

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 23 – Serpent Bait

“Kunoy in the Faroe Islands.” The seer had said. “A tiny village on an island of the same name. Head north out of Kunoy and you’ll find a small rocky valley. That is the best location to call on Q’uq’umatz.”

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Brother Alberti knew something huge was occurring, when his vortex of power, began to show him images of Laura Selway. He knew of her of course and her ludicrous plan. To kill a God and not just any God. Laura intended to destroy Q’uq’umatz, who had created their world. Banishing the great feathered serpent wasn’t enough, the foul creature was certain to return. Destroying a God would bring consequences.....Yet, Alberti accepted it had to be done.

“Vampires.....They’ll be the end of this world.” Alberti muttered. “Such brutal, wonderful feral creatures.”

Alberti’s view of the realm of dreams was in his head, like a chaotic waking dream. He could see Laura somewhere, though he couldn’t tell what she was doing. As for Simon and Niña ? He sensed their presence in the dream world, but couldn’t see them. At that moment, when he was already feeling part of a war he couldn’t see or take part in, a minion of Huh did the impossible. A smiling woman dressed in a lilac coloured robe, was stood in front of his desk. The entire room was always awash with the power of the vortex. Nothing could penetrate the outer walls, unless he permitted it. Yet there she was, a part of probably the most dangerous of all the ancient Gods.

“This is a loan, not a gift.” Said the woman. “It must be returned after the matter is resolved.”

No use asking her how she’d penetrated his chambers, the Gods tended to ignore those kinds of direct questions. Besides, the item on his desk was priceless and beautiful. The Eye was sat there, glinting in the light from his lamps, which were kept burning twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.

“The Eye.....I am very grateful to be loaned....Such a treasure.” Said Alberti.

“Are you aware of how it works ?”

“Yes, I’ve studied it in ancient texts for many years.” Said Alberti. “Little did I think.....To actually have it in my hands.”

“Just on loan.....I will return for it, once the battle has been won, or.....The matter resolves itself another way.” Said the minion of Huh.

She meant if the serpent God won of course, though even Huh wouldn’t want to mention that possibility. The minion vanished, escaping from his vortex, as easily as she had entered it.

“Impenetrable indeed.” He muttered. “I’d have Al Tabasi flogged, if he hadn’t been dead for over a century.”

For a few moments, Alberti was nervous about touching the Eye of Solomon. There was little chance that the crystal orb was ever owned by Solomon, but the crystal had genuine power, huge amounts of it. Solomon was one of those people though, all sorts of objects were supposed to have once been owned by him. So many objects that he’d have needed several warehouses to hold them all. The Eye of Solomon was mentioned in a lot of ancient texts though, including two well-known grimoires.

Whatever its origins, the crystal could show its user anything, anywhere in creation and probably other realities. You had to know how to use it of course, but Alberti had read just about everything there was to read, about the Eye. No words to activate the crystal, it was far older than any language. Older perhaps than the world Alberti hoped Laura wasn't about to destroy. As with most truly ancient devices, the crystal required a small gift of blood. Alberti had often noted that just about every artefact of power, older than mankind, required a gift of blood. Not necessarily human blood of course.

"I'm sure mine will suffice." He mumbled.

Alberti had a blade on the desk, though he had no idea if it was clean. Mainly for opening sealed packages, the steel was sharper than most paper knives. Alberti stabbed the top of his left index finger and dripped several drops of his very ordinary human blood, onto the Eye. He rubbed the blood around until the crystal took on a deep crimson colour.

"Well.....So far, the old texts were right." He muttered.

Once the blood was on the crystal, it was his to control, for a few hours. A mental link of some kind, though even the writers of the best known grimoires were unsure of how it worked. Alberti closed his eyes and imagined Laura was there with him, in the room. He'd only seen drawings of her, but the Eye of Solomon was a clever ancient device. Laura was there in his mind's eye. If he'd read the old scrolls correctly, all he had to do was open his eyes.....

"It seems to be a day for the impossible to be possible." He muttered.

