a far better scarab than the one I have, far better craftsmanship. For a quick sale to the right private collector.....We could easily make another million, each. And remember, that’s just three items out of three dozen or so.”

“Wow.....Fucking wow.” Said Ronnie. “Can we do a heist every week ?”

“You can if you like, for me this is a one-time thing.” Said Patsy.

“I nearly died and nearly dying once, was enough.” Said Jim.

Liz must have known how her appearing in a room looked, someone must have told her. It was scary if you had no idea what was going on. Plus, they’d all had a few scares recently, in one way or another.

“Jeezzz..... What the hell is that ?” Asked Ronnie.

A head had come up out of the rug in front of the TV. A completely unrecognisable head because it appeared to be covered in a black ooze, with the consistency of axle grease.

“Calm down, it’s just Liz.” Said Laura.

“We need to get her a bell to ring, or something.” Said Jim.

The ooze covered head rose up, followed by a neck, then a torso. Eventually Liz was stood there, though even Brendan might not have recognised her. The black ooze vanished, instantly, without even leaving a stain on the rug. Liz was smiling at them.

“Did you get my snake looked at ?” Asked Patsy.

“Yes, I found an artisan who’ll put it in a container, so it can’t cause any more problems. I can go back for it in four days.”

Liz ignored them and wandered around the lounge, looking at the various heaps of golden antiquities.

“Wow, you guys stole some nice things.” Said Liz. “Do you do this sort of thing often ?”

“Not often, only once.” Said Ronnie.

“Well actually, this is the second time.” Said Jim. “There was the.....Heist from the place we no longer talk about.”

“You must take something, we all agreed on that.” Said Patsy. “You did save our lives.”

“Not from the pile near the window, that’s the heap to be melted down.” Said Ronnie.

“I keep saying it, there are no bad items, even in the melt pile.” Said Jim.

Liz wandered about, touching and examining quite a few objects. In the end she chose a golden armband from a heap Jim hadn’t yet mentioned.

“This.....Not Egyptian, but I like it.” Said Liz. “Minoan goldsmiths were some of the best the world has ever seen. Don’t worry I’ll keep it safe and hidden.”

“You know your antique gold.” Said Jim.

“I do and everything here should be in museums and galleries. How did it all end up in that vault ?”

“Wars and the looting that goes along with them.” Said Jim. “The original ownership paperwork gets destroyed and people like the Monkman family buy from anyone as long as the price is right. Iraq, through Syria and I can see a few pieces from Afghanistan. Every war in decades has provided private collectors with priceless pieces, at a massive discount.”

“If the police recovered these artefacts, they’d just be given back to the Monkman museum.” Said Laura.

“It’s all very sad, but thank you for the armband.” Said Liz.

“If you’ve got the time, I’d like to hear what you know about the Egyptian pieces.” Said Jim.

“I’d like to hear that too.” Said Ronnie.

“Once I’ve had private talk to Laura, I will gladly tell you everything I know.” Said Liz. “Be careful with gold items from the middle kingdom by the way, a tiny number are sentient. In fact, a few aren’t really gold at all.”

“Like my snake ?” Asked Patsy.

“Your snake is far older than Egyptian artefacts, but yes.....The same idea holds true.” Said Liz.

“We can talk in the kitchen.” Said Laura. “I fancy more coffee and there’s enough bacon for a couple of sandwiches.”

“Sounds just about perfect.” Said Liz.

Ronnie tried to hear what Laura and Liz were talking about, though they closed the kitchen door when she tried to eavesdrop. All she managed to hear was something about the wanderers no longer being aimless in their wanderings.

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Niña hadn’t intended to sleep when she’d sat on her bed, it had just happened. Her body had been through being dead, followed by a strange kind of rebirth. It was hardly surprising that she’d fallen asleep for most of the afternoon. Dusk outside her window and as Simon had said, she felt different now the sun was setting.

“Sunlight won’t kill you, Niña.” He’d told her. “But you will always feel most alive during the hours of darkness.”

She’d put on one of her best dresses and now it was crumpled from being slept in. Her hearing was different, sharper and far more insistent, or so it felt. Simon and Giovanni were arguing downstairs, with her name being mentioned. No shutting it out of her mind, every mention of ‘Niña,’ felt highlighted in some way and impossible to ignore.

“I’ll get used to all the changes; Simon has.” She muttered.

A look in the mirror Simon had bought her and the wound in her neck was almost healed. Another day indoors and she’d be able to go to the market again. Niña couldn’t ignore the argument, but she could avoid going downstairs. She smoothed her dress and tidied her long dark hair. Two hairclips to stop it from falling over her face and she was ready to see why Simon was shouting at Giovanni, about her.



“Vampire hearing is as good as that of a wolf.” Simon had mentioned.

She heard every word of the row clearly, as soon as she opened the door to her room. The two of them always argued, sometimes about the most trivial things. Add on the amount of wine they both consumed and they could get very loud, very quickly. The animal side came out as a vampire, Simon had told her that. She could hear something in their words, an aggression that was rare. Niña knew things were escalating and two vampires having a fight, could easily lead to one of them dying.

“We’re called immortals, though few of our kind reach a huge age.” Simon had said. “We’re highly territorial, our main enemy is other vampires. Most of us will die at the hands of our own kind.”

Come to think of it, Simon had given her all the useful information she’d heard. Giovanni had given her huge amounts advice, which she seemed to know was mostly garbage.

“Sons and daughter of Cain, what a nonsense.” She muttered. “We’re animals, like the humans, only more so.”

They were in the reception area, the two vampires she shared a home with. They tended to do little in the way of receiving guests, so the room had become where they drank and talked, before falling asleep in the early hours of the morning. She’d never felt scared of Giovanni or Simon, not even slightly. They’d brought her into their home and treated her well. Niña had received a few bruises from playfights, but if you’re stupid enough to playfight with a vampire; you have to expect a few bruises.

