

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 3 - Machiavelli

“Vampires were good at handling alcohol, their bodies metabolised it really quickly. It wasn't booze making Laura feel in the mood to throw caution to the wind. It was the first night for quite some time, when her mind wasn't full of Simon being gone.”

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~ Prato – Near Florence – 13th Century Italy ~

“I love this house, Simon.” Niña had said. “The family in the house over the road have their own horses and a carriage.”

Simon was glad Niña liked their new home, even Giovanni had warmed to the idea of moving, once he'd realised there were quite a few nobles in the area, most with attractive daughters. Horses and carriages had been mentioned a few times. He was hoping Niña didn't suddenly develop expectations he couldn't afford. The house had come as part of his promotion within the Brotherhood, as he'd told her several times.

“You're giving our waif the entire top floor ?” Giovanni had asked him.

There had been a certain look in Giovanni's eyes, a question Simon had no intention of answering. His friend meant a lot to him, but he couldn't be told anything about Simon's search for the great prize, or the meddling with time that entailed. Giovanni was the product of his times, everything in his world was about God, death and Satan. If it wasn't in the bible it didn't exist. Plus, his friend could be a little indiscrete on occasions. Simon had told him it was important for Niña to have the entire top floor and his friend hadn't argued the point. They were all going to have a home many times better than they'd ever had before. Niña had already decided on an east facing room to use as a studio to create her drawings.

“The morning light is perfect.” She'd told him.

Simon wondered how their waif would react when the door at the top of the stairs was locked, effectively turning the top floor into a prison. It would be done to save her life, though she might not see it that way. Or she might, Niña did seem to grasp things very quickly.

Brother Alberti had arranged for the house in Prato to be theirs and it had all happened very quickly. The landlord of their old house had been given a payment in lieu of proper notice and they'd moved. Just like that, their personal belongings boxed up, though the new house had been fully furnished. How had Alberti managed that ? Simon wondered if the previous owners of the house had been dealt with in some way, the Brotherhood could be ruthless. Not that he was going to ask, or mention it to the two people who shared his life. Actually three people now, Juliana was becoming an important part of his life.

The entire Juliana business hadn't been the hiding in corners affair Simon had expected. Simon was a member of the inner circle of the Brotherhood now. Had Alberti said something to Juliana's father ? Instead of hiding, Simon was now a welcome visitor in the home of Dominicho Colombo and his family. No taking Juliana home in the early hours of the morning, that might cause her father to rethink his attitude. Luckily Simon's duties meant he was able to get afternoons off. He was currently looking at the naked body of Juliana Colombo. Not that there was anything wrong with her body,

he'd just never expected to see her naked in his bed. He'd adored the memory of her the idea of her, for so long. The one that had got away, was now there, in his life.

"I love this room; the pink sheets are amazing." Said Juliana. "I imagine you inherited those with the house?"

"Yes, Giovanni has light green sheets and he has the nerve to moan about those." Said Simon.

"You could buy new ones."

"What?! Have you seen how expensive sheets are?"

The furnishings screamed feminine in his room, whereas Giovanni had a fairly neutral room. Only Niña seemed to get bedding that suited her. Lots of cream colours, covered in embroidered flowers. Simon leant towards Juliana, finding her as eager as him to carry on making love. Fornication as the church called it, though Simon failed to see what was wrong with something that gave two people so much pleasure. He entered her, confident that there would be no unwanted child as a result of their mutual and seemingly insatiable lust.

"I had a medical problem as a boy. I will never father a child."

She'd shown some genuine concern, but Juliana had never questioned his honesty. As far as Simon knew, no vampire male had ever fathered a child with a human female. There were rumours of course, Giovanni even had a ludicrous story about women giving birth to grotesque monsters. Daniel had always said such children were a genetic impossibility and unlike his friend, Daniel seemed to know what he was talking about.

Simon was often tempted to tell Giovanni that all the things he'd told him as a newly turned vampire had been crap. It had been meant for the best though and better than having no information at all. If nothing else, Giovanni's crazy tales had made him cautious of holy ground. That one was real, he'd seen a vampire decompose alive, after attacking a priest in front of the altar of his church.

"I'm free in two days' time." Said Simon. "We could go somewhere; I feel bad just bringing you here every time we meet. The banks of the Arno are a nice place for a walk, at this time of year."

