

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 17 – Leptis Magna

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Simon took the girl with him every time now. Unless Brother Alberti specifically asked for a private meeting, Niña went with him. She’d had some kind of link with the Djinn, which he didn’t understand. That link appeared to work through the dead companion, Donna. It was all very strange, but in many ways, Niña had earned her seat at the table. Alberti looked better than he had, though Simon still thought his mentor couldn’t survive for long, away from his power nexus. Alberti had already mentioned the information passed his way by senior people in service to the Medici. Bandits had attacked Livorno; at about the time The Mermaid had been due to dock. Simon didn’t believe in such coincidences, someone was watching them, someone intent on stopping Niña and himself.

“So, Leptis Magna.....That doesn’t surprise me.” Said Alberti. “The city was part of the Carthaginian Empire, but was taken over by Rome during the Punic wars. A truly ancient city, with many names, going right back into pre-history. If someone has been waiting there, they may have been waiting for a very long time.”

“The Djinn had been sealed up in her rock prison, for many millennia.” Said Simon.

“Yes.....Yes, that all indicates that the great secret, has been hidden since civilisation was in its infancy.”

“I’ve had feelings of darkness, ever since Simon mentioned Leptis Magna.” Said Niña.

“You have to be cautious; Leptis was run by Carthage for generations. Rumours of their abilities with the dark arts abound.” Said Alberti. “As with all ancient rumours, legend and facts entwine to the point where the truth is hard to find. Just be careful....I’m beginning to see why two vampires looking for the great secret, may be your destiny. You’re the only creatures likely to survive the various tests and quests.”

“To me at least, it’s all about learning as much as I can.” Said Niña. “I picked up so much knowledge in Syracuse, from just our first journey to find an artefact.”

“I think Niña has a secret plan to rule the world.” Said Simon.

“I’d settle for knowing why Simon isn’t just one Simon.” Said Niña. “I felt it before and the feeling is stronger now. You’ve passed this way before, in another existence. In my dreams I see you and hear the name of Piero Rossi. You can trust me with the truth.”

Simon hadn’t seen it coming, though he accepted that the girl would need to know eventually. He’d passed through the life of Piero before; it was how he’d learned Italian and Latin. Some of that life now felt like a dream, but he still used the experience and knowledge gained by Piero. Telling Niña now though.....It was sooner than he’d hoped. She might start wanting to visit other time lines.

There was a solution of course, tell her everything. The Niña destroying large parts of 21st century London, wasn’t the young vampire sat next to him. Maybe telling her what she might become, would avert the possibility. There’d be more darkness in her drawings of course, that was unavoidable. A sensitive young woman, brought face to face with her inner demon.

"It's your choice, Simon." Said Alberti. "Personally, I'd advice telling Niña everything."

"Yes, that makes sense." Said Simon. "In private though....Can I use one of the training rooms?"

"Of course, Simon. The guards outside will unlock any room you require." Said Alberti

"So, you're really going to tell me everything?" Asked Niña.

"Yes.....Though I should warn you. Some of it will upset you." Said Simon.

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The call from Mabina had been when Clara was thinking of calling her, or maybe phoning Daniel. The changes to her body could no longer be ignored. Clara had decided to make Felipe use condoms. She had no intention of bringing a human vampire hybrid into the world, but talking to Daniel about it seemed sensible. Accidents happened and she dreaded to think what her five-hundred-year-old body might give birth to. The call and invitation to join Mabina and Daniel, came at the opportune moment.

"You'll need to come around the back of the house." Mabina had told her. "A large office building really, in Holborn. I'll give you directions."

Clara went to Holborn tube station and by the time she was on the street, her vampire senses were kicking in. She knew where Mabina and Daniel were, even the part of the building. Getting into the garden at the rear of the building though, in the dark. That looked a bit awkward. Clara made sure she wasn't being observed, before going over the garden wall. There was a man at the rear door to the building, who'd obviously been told she was expected.

"You must be Clara."

"I am."

"Top floor, front.....Watch out for the damaged stairs."