“Stop it !” She shouted. “Stop arguing, you’ll hurt each other.”

“It’s him, the great expert.” Yelled Giovanni. “He’s trying to get me to stop teaching you. Him, who knew nothing until I took the time to train him in vampire lore.”

“All you’ll do is pass on the rubbish, that other fools taught you.” Shouted Simon.

Niña kept reminding herself that they had taken her in, a street urchin neither of them knew.

Neither of them had ever hurt her, but Giovanni had his hand on the hilt of his blade. She stepped between them and hoped her life as a vampire, wasn’t about to end.

“I’m not stupid.” She shouted. “I understand far more than you both realise. I want to have both of you teaching me. I will then think about what I’m told and decide what to accept.”

Niña knew it when Simon had turned her, she knew he’d passed through her life more than once. Maybe it was something to do with drinking his blood ? Giovanni would love that, it matched ideas in some of the old legends. She knew Simon had existed in the future, even if she had no idea why or how. She was also certain that being taken into their home hadn’t been luck, or as Giovanni liked to explain away the inexplicable, one of those things.

“That sounds incredibly pompous, child.” Said Giovanni.

In reality, she’d listen to Simon and take everything Giovanni told her, with a huge pinch of salt.

Neither of them could know that, or it would eventually tear them apart. Niña was happy for them to dislike her a little, as long as it was temporary.

“I value the opinions of both of you.” She said. “Though what I decide to believe, must be my decision.”

“The arrogance of our waif.” Said Simon. “You didn’t have shoes on your feet when Giovanni brought you to live with us.”

“She should be grateful.” Added Giovanni.

“I am.....But this new life I have, is my life.” She said.

They simply glared at her until she left the room. Niña didn’t like them hating her, even if it probably wouldn’t last long. No more arguing though, things had worked out fairly well. No punctured egos

for her two mentors, meant no likelihood of future serious arguments. Plus, the memory from blood idea showed that not everything Giovanni told her was rubbish.

"It'll need care, but I can get what I need from both of them." She muttered.

By the time she was back in her room and looking at a drawing she'd been working on that morning, Niña was actually happy. The drawing was something pulled from Simon's blood memory, she was sure of it. A woman, looking at a street full of objects Niña hadn't recognised. She'd concentrated on the features of the woman, filling in the background with a few generic bushes and trees. A name was in her mind, though she wasn't certain it was right.

"Oh, Clara." She muttered. "Whoever you were to him, you're a very beautiful woman."

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Felipe had done the classic, phoning Clara the second she'd walked through the door of the house in Hornsey. The Indian takeaway was still in its bag, but she always bought enough food for three or four people.

"Yes, I am free tonight, where are you?"

"Look out of the window."

Strictly it was a bit stalkery, if that was even a word. It was also romantic and the first romantic moment in her life since Simon had gone. Felipe was sat on his bike, just over the road. After beckoning him inside, she'd given him half her chicken tikka with pilau rice and all the trimmings. There had been a warning not to just turn up again, but secretly, a good-looking Brazilian guy on her doorstep was perfect. Wine in the lounge, where she noticed a cardboard box with Laura's writing on it.

'A present for Clara.'

The box went on the shelf above the TV. Life with Laura tended to mean being more cautious than was probably normal. There might a DVD in the box, or a few grams of Colombian marching powder. Clara decided to play safe and open it when Felipe had left, whenever that was.

"Not the bedroom, it's still.....You know." She told Felipe. "But this sofa is very comfortable."

Not the most romantic way to instigate sex, but it left no room for misreading signals. Undressing was quick, with the usual pauses for the foreplay sexual etiquette required. They'd had a relationship before, though relationship was overstating it. They'd had a lot of very passionate sex, so they'd seen one another naked, on numerous occasions. A little mutual oral sex, again, because such things always seemed polite. Then they were into the part both of them had been wanting to get down to, since finishing the takeaway meal. The hard, almost brutal fucking.

"Oh, that feels so good." Said Felipe.

It did, there was almost something spiritual about really great sex, especially if it had been a while. So simple, the constant thrusting, yet it felt so wonderful. Skin so hot it felt like you'd burn one another. The sweat too, would have felt awful in other circumstances. During sex though, the sweat felt good too, everything felt perfect. Clara pulled her knees right up against her chest.

"Yes, deep.....Deep and hard, as deep as you can." She said.

The longer it went on for, the better it felt. Clara began to feel waves of pleasure, coming up from between her legs, across her tummy and right up her chest. There was rarely the instant orgasm some of the women she knew talked about. Those waves of pleasure though, they sometime gave her such a high.....She thought she might faint with pleasure. Sex was so simple, so repetitive, but so fucking wonderful.

In the early hours, when she was sure Felipe was fast asleep, Clara took the cardboard box into the kitchen and opened it. A note and a glimmer of gold in the box.

'Clara

I knew you'd love this. Might have been owned by Nefertiti.

Keep it hidden and show it to no one.

Laura.'

A kind of gate bracelet was in the box, though the workmanship made it far better than any gate bracelet Clara had ever seen before. She wasn't immune to the seductive effect of gold, few are. The soft yellow metal felt wonderful in her hand. Clara had known someone had been in the house, her breakfast things had been washed up and put away.

"Ahh, my dear Laura." She muttered. "Whatever you've been up to, you're forgiven."

Clara had seen people on antique shows claiming to be able to feel the age of an antique. Vampires did have an ability to feel how long an object had been in existence. Maybe not as exact as carbon dating, but she knew the bracelet was old, incredibly old. She'd treasure it, even if she could never show it to anyone.

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