

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 5 – A Dark Sister

“Liz could find anyone and as the world was almost entirely populated by humans, finding a vampire was fairly easy. It was the reverse of the whole hiding a tree in a forest idea.”

»

Clara wouldn't have said she enjoyed working for the Stewart Rex Agency, but it paid the bills. She'd always avoided nine to five office jobs. Gossip around the water cooler, the odd drunken fumble after office parties. It had all sounded a bit boring, definitely not a career for her. Then again, selling wedding receptions at the hotel, had hardly been an executive job. Her cubicle, yes she had been given a cubicle, was fairly close to the reception desk.

“I can for sign it.” Said Gitta on reception. “Mr Appleby is away, so he can't sign your documents.” Reception was the office equivalent of a soap opera, there was always some fresh drama unfolding. Quite limited and usually trivial, but when your day is spent making a hundred calls to strangers, any drama grabs your interest. Appleby was away in Harrogate for a conference on marketing. The package was about the third where the courier was demanding a signature from the man himself. Clara pretended to be on the phone, a skill she was quite proud of, while she listened to Gitta and the courier guy. In a battle of stubbornness, Gitta always won.

“I'm not allowed to leave the package without a signature.”

“Mike isn't back for a week.” Said Gitta. “You'll have to come back next Tuesday.”

“I can't do that.”

There was a sign by the main door asking courier riders to take off their crash helmets, though some didn't. The guy at the desk had pulled back his visor, so all Clara could see was the back of a metallic blue skid lid. There was something about the voice though, something triggering old memories. It couldn't be him of course, he was supposed to be back in Brazil by now. Clara wandered over to the desk and saw enough of his face to know it as Felipe.

“I can sign for Mike, if that helps.” She said.

His face as he saw her.....Felipe would have made a terrible poker player. Clara was prepared for anger, or pleasure at seeing her again. Not indifference though, their affair had burned too hot for indifference. She had dumped him for no better reason than that he'd become a habit and she hated doing anything out of habit. The sex had been good though and his body, underneath the bike clothes, had been perfect. Underneath a little shock, he still wanted her, Clara was sure of it.

“Er...Yes, if that's alright ?” Asked Felipe.

Gitta was looking bemused and nodding at him. Clara realised she would now be the highlight of the daily Stewart Rex soap opera. She decided to throw caution to the wind. It wasn't as if she was still with Simon.

“I'll sign for it then.” Said Clara. “I mean, it's not as if you don't know me.”

That was it, Gitta's expression meant that Clara and the cool courier guy would be the talk of the water cooler gang, for days. Clara signed for the package and walked Felipe to the door. No point in privacy now, she briefly held his hand.

“Did I ever give you my home number ?” She asked.

“No...I thought you’d found someone ?”

“Things change.”

Clara used a pen to write her number on the back of his hand. It had always looked so cool in films. In real life it was quite awkward and a bit smudgy.

“I’ll remember it and I will call you.” Said Felipe

As Clara walked back to her desk, Gitta was already muttering to Heather from accounts. That was it, Clara had made herself water cooler topic of the week. She couldn’t resist winking at Gitta, as she dialled about her fiftieth prospect of the day.

~ ~

When it hit someone, the flux hit quickly and without mercy. The previous evening Niña’s cough had become far worse and she’d begun to look ill. Their waif hadn’t eaten supper with Giovanni and himself, which was rare. She’d gone to bed early and now she was puling at his arm in the middle of the night.

“Wake up Simon, it wants to talk to you.” Said Niña.

Even by the light of the solitary candle she carried, Simon could see that Niña was seriously ill. He felt her forehead and it was hot and sweaty. No need to ask what wanted to talk to him, she had the book under her arm, still in its cloth bag. Machiavelli had called the book a journal, though he’d had no idea what it really was, or where it had originated.

“I suspect there may be something of the darkness about it, Simon.” Niccolò Machiavelli had told him.

Not that such talk scared Simon, he was a vampire, a creature of the darkness. Niccolò’s words had just reinforced the idea that the journal had always been intended to find him and be his.

“Did you read it ?” Asked Simon.

“No, I told you I wouldn’t. I felt it.....In here.” She said, while touching her head.

The huge tome was heavy, it was a miracle the sick girl had been able to carry it.

“I’ll take you back to bed, the book can wait until morning.” He said.

“No, Simon....Now, it wants to talk to you now.”