There had been a battle, quite a destructive one, followed by a tidy up. There were battery powered lanterns at strategic spots, which made it easier to get up the stairs than it might have been. Human guards lurked in strategic locations, all looking bored. Clara had no idea what to expect, Mabina hadn't told her about a fight, or the human guards. A house in Holborn that looked as though it was in a war zone. Everything was triggering Clara's curiosity. The last two guards were sitting on a sofa at the top of the final set of stairs.

"In there, you're expected." Said one of them, while pointing.

Clara felt the items on the floor, before she saw them. Nothing specific, just a feeling that the half dozen or so artefacts, were best left alone. Predominantly gold items, the preferred medium for artefacts intended to last for thousands of years. Other metals corroded away and stone carvings tended to be brittle. Gold though; very little had the ability to damage it, or even dull that wonderful yellow colour. The three people sat in the room, barely registered on her consciousness.

"Hi Clara, meet Howard Mariette, famous archaeologist." Said Mabina. "He also collects antiquities. Look at all the wonderful items he's given us."

"They feel.....Dangerous." Said Clara.

"All the best artefacts are." Said Daniel. "Liz has selected hers, a kind of finder's fee. She had somewhere else to be, her and the dragon. The rest though.....Are ours, in return for a favour."

"They're yours, in return for your blessing." Said Howard.

"Our new friend wants the gift of your kiss, dear Clara." Said Mabina. "The bite that gives eternal life."

So, Liz had found Howard and his collection of artefacts. Clara knew Liz was investigating the death of someone, though she wasn't sure who. A dragon though, that was news. As for Clara trying to turn Howard; one huge question felt paramount.

“Why me ?” She asked. “Either of you two could bless him with the vampire’s kiss.”

Clara knew about the cults who thought of vampires as almost being Gods. Crazy too, there had been a couple living in Gravesend during the last war. Human devotees could be useful and the couple would have done anything for Simon. The problem was when they believed their adoration wasn’t being appreciated. The woman out of the couple had tried to burn their house down. Clara knew the crazy speak though, the terminology of the cults.

“It seems we’re not worthy.” Said Mabina. “Howard is a scholar, who has read about our kind. He’d heard of you and Simon, but.....”

“He’s never heard of us.” Interrupted Daniel. “Give him the blessing, Clara. You turned me successfully, which he knows. It seems you’re famous in certain circles.”

“Yes, I’m feeling a little hurt.” Said Mabina. “But these wonderful objects of power, will soothe away any bad feelings. Bite Howard my dear, turn him and you can have your pick of the artefacts.”

Clara knew the odds on turning a human who hadn’t been tested. Daniel had developed the test for compatibility with vampire transformation. Only two percent of untested humans survived being turned, it was why their kind were so rare. The fact that Daniel hadn’t mentioned the test, or the success rate, made up her mind. Clara wasn’t going to mention it either. Besides, she really liked one of the artefacts.

“Fine, I’ll turn you, Howard.” She said. “As for my payment....I choose this item.”

It was a gold flying bug, probably a bee. The artist had probably worked with primitive tools, to create a perfect bee, about three centimetres long. That was another reason the ancient artisans had chosen gold. The metal was relatively soft and easy to work. The bee wasn’t just a wonderful piece of art, her finger tingled as she touched it.

“A good choice, I’ll explain why once you’ve turned me.” Said Howard.

An old guy kept alive by toxic magic; she could feel it on him. His chances of him ever being a vampire were incredibly thin. Once he’d died, there’d be his guards to deal with. Clara wasn’t in the mood for wholesale slaughter, but it would mean a chance to feed.

“Alright, get yourself comfortable.” Said Clara.

“Anywhere in particular ?” Asked Howard. “Do I need to be on the floor ?”

“The chair where you are will do fine.” She said.

For a second, as she knelt next to him, Clara saw just a scared old man sat in the chair. It was tempting to end it all quickly, by simply biting out Howard’s throat. Two of his men were watching from the door though, there to watch their boss achieve immortality. They too would die, but only when it suited the three vampires in the room.

“Close your eyes, Howard.” Said Clara. “Try to relax if you can, it will hurt less.”