Alberti had given up wondering how his impregnable security had suddenly given up. In front him was a window into what looked like another world. Actually, not another world, it was probably the grey that existed between worlds. He couldn't be certain, the grey was almost impossible to see, so no one was an expert. No gravity, no air and cold, very cold, just a degree or so above absolute zero. If the grey hit absolute zero, some thought the universe would collapse in on itself, though that was only a theory.

"What is she doing.....Laura, can you hear me ?" He shouted.

If she could hear him, she wasn't reacting. Laura was there in the grey, fiddling with what looked like a huge sword. Her real accomplishment of course was surviving in the airless gap between worlds. She had protectors though; Laura was known to be favoured by several of the Old Gods. Alberti watched Laura and began to be envious of her powerful benefactors. Whatever she was doing, watching her do it, was fairly pointless.

"Simon.... He'll be getting ready for battle." Alberti mumbled.

The same routine, closing his eyes and imagining Simon was in the room with him. Easier to do with Simon, as they had regular meeting to discuss Simon's great project, the solving of the Festina Lente conundrum. Once the mental image of Simon looked perfect, Alberti opened his eyes.

"Oh, the Eye should have known I didn't want to see that."

Clara was with Simon and although they were under a blanket, it was obvious what they were doing. Alberti wasn't a voyeur, but he watched them for a few seconds. Sex was bizarre when you were involved in it and even stranger when you were just watching. All that sweating and those noises that sounded as though the two vampires were hurting one another.

"Enough, that is.....Enough."

He closed his eyes and imagined a blank room in front of him. When he opened his eyes, the window into other worlds was no longer there. Later that day he'd take a look at Niña and perhaps Laura again. By then, the battle with Q'uq'umatz would have, hopefully, commenced.

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Juliana couldn't quite believe Simon, Giovanni and Niña, had all gone. Yes, she understood that protecting the famous Laura was important. That didn't stop her feeling deserted and alone. Rice was there, organising everyone as best he could. Not that he tried to give her orders. Her father was one of the most influential men in Florence and he was immensely wealthy. When Rice talked to her he suggested things, rather than issuing orders. Somewhere deep down though, she knew that Rice was a good man, who was trying his best to do a thankless job.

"I have the men digging graves." Said Rice. "Do you wish to be there when we bury Michèle?"

One of her maids had died after the battle had ended, probably from shock and blood loss. A Corsican girl her mother had found for her, when she was old enough to need a lady's maid. Poor Michèle had only been a year or two older than her. Now she was going to be buried close to the ruins of Leptis Magna.

"Yes, please send for me when things are ready." Said Juliana.

There had been some damage to the building they slept in, but nothing to stop it being used. Juliana had already done more cleaning and tidying, than she'd ever done before. She was determined though, that the area they called their camp, was going to be free of blood stains by the end of the day. Her surviving maid had cried a lot, but Bea, short for Beatrice, was now on her knees, scrubbing the tiled floor.

"Dreadful.....So dreadful." Muttered Bea.

"We were lucky." Said Juliana. "Three to bury.....It could have been far worse."

Two of the men had died and her maid. It could have been far worse and the feeling of evil had left the ancient ruins. If all of them had died, there would have been no proper burial for any of them. Bea looked at her and nodded.

"Will the other be returning?" Asked Bea.

"Yes, don't worry.....They'll be back soon."

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Laura had been thinking for days, about where was the best place to seek out the feathered serpent. The clerics of the Silver Dawn had helped, with their library full of old and forbidden books. Tomes was probably a better word than book, the one she'd been shown had to have weighed at least twenty pounds. Nathalie Aurigny, her boss, had gone with her.

"Just so you don't get any arguments about what you may, or may not read." Nathalie had said.

Not a cleric, one of the seers had shown them the right page. Laura was impressed with the drawing of Q'uq'umatz, though the writing next to it was in a language Laura didn't even recognise. The nameless seer had translated for her.

"There is mention of a place sacred to Q'uq'umatz." The seer had said. "Continents move and change and I doubt if any of the old temple survives. The ground though, that will remain a sacred place. I can give you a location.....Go there and call upon the great serpent. I'm certain he will answer the call."

"Where is this location?" Laura had asked.