“Alright, you lay on my bed and I’ll see what it has to say.” He said.

A few seconds after giving him the book, Niña was asleep on his bed. She looked so ill, yet the obvious solution was hazardous, to both of them. Turning Niña into a vampire, a dark sister, was against all the rules he knew. Daniel had a few books on vampire lore and there were dire warnings about turning someone her age. Niña was an innocent, a child unsullied by the world. Plus, there was no way to use Daniel’s compatibility test on her. The success rate at turning someone was probably about one in a couple of hundred, maybe even less. If someone’s physiology was incompatible, they died, simple as that. Creating new vampires rarely worked. It was the reason the world wasn’t full of vampires.

“It might come to that.” He muttered. “I won’t allow her to die of this awful disease.”

On a table in the window was an elaborate silver candle holder, with no less than seven individual candles. A house warming present from Juliana. Simon lit the candles and took the book out of the cloth bag. It had that slight glow about it, as it had in Machiavelli’s house.

“If you’re of the darkness, so am I.” Said Simon. “Show me the truth book, no hints or more stories about death in the marketplace.”

He grabbed the cover and a few pages and pulled the book open. There was no mistaking the relevance of where the book had opened. A handwritten page, with the heading ‘Dark Sister.’

“So, something useful.” He muttered. “I can see you and I becoming good friends, book.”

The words on the page were almost exactly the same as those used by Niccolò, who must have been shown the page. A lot on not being swayed by anyone, or following alternative solutions. The book was clear, Niña had to live, or his destiny would never be fulfilled. To live she would have to be turned, before the flux ended her life. The journal was fair though, it gave him a warning too, in the form of a waking dream, a nightmare.

"I told you Simon, no one has the strength to stop us."

Niña had spoken and Simon knew she was a vampire in the dream. No taller or more grown up though, that much of the ancient vampire lore was true. Perpetually on the cusp of going from a child to a woman, no wonder there were so many warnings about turning one so young.

"Leave a few alive, we need to feed." His dream self said.

He was walking beside her, along a street that could have been in any twenty first century city. So, Niña had lived, she had survived the flux after being turned. That was a relief, though the destruction around them was worrying. A street of housing of the kind you'd find all over Britain. Two ups and two downs, though few of them were intact. It was daytime and the sky was full of dark clouds. Lightning too, which occasionally struck a building. Niña laughed and the ground trembled, before shaking as though there'd been an earthquake. He'd created a dark sister, who laughed again, as the tremors brought down an entire three storey house.

"Let me have my fun, Simon. I promise not to kill all the humans."

Simon knew it was Niña causing the destruction, though he had no idea how. Vampires were tougher than humans, but small in number. Add on the general acceptance by the public that vampires were a myth; and his kind usually moved around unnoticed. Something had changed and he was sure turning Niña had caused it. What was the great secret? He had no idea, even the Ancient Gods seemed unsure. Then there were the hinted at period of change and growth, while he searched for the great secret. Had he shared some of those changes with Niña?

"I've never really liked South London." His dream self said.

Vehicles accurately age any period. Some old films can be given an almost exact date, by the cars and trucks going past in outdoor scenes. So far, there had been no vehicles, just a street of ruined houses. No bodies either, just a street full of destruction. As they reach a junction, there was a six wheeled vehicle like nothing Simon had ever seen before. All shining silver metal, with words on the side, in a language Simon didn't understand. Several open doors on the vehicle, with two dead bodies in the road close by. Bodies in uniform, like cops or some sort of paramilitary unit.

"Urggh....Dead meat, nothing to feed on." Said Niña.

As his eyes got used to looking at the writing on the dead guys' uniforms, Simon realised it wasn't a weird language. It was English, hacked about by time, with no punctuation at all. Lots of words added, which went on all the time.

'Sud LDN Gard.'

They were the South London police, from a hell of a long time in the future, or maybe one of many potential futures. One thing though, it seemed the grammar police had lost the battle. The vision ended and Simon closed the book. No asking the girl to hide it again, he'd keep it where it was for a while.

"A warning, but it won't stop me turning her, if I have to." He muttered.

He snuffed out six of the candles, leaving just one alight. The strange waif could have his bed for the night and maybe the next day. He could see her face with just one candle and he could sense her beating heart.