It didn’t really have time to hurt. Howard gasped as her fangs went into his neck, but the neurotoxin kicked in fairly quickly. By the time she was drinking his blood, Howard was conscious, but probably unaware of what was happening. Clara stopped after getting a pint or so of blood into her stomach. She bit her own wrist and let the blood trickle in Howard’s mouth.

“Swallow.....Come on, swallow or it won’t work.” She said.

She used her fingers on his throat, pressing gently until he swallowed the blood. Clara carried on draining the archaeologist of blood, until his heart was about to stop. For the second and last time, she made sure he swallowed quite a bit of her blood. When Howard’s heart stopped, she pushed him right back in the chair.

“That’s it, everything done as well as I can do it.” Said Clara.

“How long until it works ?” Asked one of the guards.

“At least an hour, though it might be as long as three hours.”

If it took three hours, it was highly unlikely that Howard Mariette was coming back. Mabina was hungry and sent one of the guards out for burgers and fries. A weird choice, but it seemed she'd recently developed a taste for burgers. Two hours to kill, maybe three until it was time to feed on the guards, before disposing of their bodies. It was the ideal moment for Clara to discuss her recent problems.

“I'm glad we've got a while.” She said. “I need to talk to you both about something personal and a little embarrassing.”

“Well..... It can't be a sexually transmitted disease.” Said Mabina. “Our kind can't catch those.”

Mabina laughed and so did Daniel. They were both obviously enjoying her obvious embarrassment.

“You can't be pregnant.....Our kind don't do that either.” Chuckled Daniel.

“Are you certain about that ?” Asked Clara. “After over five hundred years, I'm bleeding.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry Clara.” Said Mabina. “Tell us everything, every tiny detail.”

There wasn't much to tell, apart from her periods starting up again, after stopping when she'd become a vampire. Clara had looked up the tell-tale signs of a girl's first period. It was all online, the number of days, the stomach cramps, even the sore breasts and mood swings. She'd ticked every box.

“So, how can this have happened ?” Asked Clara. “Has it happened before ? Is it in any of the old books, the ones that aren't total crap ?”

“I've never heard of it and my family goes back several millennia.” Said Mabina.

Daniel had linked his fingers together, while he stared at the ceiling. In a way he was the best person to ask, but also the most embarrassing. If anyone had ever learned anything useful about vampire procreation, it had to Daniel.

“Not with vampires, but I seem to remember a few cases in human females.” Said Daniel. “Very rare, staggeringly rare, but the cases have been authenticated. One was a senior priestess who'd gone past the natural age of being able to have children. She was given a gift by the Gods, something to make her fertile again. Have you had a major change in your life, Clara ? Or maybe an unexpected gift ?”

“I knew it, or at least I had guessed.”

Clara had found it impossible to leave the house, without the jade carving in her pocket. A beautiful carving of a child, made by an artist, long before the Japanese had begun working with jade. She held it in her hand and as Daniel reached out for it, she didn't want to give it to him.

“I'll drop it, then you'll need to pick it up.” She said. “I can't give it to you, the damned thing has some kind of hold over me.”

“I can feel it now.....I'm not touching it.” Said Mabina.

Daniel picked up the carving and Clara wanted to attack him. It took a huge effort not to hit him and pull the jade out of his hand.

“Where did you get it ?” Asked Daniel.

“From Laura, a gift. Something carved about five thousand years ago. She found it in a temple in Sudan.”

“More like fifty thousand years ago, Clara.” Said Daniel. “A gift from a God, or perhaps a powerful shaman. A gift to ensure a child, probably for a woman who was infertile, or older than the usual child bearing years. Staggeringly rare.....I think you need to dispose of it. Probably indestructible, you'd need to drop it in a hole in the ground, a very deep hole.”

“I'm not sure I could.....Supposing I want to keep it ?” Asked Clara.

"Then get the man, or men in your life, to use condoms." Said Mabina.

"Do you wish to have a child?" Asked Daniel. "I wouldn't advice it...Your body is no longer a nurturing environment for a human child."

"I'd guessed that, I'm not stupid."

Enough of his nonsense, Clara grabbed the jade figure out of Daniel's hands. Once it was in her hand again, her mood improved.