For a seer, he seemed very comfortable with modern technology. He used a screen to enter a set of coordinates, which he then copied into one of the archive devices. It took him a few minutes, before his seemingly permanent frown became a smile.

"Kunoy in the Faroe Islands." The seer had said. "A tiny village on an island of the same name. Head north out of Kunoy and you'll find a small rocky valley. That is the best location to call on Q'uq'umatz."

There had been a full latitude and longitude location, together with some high definition pictures taken from the internet. It had been nice to realise that even the Silver Dawn, weren't above copyright violation. It was all enough for Laura to use the Egg to get there. With her sword of course. The sword was a key of a sorts, she remembered that from her trip past the battle between Order and Chaos. She remembered little else, but she knew the sword was pretty important. She'd pictured the village of Kunoy until she could have described the houses and shacks in great detail. A press on her side to activate the Egg and.....

"Oh, why today of all days." She'd muttered.

There was delay in arriving, while held in a sort of limbo. Then the golden hue to everything. It all meant she was being diverted by an Old God. Sometimes Huh, but it was almost certainly Horus. Laura knew it was definitely him, when she arrived in his throne room. There he was, sat in the centre throne out of a line of at least twenty golden thrones. He pointed a finger and a plain wooden chair appeared, right in front of him.

"Sit Laura, sit near me." Said Horus. "We have much to discuss before you fight the oldest of the ancient ones."

Supposing he was about to forbid what she was about to attempt. She could hardly refuse to obey him, without being turned into something unnatural, or simply killed. Laura seemed to remember though that Horus wasn't into quick and painless punishments. When he felt a need to punish someone, it was always something huge and dramatic. Laura sat in the chair and as usual, she shuffled the chair forward, until their knees touched. He liked her, she knew that and for the most part, she liked him too. Touching knees with a God was strange, but strangely comforting.

"Good.....Now, give me the sword." Said Horus.

It was too large to go on her belt. Laura had the sword in her left hand and even with vampire strength; it was an effort for her to carry. She spun it around and handed it to the bird headed God. Horus placed the sword on his lap.

"Not always a sword, do you know what it really is?" He asked.

Honesty was best with Horus, he was simply too powerful to piss off with lies.

"I spoke to someone I can now barely remember." She said. "They said it could take on many forms and was part of the universe before this world had existed. I understood that it is a reset switch that can reset the feathered serpent. Yes, I know that probably sounds wrong."

Horus had his hand on his knee, their finger touched. Laura knew it was probably breaking a rule of etiquette that she'd never been told, but she placed her hand over his. His face became human and he was smiling at her. His other hand covered hers and he gently squeezed her hand.

"Your understanding is right." He said. "The sword can return Q'uq'umatz to an idea of a God, a potential for a creator for your world. A potential that will never actually exist. Dangerous of course dear Laura.....Destroying a God will have consequences."

"Yes, Huh told me that."

"Do you really not remember who gave you the sword?" Asked Horus.

"I did then, but now.....It feels like a fog has hidden my memories."

"Probably for the best.....This sword needs to be fixed in this reality." Said Horus. "It can be done in various ways, though the easiest is for you to do it. I can give you instruction, it's not particularly difficult. It will have to be done in the gaps between worlds, the grey areas of reality."

"I've heard of the grey before.....I think it was them, whoever gave me the sword." She said.

His hands left hers, which made her, feel sad for a moment. Horus had the head of a bird again, as he handed the sword back to her.

“Only you can lock the sword into your reality.” Said Horus. “I can send you into the grey and keep you alive there. Not for long though, an hour at the most. Remain there too long and you’ll disintegrate. The grey isn’t a kind place.....Do you understand that Laura ?”

“Yes, I do.”

Horus told her how to fix the sword in her reality. Quite simple in a nice comfortable throne room, but not in the grey, where everything seemed hostile to life. Horus flicked a finger in her direction and Laura was in the grey, one of the gaps in reality. Dark, airless and staggeringly cold. Even with the protection of God around her, it was the worst place she could remember being, ever.

“Once this is over....If I survive.” She muttered. “I’m going to take it easy for a while, maybe forever. Late mornings, maybe I’ll drink a little too much and eat too much.”