Juliana was seeing a tutor the next day, an expert on the history of art. Her family were keen on giving her a broad education. Giovanni had duties protecting a visiting diplomat, but Simon had a day free of obligations. He was going to spend it looking after Niña. The flux had stages, all with tell tale symptoms. If her skin began to look slightly jaundiced, the girl would be in the final stage, just a few hours from death. He'd bite her then, drinking her blood and bringing her close to death. Then, and only then, he'd feed her his own blood and hope. He might even pray to whatever dark deity watched over his darkest children, the vampires. Niña had to live.

~ ~

It seemed it had been a bad year for falls, though no one was quite sure why. Falls tended to mean injuries, especially to the frail and elderly. So, Mabina was busy looking after those convalescing at home from broken hips and other injuries.

"Think of me as a private healthcare district nurse." She'd told Liz.

Which left Liz Grant with the job of contacting Laura, who didn't seem keen on being contacted. Tim was easy to contact, his phone was answered on the second ring.

"Sorry Liz, I just know she's busy." He'd told her. "Something up north involving a computer nerd. I've found it best not to ask for details. She should be home in a couple of days."

Liz should have left it there. She knew Laura had a few side hustles, some of which were legally dubious. If Laura was silent running for a while, she'd have a damned good reason. It was the Wanderers though, the spaced-out Gods, who'd suddenly found a purpose. They were beyond simply something to worry about, Liz was terrified. She tried the Silver Dawn work cell phone, which Laura had told her never to phone, unless it was a matter of life or death. No answer, so Liz left about her sixth or seventh message of the day.

"Laura, it's Liz.....The Wanderers have stopped wandering. We need to talk, urgently."

Liz had lunch and the feeling of fear kept growing. Not for herself, but a whole roomful of Gods looked to be abandoning an eternal life of hakuna matata, for something sinister. She knew it, or rather her non-human other side knew it.

"It can't wait, it really can't wait." She muttered.

Liz could find anyone and as the world was almost entirely populated by humans, finding a vampire was fairly easy. It was the reverse of the whole hiding a tree in a forest idea. Laura would stand out to her other existence, the Guardian of the Final Gateway.

"Do it, do it right this moment." She mumbled at herself.

Liz became the guardian as she dropped into the underworld. An immortal being of shiny black skin and dozens of tentacles. She'd once walked through the underworld as a human and every step had been accompanied by fear and peril. Now she was an almost indestructible servant of the Ancient Gods. The denizens of the underworld who weren't running away from her, would give her a wide berth. Even the dark dusty passageway she was in, felt like home.

Liz didn't entirely give up her human mind, she focused on finding Laura. It was amazingly easy to find the female vampire, in the north of England. An area of Lancashire with very little population. Somewhere wild probably, there were places like that in the north. Not that Liz would ever think of just dropping in, Laura had every right to privacy.

"I'll just take a look first." She muttered.

Liz as the guardian, could penetrate the walls of different worlds and dimensions. On a good day she could look into other realities, by something that felt like osmosis. Looking into the sealed vault was ridiculously easy.

"I think Jim is dead.....Get us out of here, Laura." Patsy was saying.

No air in the vault, or more accurately, not that much air. The carbon dioxide level was way too high, too. Bodies react to high carbon dioxide levels, even vampire bodies. Frantic breathing and general panic, though Laura still seemed calm, as she pressed the side of her ribs.

“Why isn’t it working.” Said a dark-haired woman.

Liz knew roughly what was happening, at least enough to know she needed to intervene. The man called Jim wasn’t dead, though he soon would be. As for Laura; something had to be blocking her ability to use the Egg to escape.

“I have no idea.” Said Laura.

Liz dropped into the vault as the guardian, which must have been a shock to those already there. One good push by her tentacles and the vault door flew open. As fresh air entered, the dark-haired woman began screaming. Ronnie....Yes, Liz remembered seeing her at a party thrown by Anthony, Simon’s old boss and business partner. Liz kept the extra strength, but made herself look human again.

“Liz.....How the hell did you know we needed help ?” Asked Laura.

Like anyone who has rubbed up against the Gods and those with real power, Liz knew there were no such things as blind luck, or coincidence.

“I think.....No, I’m certain; that my whole day was about someone sending me to you, at just the right moment.” She said.

~ ~

“Is Niña any better ?” Asked Giovanni.

“Her breathing is far worse.” Said Simon.