"Sorry....I do respect your advice." She said.

"You either use condoms with sexual partners, or dispose of the jade figure." Said Daniel. "The one option almost guaranteed to be horrific, is to have a child. Promise me Clara, don't even consider it."

"Alright, I promise." She said.

"The figure was intended for a human, not our kind." Added Mabina.

"Ok....I get it, no using the gift to have a child."

Two hours later, they decided that Howard never was going to wake up and become a new born vampire. No weeping at the beauty of the night for him. Clara ripped out Howard's throat, just to be certain she hadn't created a new immortal. The guards put up a decent fight, but all of them ended up dead, drained of their lifeblood. Clara took her gold bee, even if she never was going to hear the story about its history. The others took their golden objects of power and a few other small antique items. When they were finished looting, Daniel set fire to the house.

"The purging flames." Muttered Mabina. "Definitely the best way to get rid of any evidence."

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Juliana had intended to leave Simon's past alone. After all, history was all about the past and there was nothing to be done about the past. Giovanni had admitted to terrible deeds in his past, though he hadn't gone into details. Her lover, Simon, had probably done similar unspeakable horrors. They were fighters with the Medici after all, probably assassins too. There was no use in fretting over what couldn't be changed. Then Juliana had literally bumped into Anna, an old friend. On the way to mass on a Sunday morning. Always a wonderful opportunity to pick up gossip. Juliana had stepped backwards out of her carriage and poor Anna had nearly been knocked over.

"I'm most dreadfully sorry." Said Juliana. "Anna....I was thinking about you the other day. It has been far too long since we last caught up on each other's lives."

Anna was about her age and they'd once used the same history tutor. Out of that simple coincidence, Juliana had gained a friend who would wield genuine power, when she was older. Anna had a string of pretty names, which ended with the name of Medici.

"I've been hearing about the man in your life." Said Anna. "My uncle thinks highly of him and he's with the Brotherhood. I'd say you've found a keeper, dear Juliana."

"And I've no intention of sharing him."

They laughed over a shared joke. There had been a boy when they'd been no more than eight, maybe nine. Male company was so rare, that they decided to share little Bicci's affections. Not that there was much affection to share at that age. Anna knew things, she'd probably know about Simon's past and his present duties. Juliana's parents had tried to shield her from the darker side of Florentine life, especially her father. Anna's parents had kept nothing from her, nothing at all.

The church wasn't far from where their coaches stopped. It was a rainy morning, so both of them were accompanied by maids holding umbrellas. No chance of privacy, but Juliana wanted some of the information in Anna's head.

"We must get together, for lunch perhaps." Said Juliana. "During the week, we must do it. Leave it any longer and we'll forget.....Then another half a year will go by."

“You’re right, we can’t let that happen.” Said Anna. “I’m at the bank on Wednesdays. My mother wants me trained in something truly evil....Double entry bookkeeping. Come for lunch on Wednesday and I’ll show you around.”

“I will, definitely.” Said Juliana.

Simon was already making arrangements to visit North Africa, a place called Leptis Magna. Again, the idea had been to take just Niña and a few hired guards. Juliana had almost persuaded Simon to take her, but it was an uphill struggle. Giovanni had fought his own battles to get an invite and he seemed to have won. There had been a letter on Simon’s desk, mentioning Giovanni as one of his North African party. Juliana was hoping that Anna might know of a few skeletons in cupboards. Not that Juliana was going to use the information to threaten Simon. Just rattling the skeletons about would probably mean her going to Leptis Magna. A strange name for a city. Her Latin was quite good, so she knew the literal meaning on Leptis Magna, was Big Bed. It had to be a very strange place.

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Whatever Mabina had done to Zeus, seemed to have worked. Patsy had received no more early morning calls from her mum; about her pet cat glowing, growling or stomping about. She loved her mum and sometimes missed her old life. There was something though, about the peace and quiet of living alone. She swung around and her feet hit the cold wooden floor next to her bed.

“I must remember to buy a rug.” She muttered.