All symbolic really, her vampire physiology could deal with most excesses. Live on cake and she was unlikely to put on an ounce of fat.

“Alright reset switch, or whatever you are.” She mumbled.

It wanted her blood, though luckily not that much of it. An artefact that existed outside of time and reality, of course it wanted blood. What else would it want ? Laura had seen so many comments in so many ancient texts; that had all stated that in the end, everything was about the blood. One day, if she lived and saw them again, she was going to ask the Gods from another world, about the whole blood thing. Laura used her fangs to tear open a vein in her wrist.

“You are mine, until I no longer have need of you.” Said Laura.

She spoke the words in English, but heard them in the language of the Old Gods. A favour from Horus, though he couldn’t help her in the battle. Q’uq’umatz was a fellow God after all, the creator of.....Just about everything. Laura wasn’t surprised that the Gods stuck together and had rules about conflicts caused by mortals. Every other profession she knew tended to operate under the same principles, so why not Gods ? She let a lot of her blood drip over the sword. Eventually the silver blade turned blue.

“Good.....Now I can go to the Faroe Islands.” She muttered.

Laura ripped a sleeve from her shirt, using it to bind the bitten vein. It would still bleed for a while, but it really was the least of her problems. Laura thought of the village of Kunoy. When her mental image was about as clear as it was going to be, she pressed her elbow against the Egg, which was snugly up against her ribs. No diversion this time, she was instantly looking at a small village of single story houses and shacks.

“Oh, rain.....Why couldn’t it be a sunny day.”

Cold, no more than eight degrees and there was a biting wind. Add on the drizzle and she could see herself hating Kunoy. North the seer had said and Laura had a pretty good idea where north was. As she trudged along a stony path, a child saw her. No words, the little girl waved at her and Laura waved back.

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Patsy hadn’t been avoiding a visit to see Ronnie, not really. Her job at Hayle’s felt more important now, people were relying on her. The days of taking a sickie were mostly a thing of the past. Plus, if she was being honest with herself, it could easily have been her lying in a bed, in the slightly dodgy private clinic. Worse still, she might have been killed. Patsy had called to ask about visiting hours and had been told visitors could pretty much turn up when they wanted.

“Try and avoid doctors’ rounds at nine thirty.” She’d been told.

Obligatory fruit basket in her hand, Patsy entered the room where she’d been told Veronica Neophytou was being looked after. She walked straight in, there seemed no reason to cough, or

knock on the door. Noah was there, the huge guy who cracked heads for Tom Ives. He and Ronnie had once had a bit of thing going, actually more than just a casual fling. They were obviously rekindling something, if the snogging and groping were anything to go by.

“So Ronnie, I’m guessing you’re feeling better.” Said Patsy.

They reacted the way Patsy remembered reacting, when her mum had caught her snogging in her room with Gary Brown. They’d both been about thirteen though, not consenting adults like Ronnie and Noah.

“I was just.....I have to get to work.” Said Noah.

Ronnie was red faced, which was surprising. Patsy had always thought nothing could embarrass Ronnie, though she was supposed to be with Jim now, the hacker from Yorkshire. Noah had always seemed the perfect partner for Ronnie. Jim was a nice enough guy, but he was crazy; paranoid enough to be dangerous.

“Don’t let me chase you away, Noah.” Said Patsy.

“I have to go, there’s a lot to do with Clara away. I don’t suppose you know where she is ?”

“Involved in something huge.....And secret I’m afraid.” Said Patsy.

“Yeah, right.” Muttered Noah.

A man of few words was Noah, taciturn to the point of being seen as rude by some. He left and Patsy put the basket of fruit, on the cabinet beside the bed.

“It’s not what you think.” Said Ronnie.

“Oh, I bet it is.....Not that I blame you. Noah is cool, but Jim.....He’s three parts crazy.”

“Can this be our secret ?” Asked Ronnie.

“Fine, but you’ll have to choose.” Said Patsy.

Ronnie looked well, even if there were still quite a few tubes connected to bags on drip stands. Hospital gowns weren’t designed for modesty, or groping. Patsy looked away as Ronnie made sure her private bits were covered.

“Do you know when they’re going to send you home ?” Asked Patsy.