Simon had been caring for Niña all day and her condition had worsened with every hour. She was still drinking fluids, but had refused solid food all day. It was her breathing that worried him most. Every breath sounded as though her throat was full of mucus.

“You’re still considering turning the girl ?” Asked Giovanni.

“Not considering, my mind is made up. I will turn her, if she looks close to death.”

“Then you’ll both die.” Said Giovanni. “Turning one so young is viewed as an unforgiveable sin, Simon. You’re just giving her a far worse death and bringing a painful death on yourself.”

Tempting to ask Giovanni if he had any suggestions, but Simon trusted Machiavelli and the strange journal. The girl had to live, even if it meant risking an affront to whatever God had set the rules. Being a vampire often felt like a game of dice to Simon, with the dice usually loaded against him.

“I have no wish to argue with an old friend, Giovanni.” Said Simon. “In this matter my mind is made up and will not be changed. If Niña looks at all jaundiced, I will attempt to turn her.”

His friend leapt up from the chair he usually claimed in the kitchen. For one moment Simon thought Giovanni might leave their house. He turned around at the door and came back into the room.

“Sorry Simon, my temper can get the better of me.” Said Giovanni. “What can I do to help ?”

“Just stay in the house and.....I have no idea what might happen.” Said Simon. “We may be attacked as I turn her, though I have no idea by what, or who. Guard the door for me, will you do that ?”

“Of course, I will.”

Simon had been around Niña all day; he must have become accustomed to how sick she looked. He hadn’t expected her to eat the food placed next to the bed, but she hadn’t drunk anything either. For the first time, he detected an irregularity in her heartbeat. Strangely her skin still looked healthy, with no trace of yellow. The symptoms of the flux were varied though, Simon suspected it was a variety of virus mutations. For Simon, the heartbeat meant he had to act. He shook the girl, though he did it gently.

“Oh, Simon.....Let me sleep.”

“If I do, you’ll never wake up. I might kill you trying, but I want to turn you into one like me, a vampire. There, we’ve never used the word, but you know what I am.”

“Will I be damned to hell, Simon ? I’ve been seeing Angels in my dreams, weeping angels.”

Laura had once told him that all vampires were damned, though Clara had heard a few managed to avoid eternal damnation. There was no indisputable set of instructions on how to live as a normal human. It was worse when you became a vampire. There were more religious doctrines and weird instructions than a dog has flees, most of them nonsense. He loved Giovanni like a brother, but he came out with ten contradictory ideas, every day. Simon decided to be economical with the truth. Niña had to live, which meant turning into a dark sister.

“I’ve never been religious. I know one thing; you’ll die if I don’t make you a vampire.”

“Will it hurt ?”

“Yes, but only for a few moments. All birth hurts.....If it works, you will be reborn.”

“Do it Simon, change me.”

Simon let his fangs drop, though the girl didn’t look scared. Niña did cry out as his fangs entered her neck, but not for long. The neurological agent in his saliva, quietened her and made her docile, as it was intended to do. By the time he began drinking her blood, the waif was unconscious. Simon drank until he felt her heart hesitate over the next beat.

No good telling her to drink his blood, she was too close to death. Simon bit his own wrist and poured his blood into her mouth. He then pushed gently on her throat, until he felt her swallow. He gave her more blood, until he was happy, she’d swallowed enough. Not that he knew exactly what was enough. No vampire turns enough humans into vampires to become an expert in the process. Niña had swallowed a good cupful of his blood, which felt about right.

“Please Niña, don’t die.” He muttered.

His blood was a toxin, a poison fatal to humans, so of course she was going to die. If she was one of the small number compatible with becoming a creature of the darkness, she would return though. If not; then it had all been for nothing. Simon drank from her again, until the precise moment he felt her heart stop. He then sat in a chair and watched her lifeless body. Giovanni found him still watching, two hours later.

“You did it then ?”

“Yes, I did. It seems we weren’t attacked by avenging angels.”

“No, everything is quiet downstairs.”

With all the instructions in the journal and similar words of wisdom from Machiavelli. Simon hadn’t expected the girl to die. For one thing it would be a huge amount of wasted time, by whatever deities had pushed him towards turning her. Even so, it was a huge relief when he saw Niña move. Just shuffling about, pulling the blanket up a little, but the dead don’t do those sorts of things. She turned towards him and smiled.

“I feel so much better.” She said.