She had almost shared her bed with Dave, the son of one her mum’s neighbours. He was alright to look at and they knew a few of the same people. The physical side had reached that final stage of heavy petting and dry humping. She’d have to either sleep with Dave fairly soon, or cast him adrift. The problem wasn’t Dave it really was her. Sometimes, when he touched her in a certain way, she thought of Simon. Patsy was amazed she hadn’t called him Simon by accident.

“Come on, get up you lazy slut.” She mumbled.

After the recent conversation with Mabina, Patsy had considered her options if she was given an opportunity to see Simon again. Not that she’d rush into his arms....Or maybe she would. Her feelings were complex and just as she’d decided to settle for Dave, at least for a while; Mabina had stirred up all her old feelings again.

No one had described in detail the minions of Huh, the women in lilac robes. When Patsy found one waiting in her bathroom, she had a good idea what was about to happen. No embarrassment about being naked, or at least not that much. It was her home after all, she had a perfect right to sleep naked. It was first thing every morning, straight out of bed. Patsy needed to pee, so she sat on the toilet and peed.

“Sorry.” Said Patsy.

The woman smiled and waited for Patsy to finish and give her hands a rinse.

“You’ll need to dress, something comfortable.” Said the minion. “I can take you see Simon, if you’d like to see him again ? A temporal anomaly has been created, a very rare thing. I need an answer now.....Do you wish to see Simon Atherton ?”

All of her calm, well thought out ideas about seeing him again, evaporated.

“Yes, I’ll go.....I’ll dress as quickly as I can.” Said Patsy. “Is there time for me to shower ?”

“No.”

Patsy ignored the growing number of robed women, as she opened drawers and put on clean clothes, almost at random. Blue jeans with a colourful silk blouse and brown trainers. Odd socks of course, who has the time, or patience, to match up their socks. A red zip up jacket a car parts rep

had given her, before picking up a bag. Not much in the bag, but she knew there'd be a need for one, if she didn't take it.

"Alright.....Ready as I'll ever be." Said Patsy.

Patsy had meant to complain about them upsetting Zeus, but that was driven from her mind. There were so many women in lilac robes, dozens of them...All crammed into her bedroom. No chance to ask if it would take long, the room around her seemed to fold up into the ceiling. It was replaced by cloisters, damp and fairly dark, cloisters.

"I'm sorry Niña, but I had to tell you." Said Simon.

"Fine, but that wasn't me.....Or maybe not the me I will be."

Simon, looking like an extra in a piece of period theatre. He was walking along the cloisters, while talking to a young woman. She was dressed as though on the way to a Halloween party, all dark colours and a strut, definitely a strut. Patsy stepped out from behind a stone column and looked at them. Something had to happen, didn't it? She'd be transported away with Simon, while the girl, Niña was frozen to the spot. Only nothing like that did happen and now they were looking at her.

"Hello Simon, I'd recognise you anywhere." Said Patsy. "Even with the new beard and leather jerkin."

"Patsy.....This is Niña." Said Simon. "Sorry, I'm lost for something to say, this is impossible."

Thirteenth century Italy, maybe the date had become the fourteenth. Patsy wasn't sure where Simon had been sent, but she knew it was around that time. There she was in her Chinese made polyester jacket, while Simon and Niña simply stared at her.

"I saw you once, in a vision, or a dream." Said Niña. "I drew your picture."

"Yes, I've seen it. You replaced the shop counter with beautiful flowers."

"It survived all that time.....I'm surprised." Said Niña.

"The paper is a bit yellow, but otherwise..... It's fine."

Patsy couldn't help it, she held Simon's hand, while expecting to be zapped by whoever policed the time lines. There was no zap, just a very confused looking Simon. At least Niña seemed to realise their need to be alone.

"I'll go and wait in the carriage. Nice to meet you, Patsy."

"And you....I now know who made all those lovely drawings."

It was all so weird and impossible. Patsy even understood Italian and she'd never learned it. She stood there, still holding Simon's hand. Someone was coming along the cloisters, so Simon took her into a small room.

"No one will come in here." He said. "I'm glad you were brought here; we never even had a chance to say goodbye."

"I heard you have someone here, a Juliana. I think Laura told me, though it might have been Clara. Clara is being a bit scary lately.....She got your old job with Tom."