“Tomorrow, as long as today’s tests are alright.” Said Ronnie. “I’m tempted to book a taxi, then they have to let me leave.”

Patsy decided there were still some things, which justified taking a sickie. Poor Ronnie wasn’t going home in an Uber.

“Don’t book anything.....I’ll take you home.”

“Thank you, I wasn’t looking forward to a cab dropping me off.....I take it you know something about where they all are ? Clara I mean and some of her friends.” Said Ronnie.

“I know some of it.....And you ?”

“Yes, I know bits of it.”

They looked at each other, with Patsy wondering what Ronnie knew, while knowing Ronnie was probably wondering the same about her. A kind of Mexican stand off about secrets and weird facts. Patsy broke the atmosphere by pulling up a chair and grabbing the fruit basket.

“Can we start on the grapes ?” Patsy asked. “I’ve been looking at them all morning. The red ones look delicious.....I have a thing about grapes.”

“Yes, of course.....I like the green ones.” Said Ronnie.

Soon the awkwardness of finding Ronnie with Noah was forgotten, as the small talk began, hopefully laced with some juicy gossip. They chatted and attacked the large heap of assorted grapes. At one point Ronnie lowered her voice.

“You got him, didn’t you Patsy ? I remember you telling me about it, but I was drifting around then, in and out of consciousness. The huge guy I mean, the one with gang tattoos on his neck.”

“Yeah....I got him. Huge guy, like a fucking mountain.” Said Patsy. “He won’t be bothering anyone else.”

“Thank you.”

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Laura knew Q'uq'umatz was a dragon, rather than a serpent. To her though he was the great feathered serpent, which made her serpent bait. She’d seen drawings of him, hacked into stone walls in the few surviving temples built to honour the Ancient Deity. Few had seen the ink on parchment drawings on a tiny number of truly ancient scrolls, but she had. Beneath the drawing in one fairly complete scroll, was an eyewitness account of a visit by Q'uq'umatz.

“Q'uq'umatz walked low on four legs, his belly almost touching the ground. A long creature, who filled the street. A ruffle of white feathers round his throat, but otherwise his skin looked green and reptilian. A dragon rather than a serpent, at least to my eyes. Even horns at the back of his head.” It was said the feathered serpent had regularly walked through the streets of that part of South America. He fed on those faithful to him, ripping them apart to devour their heart and liver. The faithful were so intoxicated by their faith, that they ran towards the dragon, hoping to be eaten. It was an honour to serve Q'uq'umatz in any way, even as just a meal.

“I have no intention of feeding the brute.” Muttered Laura.

The seer had been wrong; there were traces of the temple on Kunoy Island. At the centre of the stony valley were three boulder sized stones. They looked like the rubble left behind by retreating glaciers. A tourist wandering the Faroe Islands wouldn’t have looked twice at the stones. Laura did though; their position was too ideal, too perfect to be a coincidence. The stones had been worked, though that had to have been many thousands of years ago. At the bottom of one of the stones was a very feint carving of a dragon, with a feathered neck.

“Come to me Q'uq'umatz.” Yelled Laura. “Come to me here, or I shall defile what is left of your temple.”

There was more to it than that of course; she’d learned a few phrases in the language of the Ancient Ones. Laura thought that if Q'uq'umatz was so desperate to kill her; he’d turn up when she began to insult him and his temple. Threatening to defile the ruins had been her own idea. She’d once peed on an old church crucifix and that had caused a lot of spiritual effects. She’d come close to being killed by the effects. If Q'uq'umatz didn’t show up fairly quickly, she’d empty her bladder over the stones.

“Come to me feathered one.....I am here, the descendant of Samnuha.”

There would be no warning, the seers and clerics had told her. The serpent would simply appear, probably quite close to her. It would then try to swallow her, after chewing at her for a while. No mighty wind, no cloud of mist.....The great serpent would hurtle at her, with no warning.

“I am here ! Do you want me or not ?” She yelled.

Laura used the sword to strike the stones. Surely the feathered serpent had to see that, or feel it, or know about it with some kind of godly senses ? The sword created sparks, as she hit the stones with all her strength.