~

~

Laura needed to visit somewhere once, to be able to travel there with the Egg. Actually, just seeing somewhere through a window or at a distance would do the trick. Laura wanted to do the full tourist thing though, as she’d done for the British Museum robbery.

“You can’t beat walking through the location.” She’d told Ronnie. “Doors that might be useful, CCTV points, right down to where the night security people probably make their cups of tea. All priceless information and ours for the price of admission.”

Ronnie didn't fancy getting her face on CCTV recordings and refused to consider using a disguise. Patsy had other things to do it seemed and had arranged to arrive later. Laura suspected that she too, didn't fancy dressing up as a tourist. Jim had been more than happy to put on a wig and bright touristy clothing. Laura had seen the sun glasses he was wearing in a thrift shop. They were wonderful, huge enough to cover most of his face. Laura for her part had a blonde wig and bright blue contact lenses from a previous heist. Jim and her had been given a few strange looks by others on the official tour of Monkman Hall, but no facial recognition software would stand a chance of identifying them. Then there was Jim's put-on accent, which sounded from somewhere along the LA and Belfast border.

"Too much?" He'd asked her after practising it on the way there.

"No, actually it's bloody perfect." She'd told him.

Laura had liked the look of the area, mainly because there were so few people, which tended to mean a long time for the police to respond to an emergency call. Miles of farms, with a small village about two miles away. A picturesque Lancashire village of about ten houses, a local shop and a pub. The Malt Shovel pub, a common pub name that Laura kept meaning to look up online.

"Who shovels malt?" She muttered as they'd driven by.

"Pub names are weird, who the hell was the Marquis of Granby?" Asked Patsy.

"Something to do with Boxing I think, though I might be wrong." Said Jim.

The tour of the Monkman family seat, was a book ahead affair, though no one had asked Laura for any personal details. She'd booked under the standard cover name she used at work and used a prepaid debit card to pay the extortionate prices. Jim had done a bit of delving and discovered English Heritage demanded the hall gave public access to receive various grants and taxation perks. They might have to let the public walk around their museum, but that didn't mean they couldn't use prices as a discouragement. Laura had to pay extra to visit just one floor of the museum.

"Have you seen the prices in the giftshop?" Jim had asked her.

She had, which meant no one was getting a Monkman calendar, priced at eighteen pounds fifty. Even if Earl someone or other had taken the pictures. They had the floor plans for the hall and the museum extension. Everything Laura has seen during the tour, corroborated details on the floor plan. She'd even found the perfect entry point for that night. While carefully pushing at doors marked staff only, she'd found what looked like a den for the cleaning staff. Lots of buckets and mops, with a tang of stale cigarette smoke in the air. Arriving there with the Egg and then heading towards the museum, wasn't the most thorough of plans. They did have the floor plans though and the Egg.

"Anything goes wrong, the Egg will get us out."

Laura had told Jim, Patsy and Ronnie, as they'd arrived in the cleaners' den. Laura was currently wondering if teasing Patsy was childish, though she decided to do it anyway.

"If all else fails, we burn the place to the ground." She said.

"Hah, bloody hah." Said Patsy. "Move out of the way while I fall about with laughter."

"Jeez Patsy, lighten up." Said Ronnie.

"Hoodies nice and tight around your faces, just in case Jim misses a camera." Said Laura.

They left the staff den that smelled of decades of illicit ciggie breaks and turned left. The museum itself was going to be a bit seat of the pants, but they'd seen everything there was to see in Monkman Hall. About twenty feet of fairly dark corridor and there was a desk with a computer on it. Jim had spent a minute or so watching a tour guide use the terminal.

"This shouldn't take long, it's a fairly crappy system." Said Jim.

Laura watched as Jim used a few tricks to get past the basic level of security the tour people were restricted to. Muttering about cowboy tech guys, Jim easily accessed the deepest levels of the system. Laura saw the log files over his shoulder.

"Wow, talk about making it easy." She said. "They don't even walk through the place in the night, never."

"I bet their insurance company don't know that." Said Jim. "Turning off every camera is a single command. I've seen some bad tech, but this.....No pressure pads and just two alarmed inside doors. Ok, they're now deactivated."

"I take it the museum is likely to be tougher?" Asked Patsy.

"Oh yes, they'll have top level security in there." Said Jim.