"I know, Clara has been here." Said Simon. "Just the once and I'm not sure if I'll see her again."

They kissed, a full eating face kiss that went on for some time. Only one lamp in the room and a single bed. The room looked like a cell, though someone had to think of it at home. It would have been so easy to steer Simon over to the bed, she couldn't imagine him saying no. The bed looked rickety, but sex did that thing; it made any bed feel wonderfully comfortable. Patsy rested her face on his chest.

"I think.....I think this visit is all about having a proper goodbye." Said Patsy. "You have Juliana and I've been seeing someone. An engineer from a heating company, his name is Dave. A bit boring I

think, but after some of the place I've been, things I've seen. Boring sounds nice, at least for a while."

"I still think we will meet again." Said Simon.

"Yes, I feel like that too.....We'll meet, though it might be years from now. Just don't get yourself killed, Simon Atherton. I get this awful feeling that if you die in the past, I'll never meet you."

They kissed again and Simon told her all about some of Clara's gossip and his trip to Syracuse. Patsy told Simon all about the raid on the Monkman Museum and the snake she had hidden in her knicker drawer. They sat on the bed and gossiped. All too soon the minions returned and took her away, while she was still kissing Simon.

"We will meet again.....I feel it in my soul." Said Simon.

It was as if the room in Italy folded into itself and she was once again, in her bedroom. One of the minions briefly touched her hand, before vanishing. As if to prove it had all been real, there was mud on her trainers. Mud from thirteenth or fourteenth century Italy, she still wasn't sure of the exact date.

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Carnac, an exceptionally dense collection of megalithic sites. Stone circles, standing stones, dolmens and the obligatory burial mounds. Ancient man had built there for the same reason The Silver Dawn had used the chateau as their headquarters. There was power deep beneath the ground, power that could be pulled to the surface and used. Our ancient ancestors felt the power. The Silver Dawn had technology that could measure the energy and quantify it. Laura was a vampire, far more sensitive to such things than any human shaman. She'd brought them all there to give them privacy, though she also liked to be there. That close to that much energy.....It was like bathing in ancient powers. "I knew we had to have this talk." Said Laura. "Better here than the chateau. I dread to think what the Silver Dawn's shamans would think of your dragon. It's a mild morning and I often come here when I have free time."

Tim had come of course, she kept very little from him now. Akiva had to be there, it was his destiny, which he kept mentioning. Liz Grant had brought Karkengara, though she'd had the good sense to leave him well away from the chateau. Invisible to humans he might be, but the shamans would have seen him. Laura sat on a fallen standing stone, leaving the others to sit, or stand if they preferred.

"I'm not her dragon." Said Karkengara. "We just travel together, or rather we did. With the death of Howard Mariette, our association may have come to an end."

"We're here to help Laura, it's important." Said Liz. "Mabina's Gods from another world are worried, so we should be concerned too. If Q'uq'umatz devours Laura, our world will perish and die. It might take a while, but every living thing will die."

"Horus knows this to be true." Said Akiva. "He sent me here, to protect Laura."

"Wonderful.....Though a few thousand of his minions might have been of more use. All of them armed to the teeth with mystical weapons, of course." Said the dragon.

Laura didn't like the dragon, the bringer of fire. Not that it meant they couldn't work and fight well together. She'd thought Akiva was a jerk for most of the time they'd tried to keep Horus happy. Sometimes she still thought his jerk level was way too high.

"There is power in Carnac and the chateau is a fortress." Said Laura. "I can defend myself."

"Not from a God, Laura." Said Tim.

"You can't simply hide here forever." Added Liz.

They were right, of course they were. Laura needed a while though, to get used to the idea that a feathered serpent, wanted to eat her, swallow her whole. Why her death would mean the destruction of their world, was still a mystery. Someone would eventually explain that, she was sure of it. The dragon lay on the ground and looked like a huge resting hound. Despite their outward animosity, Liz sat on the ground and rested her back against Karkengara. Tim sat next to her on the fallen menhir, while Akiva sat by himself, on the ground. For a while, everything was quiet and peaceful.

"I've decided." Muttered the dragon. "I will join this enterprise."