“Q'uq'umatz, creator of this world.....Are you scared of a single, solitary vampire ?”

The Silver Dawn clerics had told her it might take a while. The serpent wanted her, but there was an entire planet to be searched. It might ignore an annoyance in the Faroe Islands, believing it to be a pointless distraction.

“Take supplies, you may be there for hours.” Akiva had said

To hell with waiting for hours, everyone was waiting for her to arrive, with the serpent chasing her. They all had lives and other places to be. Leave it a few hours and her small army of volunteers would lose focus. Some might even think about leaving the realm of dreams.

“Last chance, Q'uoq'umatz.” She shouted. “I’ll count to ten.....Then I’ll be defiling what’s left of your temple, your holy of holies.”

Laura loudly chanted the words the seer had taught her, the invocation rhyme in the language of the most ancient of the Ancient Gods. She waited, well beyond any sensible count of ten.

“Think I’m bluffing.....One.” She shouted.

Laura began to wonder what she’d do if the feathered serpent was a no show. All the time, everyone had assumed that Q'uoq'umatz was desperate to kill her. Of course the brute would arrive, as soon as Laura showed herself. But....What if it didn’t show up ?

“Two.” She shouted.

It was so peaceful on the island. Laura could see smoke rising from the chimneys, in the village she’d passed through. She used the sword to strike the rocks again. After another wait of at least twenty seconds.....

“Three.” Laura yelled.

By the time Laura reached eight, she knew it wasn’t going to work. Nine and ten were yelled, merely to complete the numbers. Laura wasn’t keen on carrying out her threat. Squatting with her knickers round her ankles, while she peed, would leave her vulnerable to attack. It had to be done though, threats ignored, had to be followed through. Laura lowered her panties and squatted with her rear end against the largest of the stones.

“You deserve this, Q'uoq'umatz.”

Laura peed, she could hear the splashing sound as the contents of her bladder, ran down the stone. After she was finished and adjusting her clothing, she saw the child again.

“Damn, I never realised she was there.” Muttered Laura.

A scruffy girl child, probably no more than six or seven. Still some distance away, though she wasn’t waving this time. Laura hoped the serpent didn’t choose that moment to attack.

Laura quickly learned to never underestimate Ancient Gods. The scruffy girl child began to grow and change. Q'uoq'umatz had turned up, the feathered serpent had been there all the time, watching. By the time the child had fully become the serpent; Laura was picturing Jack in her mind and pressing her elbow against the Egg of Astaroth.

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Brother Alberti had a first name, though even the few people he trusted didn’t know it. His mother had called her boy child Drefan, which meant trouble in Anglo-Saxon. Alberti had been born a long time ago and in another part of the world, though he now considered himself to be Italian, a citizen of Florence. Sometimes he thought of himself as a servant of the Medici, but only when it suited him. His first name had been lost in history, though sometimes he used it, when muttering to himself. He was an elderly recluse who needed to spend a lot of time alone in his power nexus. So of course, he tended to talk to himself more often than was probably healthy. He was using the Eye again, to watch Niña this time. She was stood near Giovanni. Both of them were watching the sky. Alberti was used to seeing Giovanni armed and dressed in leather. The girl looked strange holding a blade, while wearing some kind of chain armour over her clothing.

“Oh Niña, don’t let Giovanni turn you into a ruffian.” Alberti muttered.

They were on a rocky hillside somewhere in the realm of dreams. Alberti had the occasional glimpse of a dragon, who had to be Karkengara, the bringer of fire. So far the view had been quite boring, but things looked to be about to get more interesting. The dragon joined the other two, in looking intently at the sky. Alberti finally heard the sound the others must have heard for a while. A tearing sound as the sky over that rocky hillside, split apart.

“Oh Drefan, part of me feels frustrated at not being there.” He mumbled. “A larger part though, is glad that I’m here, safe in Florence.”

It seemed Laura could fly in the world of dreams, or at least move as though she was flying. The loud tearing sound became the sound of thunder, as the rip in the sky belched fire. Hurling away from that chaos was Laura. She was looking behind her, while holding a sword that looked as long as she was tall.

“Careful Laura.....If it swallows you, the world will probably end.”