It was nice to simply walk through Monkman Hall, as though they were on the official tour. No alarms still activated, no worries about video recording. Best of all, no concerns about running into a night watchman doing his rounds. Laura began to get the tingle she felt, when something seemed too easy.

"This place really is beautiful." Said Patsy.

There were a few lights, especially near the now deactivated cameras. The ancient building really did look beautiful. Laura had no idea where the Monkman family now lived, but if the hall had been hers, she'd have lived there. Perfect for a vampire, with all its gothic chic and atmosphere.

"Some of these antiques must be worth a fortune." Said Ronnie.

"If you want to hide them in your attic forever." Said Jim. "All this stuff is too well known; you'd never be able to sell any of it. Gold is what we're after. And.....I'd love to see the items from Iraq they recently acquired.....The special artefacts."

"Now that we can agree on." Said Patsy. "I'm after something small and exquisite for my knicker draw."

"Don't spend it until we have it, guys." Said Laura. "This is where the hard work begins."

The door to the new wing, the museum itself. They'd only seen the first floor on the tour and that had been an extra twenty pounds per visitor. A few others on the tour had paid to see the First Kingdom Egyptian items, but the really good stuff was on a lower floor. A solid well locked and alarmed door, though there were two armoured glass windows in it. Jim had discussed an idea, but he was looking through the window and muttering to himself.

"I saw the terminal during the tour." He said. "I might be able to turn off a few cameras, but not all the door alarms. I might even set off an alarm when I turn off the cameras."

"We knew it'd be a run and grab what we could robbery." Said Patsy. "The police are likely to take a while getting here."

"The museum is rumoured to have armed guards." Said Laura.

"Only a rumour." Said Jim. "Still, I'd like to avoid us setting the alarms off for as long as possible. Alright Laura, drop us as close to that terminal as you can."

The Ancient Gods could be eccentric and a little strange. Laura had been grabbed doing short hops, mainly by Horus. Usually he just wanted something, a favour of some kind. There was always the worry though, that those with her might be hurt. The Egg took her and those with her into the void and from there into anywhere she chose. The Gods watched the void though and they could be a little fickle about who they favoured and who they didn't. It was a relief, when they were all stood next to the terminal, a fraction of a second after she'd pressed against the metal disc under her skin. "I've yet to encounter a voice activated alarm, so we can still talk." Said Jim.

Plenty of light, though not intended for them. Cameras needed light and one of them was actually generating its own infra-red source. Jim was right, the systems in the museum were in an entirely different league to Monkman Hall.

“Hey, we were due a bit of luck.” Said Jim, as he used the terminal. “There’s actually still a shut down for routine maintenance function. Not on the screen, but the code is still there. Some lazy tech guy left it in there, probably from an earlier version. If I.....Yes, we can stop worrying about cameras on this floor and the one below.”

“And after that ?” Asked Patsy.

“We will set off an alarm and get locked in.” Said Jim. “We knew that and although I’m embarrassed to say it out loud.....That’s part of the plan.”

“How about doors ?” Asked Laura. “Are they still alarmed ?”

“Afraid so, we’ll need that Egg of yours.” Said Jim. “Or we can smash them open and the alarms will go off.”

They walked past a large number of cabinets, all still alarmed. Patsy looked in all the cabinets, but always looked disappointed.

“Looking for the perfect thing for your knicker drawer ?” Asked Jim.

“Yeah....I know it sounds silly and I’ll never show it anyone. It matters though, just to have a memento of some kind.”

“No, I get it, it’s not silly.” Said Jim.

Jim wasn’t flirting with Patsy; it was just a conversation. Laura had recently noticed something different between Jim and Ronnie. The way Ronnie was looking at him, with jealousy in her eyes. They were at it and probably at it on a regular basis. Good, Jim was a nice guy, he deserved to get his oats once in a while. The door to the stairwell hadn’t even been locked, but the door to get into the first basement level was locked, alarmed and very solid. Luckily there was one armoured glass window.

“Alright, from here we could run into anything.” Said Laura. “Think of it as bandit country and act accordingly.”

“This is why I insisted on bringing a gun.” Said Ronnie.

“There’ll be no guard patrols, the system is too complex to cope with night watchmen wandering about.” Said Jim. “The cameras and motion sensors are off, so we just have to avoid pressure plates and.....Not bumping into anything.”

“Jim, you fill me with such confidence.” Said Laura.