"What did Howard know about you?" Asked Liz. "He mentioned you being jailed by someone."

"Imprisoned, not jailed, there is a huge difference." Said Karkengara. "That was all a long time ago, even for a deity. I would rather not discuss it. I'm sure you all have things in your past that you're not particularly proud of."

"He's got a point." Said Laura.

"I know why Laura being eaten will destroy the world." Said the dragon. "I'll gladly tell you about that, in exchange for not explaining being imprisoned."

"Ahhh, good....I was hoping someone would explain it." Said Laura.

"Fine.....I'll never mention your dark secret again." Added Liz.

"We should have brought coffee and nibbles." Said Akiva.

"No.....If I go for some, you'll all be talking about something else by the time I return." Said Laura.

"No coffees, no cakes, no cheese on toast. I don't even care if your bladder is about to burst, we're going to hear what Karkengara has to say."

"She used to be such a sweet girl." Muttered Liz.

"Afterwards.....Once we're finished talking, I'll go for refreshments." Said Laura.

"It's not a huge story, nothing to trouble a healthy bladder, or cause serious dehydration. It all comes down to a philosophical point that never seems to trouble most forms of intelligent life. Why are you, you? Why do you look through your eyes and not say, the eyes of the person next to you."

"Oh, come on Dragon, less waffle." Said Akiva.

"Leave him to get on with it. I've heard of movement through entity. I did it myself, when I absorbed the previous guardian of the last gate to the underworld." Said Liz. "It can be dangerous, or so I was told, world destroying dangerous."

"Indeed.....You're used to entity being fixed." Said the dragon. "You question that no more than you wonder about gravity, or up being up, or down being down. It is what it is and you are you, forever. Like a rainy day when you need to go out, you live with it."

"Until something goes wrong." Muttered Tim.

"Yes, there are holes in your universe from where things have gone wrong." Said Karkengara. "I know, I've been around for a very long time. I am a deity after all. If you think altering the past is dangerous, that has nothing on fiddling with entity. The Gods from another world are right to be worried. It's mercifully rare, but whole galaxies have ceased to exist."

"Alright.....We're taking it seriously." Said Laura.

"It all started with the feathered serpent, Q'uq'umatz." Said Karkengara. "He probably swallowed Laura's ancestor out of annoyance, nothing more. He spewed her out again as some kind of egg....Then the problems began. Samnuha was her name, your long-lost ancestor, Laura. First of the modern vampires, her soul split open on rebirth, into multiple entities. I've even heard of an ancient Djinn who called herself Samnuha. The Gods did what they could, but this world could have ended a very long time ago. When Laura killed Yosef Khatib, a balance was created, of a sort. If the feathered

serpent kills Laura, the balance will break apart. There will be a hole, where this galaxy once existed. Other galaxies might cease to exist too. Such events are rare and difficult to predict.”

“Why are these things never easy ?” Asked Tim.

“You don’t fuck with entity.” Added Liz.

Laura knew the next move was up to her. The others might advise her and mutter if she got it wrong, but the key decisions had to be hers. It was her after all, who the serpent wanted to eat.

“I’ll get us refreshments; there’s a great coffee and nibbles place I know.” Said Laura. “It’s in Stockholm and they do the perfect croissant. Then I have to see Nathalie and she may keep me busy for a few days. I am a vampire with a job after all, with a lifestyle that needs a regular pay cheque to support it. When I can, I’ll go to the Giza Plateau at night. From there, I’m almost certain I can take myself into Huh’s world. It’s time to talk to the God of time.”

“I will go with you.” Said Akiva. “And I think you’d need to tie Tim up, to stop him going.”

“I can’t join you.” Said the dragon. “I wouldn’t say Huh and I fell out, but we’re not exactly best friends either.”

“If I go, you have to go.” Said Liz.

“Why is that ?”

“Because.....As you always say. Where I go, you follow.”

The dragon’s laugh was pretty much as Laura had imagined. The sound of a large passenger jet, slamming into reverse thrust at landing. Only louder, much, much louder.

“Alright, I’ll let you all know when I’m ready to go.” Said Laura.

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