Alberti had seen drawings of the feathered serpent before, but drawings never give a good idea of size, or how much pure aggression was coming from the huge Ancient God. Huge wasn’t a big enough word, Q’uq’umatz seemed to fill the sky over the valley. For some reason the Eye centred Niña in the area he could see. Annoying, but the Eye of Solomon was a clever device and as he couldn’t change the view, he had to live with it.

“By all that’s holy.....Who was stupid enough to teach her that ?” He mumbled.

Maybe no one had taught her how to manipulate the world around her. It might well have been something that simply happened when she’d been taken into the realm of the dreams, the ultimate shift in reality. As Niña waved her hand at a group of stunted trees on the hillside, they came out of the ground. Roots trailing behind them, the trees became missiles. It was almost unbelievable, but Alberti was seeing it with his own eyes.

“Oh Drefan....She needs those skills now, but pray she loses them after the serpent had been defeated.”

Q’uq’umatz the great feathered serpent, creator of the world, had to swerve to avoid the trees Niña had sent hurtling at it. It, he or she, Alberti was unsure if any gender was really appropriate for an Ancient God. The serpent had needed to treat Niña’s attack with respect though, Alberti had witnessed it.

“Oh, if only I had more control over what I see.” He muttered.

The Eye had decided Laura was now the centre of whatever was happening. Alberti was looking down at her, as she moved across the sky. The poor female vampire had tangled with the serpent somewhere else; her clothing had been reduced to rags. She was descending towards the ground at speed, apparently aiming at a particularly stony part of the valley.

“You’re correct Eye, this is more interesting.” Alberti mumbled. “She needs to be careful.....hitting the rocks at speed is likely to kill her.”

The laws of physics seemed adaptable in the realm of dreams. Just as Laura looked certain to hit the ground, she went straight up, at speed. Q’uq’umatz turned, but still hit the ground at an alarming speed. The serpent’s back dug a deep furrow in the ground, as its jaws tried to grab hold of Laura. “Yes Drefan, they understand the weird physics of the place and Q’uq’umatz doesn’t. I do believe, those fools might stand a chance.”

Laura was up and away, with the serpent still trying to go after her. It might have succeeded in catching her. A blur of brownish skin and fire arrived from somewhere Alberti couldn’t see. The dragon had joined the battle; Alberti had wondered what had become of the bringer of fire. Belching

white hot flames, Karkengara had his jaws locked around the throat of the serpent. Down they went, the fighting pair crashing into the rocky floor of the valley.

“Wonderful.....To think I once doubted Karkengara’s sincerity.”

It seemed the dragon deity intended to protect Laura with its life, exactly as it had given its oath to do. It held onto the serpent, as they both thrashed about on the valley floor. Q'ug'umatz was larger than the dragon, but Karkengara looked to be the quicker out of the two. The serpent was thrashing about; trying to break free, but the dragon obviously had a good grip with its jaws. Then Alberti could see nothing, the image had gone and he was looking at an empty room.

“No.....No, I must see what’s happening.” He yelled.

The Eye was still there, though it now looked like clear crystal once again. The blood, his blood, had run out. Alberti had once seen an automaton at the fair ground. A skeletal man who was brought to life by clockwork. When the spring was wound, the pile of metal became a moving man. When the spring ran out, the man became a pile of useless metal again. That had to be what had happened to the Eye.

“Fuck.” He shouted.

Alberti didn’t like obscene language, but there were times when such words seemed to be the only appropriate thing to say. One of his guards looked around the door, to be sent away with a wave of his hand. No finesse about it, Alberti dug his blade into his hand and let the blood pour over the crystal. He used both of his hand to spread to the blood around, until the crystal became the colour of fresh blood once again. By the time he’d concentrated and brought the Eye under his control again, or as much under his control as it was ever likely to be; the view had changed. He was looking at the backs of Liz Grant and Daniel. So, the other vampire male had turned up after all. They were both looking at an area of the forest just beyond the valley. Alberti couldn’t see any details, but the flames and smoke suggested Karkengara was still fighting the great serpent.

“Fuck.....I need to see what’s happening.” Muttered Alberti.

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