Every use of the Egg brought a risk, though she hadn’t warned the others about fickle, moody Gods. Laura looked through the window and chose a spot near the other side of the door, next to a cabinet of what looked like pottery vases.

“Alright, hold onto me, here we go again.” Said Laura.

A slight golden tinge in the void, someone had been watching her. No diversions though, no grabbing her for a conversation. In some ways the Old Gods reminded her of living at home in her teens. Usually, her parents had left her alone, but sometimes, there’d be an interrogation about coming home after midnight. Then again, Laura had killed her pet rabbit and bitten the neighbour’s teenage son. Laura had to admit it to herself, she’d been fucking weird, even before becoming a vampire. They all arrived safely on the far side of the door.

“Oh, that felt.....Different.” Said Patsy.

“Yeah, the deities watch sometimes. We’ll be fine.” Said Laura.

An intended throw away line, that didn't work out as well as Laura had hoped. The others were giving her worried looks.

"We're using an ancient artefact to get around, not a budget airline." Said Laura. "There are side effects and there can be the occasional diversion. Nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, right !" Said Ronnie

"Tim and I go everywhere with the Egg. It's safe, I give you my word." Said Laura.

"Mum and I used a low-cost airline for a holiday once." Said Patsy. "We ended up in an airport in Latvia, miles from anywhere."

A strange anecdote, but everyone laughed and best of all, no one asked Laura anything else about the Egg of Astaroth. Cabinets full of objects made of solid gold, yet Jim seemed mesmerised by a simply stoneware vase.

"I know this vase, it was looted from a museum in Iraq, decades ago." Said Jim. "These people haven't just started buying stolen art, they've been at it for years."

Cabinets and shelves full of priceless objects, though they barely looked at any of them. Patsy was still looking for her memento, but everyone knew the big-ticket items were in the vault, in the second basement level. Again, the door into the stairs was unlocked. It gave access to a short corridor, with a tough looking door at the end. No window, but there was a number pad on the wall, which Jim was confident he could crack.

"An old J&W keypad, almost insulting in a building like this." Said Jim. "Once open though, we'll be in a floor with live cameras and motion detectors. We can expect loud klaxons and the police being on their way."

"We knew this moment would arrive." Said Laura. "Get the door open, Jim."

Laura had the strength to break through the door, but in a way, it was more satisfying to watch Jim hack the keypad and simply open the door.

"Voila.....We're in." Said Jim.

If they'd expected shelves covered in golden artefacts, they'd have been disappointed. There probably were lots of priceless antiquities, but everything was inside large cardboard boxes. More of a storage area than a museum. Laura might have mentioned her disappointment, if the alarms hadn't begun to make enough noise to wake the dead. There had to be several independent alarm systems, linked to everything from pressure plates, cameras and motion detectors; to simple body heat. They'd obviously managed to set them all off, after their first ten steps inside the second basement area.

"Hurry up." Yelled Jim. "The vault is closing."

A vault that was open most of the time, but sealed itself shut after the alarms sounded. All the best pieces were supposed to be inside the vault and access was needed most of the day. So yes, Laura could see that the door beginning to close made sense. The large round vault door was at the end of the basement and she could see it closing.

"I'll try and slow it down." She shouted. "Get inside everyone, get in the vault."

They were probably running past a fortune in easily convertible gold. Melted down gold was all the same, apart from the usual impurities. Not that they wanted to melt down the best pieces, which were likely to be inside the vault. Laura might have been able to stop the door closing completely. She had the strength, but her boots were sliding on the floor tiles. Not that there should have been a problem, they'd all have time to get inside. Patsy had collided with a cardboard box though and a few tiny objects had fallen out. As the door moved inexorably to close, Patsy was on the floor, picking up the tiny gold piece of art.

“Hurry up Patsy.” Yelled Laura.

“Sorry, I found it.....I found the perfect memento.”

The vault door closed with a clang and the silence was wonderful. No more klaxons at slightly different pitches, just a superb silence. Actually, not complete silence, there was the quiet sound of a motor running somewhere, an electrical motor.

“Alright, nothing goes in your backpacks unless I’ve examined it.” Said Jim. “There’s a limit to what we can carry, so we’re only taking the best items.”

“Where do we begin ?” Asked Ronnie.

“Pick a box, any box.” Said Jim. “I doubt if we’ll open more than a dozen. That will be enough though, to set us all up for life.”

The vault was full of rows of metal shelving, like library stacks but full of cardboard boxes. If they all contained value antiquities, there had to be billions of pounds stacked on the shelves. Laura grabbed a box and ripped off the top, but Patsy was still looking at the tiny piece of gold in her hand.

“Ahh, your knicker drawer piece.” Said Laura. “What did you pick ?”

“A coiled serpent. Weird I know, but it sort of called out to me.”

It was tiny, nestling in the palm of Patsy’s hand. Like a coiled cobra, Laura had never seen anything like it before.

“Older than Egyptian.” Said Jim. “I think you’ve got a Sumerian artefact. Nice.....But we do need to get these boxes opened, guys.”

“Sorry.” Said Laura.

The sound of a motor was a little louder, as Laura pulled wrapped golden artefacts out of a box. Jim liked the pieces, so they went in her backpack. The sound was a pump, slowly taking air out of the vault. Nothing high tech, involving AI. Removing air from vaults was an old and proven way of telling if someone had tunneled in, or opened the door outside of prescribed hours. Any material increase in air pressure and an alarm goes off. Although not officially part of the process, it wasn’t unknown for thieves hiding inside large vaults, opportunist thieves, to die of asphyxiation.

“How long until we run out of air, Jim ?” Asked Ronnie.

“We discussed this, several times. Three hours, maybe four. We’ve plenty of time.”

Of course, Jim insisted on opening every damned box, so they needed every minute of the three and a bit hours, until Laura said they were leaving. Her breathing was still fine, but Ronnie seemed to be struggling a little.

“Alright, the air is getting stale.” Said Laura. “Close up your packs people, we’re leaving.”

“There’s just another few boxes.” Said Jim.

“And you’ll want us to empty and reorganise the packs again.” Said Patsy. “I’m with Laura, there’s a constant sweaty armpit smell in here. Let’s go, right now.”

“We do have full packs, Jim.” Added Ronnie.

“I’m taking everyone out of here.” Said Laura. “It’s worth remembering that the police will be waiting patiently outside the vault by now, probably armed to the teeth. They’ll need a keyholder to reverse the pumps before the door will open, but they’ll be out there.....Waiting.”

“Fine.....Fine, Laura. I’m not a greedy man.” Said Jim.

Everyone knew the routine; they all grabbed a part of her or her clothing. Laura held an image of Jim’s lounge in her mind, as she pressed an elbow against the disc, which was under her skin.

Nothing happened, so she tried again. Nothing continued to happen on the tenth time she pressed hard on the Egg.

“Are we going ?” Asked Patsy.

"I've no idea why, but the Egg isn't working." Said Laura.

"Stop messing about." Said Ronnie.

"I'm not messing about, it won't work. Let go of me, I'll try a quick hop on my own."

Nothing, she pictured her room in Hornsey and.....Nothing happened. Short of ripping the disc out of the flesh that covered her ribs, Laura had no idea what to do. The Egg always worked, always. She'd never once considered what to do if it didn't.

"What do we do now?" Asked Jim.

There was only one option left, though Laura knew they might all be killed trying it.

"We wait for them to open the vault door." She said. "Then we fight our way out."

"That's crazy." Said Patsy.

"I know, but it's our only option." Said Laura. "Unless we surrender and spend the next two or three decades in prison."

The pump probably had to complete its cycle, before it could begin to put air back in the vault. The air was still being taken out and after about another hour, Jim was the first to collapse. He looked so pale, as though he was dead, but Laura could still sense a heartbeat.

"I think Jim is dead.....Get us out of here, Laura." Said Patsy.

Laura tried again, picturing her room in Hornsey, while pressing hard against the Egg. She'd tried so many times that her ribs were sore and bruised.

"Why isn't it working." Asked Ronnie.

"I have no idea." Said Laura.

If Laura had imagined how they'd be saved, she'd have never thought of Liz. Given a thousand chances, she'd have never guessed that Liz would be the next person to enter the vault. Liz appeared as the guardian of the last gate, which was a fairly terrifying thing to happen. Ronnie screamed, but Laura had seen the creature of darkness before. The creature easily pushed open the vault door, allowing fresh air to come in. Quite quickly the creature of darkness became Liz Grant.

"Liz.....How the hell did you know we needed help?" Asked Laura.

"I think.....No, I'm certain; that my whole day was about someone sending me to you, at just the right moment." She said.

~

~