His sweat was dripping off his hair and onto her face. Not that Juliana seemed to care. She'd taken to their lovemaking as though she'd been waiting all her life for him to arrive. He'd told her to just do what seemed natural and she had. All of it was wonderful, probably better than he deserved. There was Clara to think about. Simon hoped she was happy.

"I'm very happy where we are right now." Said Juliana. "Though yes, a walk by the river does sound enjoyable. I'll get my maid to pack a picnic basket."

Simon found his smile vanishing as quickly as morning mist.

"You're going to bring a maid?" He asked.

"No, you can carry the basket. I don't know how you did it Simon, but my parents are more than happy for me to see you, unchaperoned."

No chaperone was one thing, but naked and sweaty after sex, would definitely not meet her parent's approval. Simon kissed Juliana and her hand began to do wonderful things to his dick.

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~ London – Recently ~

Liz Grant knew about the Wanderers of course, the memories of all the previous keepers of the final gateway, had become her memories. It sometimes occurred to her that she knew ten times as much genuine history of the Ancient Gods, as the wisest theological scholar. Actually, she probably knew a thousand times as much and better still, all her knowledge was real. All of it facts, her predecessors had lived through it all, every year since the planet had coalesced out of a cloud of rocks and dust. Nothing allegorical, no requirement for any kind of faith. It was all real and she had the memories of

it all. Not always the clearest of memories, some was definitely low definition. It was there though; the kind of knowledge people had died trying to acquire.

“Do you want me to get anything on the way home ?” Asked Brendan.

“Are you going anywhere near the Indian takeaway we like ?”

“I can do.”

“Get something, you know my favourites. We’ll have a no washing up night.” She said.

They got up at the same time, but Brendan left their flat about an hour before she did. It was great, it gave her time to ponder on things before heading off for a day on the phones. Their lives had the same ups and downs as any couple, but mornings.....They had mornings organised to perfection.

In her other existence though, as the guardian of the final gate to the underworld; something definitely wasn’t right. Not in an ‘oh crap, here comes the apocalypse,’ kind of bad. The Wanderers were doing strange things that just might show a pattern.

“How can Gods who don’t give a fuck about anything, be doing something together ?” She muttered.

“What was that ?” Asked Brendan.

“Nothing, see you tonight.”

The accepted wisdom was that even Gods had a limit to how much of eternity they could put up with. They might be in our world now, but all the Gods had looked after other worlds. Liz couldn’t imagine looking after an infinite number of worlds, populated by an infinite number of whining, toadying intelligent creatures. To be honest, she didn’t want to try and imagine it. Hardly surprising that some of them decided to end it all.

Not suicide, that was impossible for omnipotent deities who inhabited the entire multiverse. Some of them simply zoned out, giving themselves the ultimate form of brain fog. They drifted through the various dimensions, thinking about nothing, doing nothing. Hence the reason for them being called the Wanderers. Only now they were doing something and they seemed to be doing the same thing. How many of them were there ? Even she wasn’t certain, but it had to be about a tenth of all the Gods. They’d all decided to opt out of any meaningful existence.

“So, what or who prodded you with a stick guys ?” She mumbled.

It wasn’t her job; she didn’t even have a direct line to the major deities. Laura had their ear, but they seemed to view her as hired help, who they’d rather not be seen with. Horus had even told her after her initiation, that they’d probably never meet again. She was a creature of darkness, who for one reason or another was essential to the balance. Alright for her to guard the back door into the underworld, as long as she never turned up at the front door to their world.

Others talked to her though, the countless minions who served the Gods. Some were mindless beasts, while others were as human looking as her, when they chose to be. They were all saying the same thing, something wasn’t right, something was wrong with the Wanderers. It wasn’t her job.....But she wasn’t going to ignore it.

Liz had a job, a proper nine to five normal human job. But there were gateways from dreams to the underworld. A few weeks of such a double life would leave her feeling very tired. She’d know by then though, whether she needed to seek an audience with the Gods. Someone to help was essential, just in case something happened to her. Another set of eyes had to see; another set of ears had to hear. Liz had assumed she was a true eternal, incapable of being killed by normal means. It was the Gods she would be watching though and if the Wanderers were planning something.....

“I wonder if Mabina is busy ?” She muttered.

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~ Cleckheaton, Yorkshire – Recently ~

It was Ronnie's third time in Cleckheaton, though the first two times had been with Laura and Patsy. On her own this time, not even her boyfriend there to make the drive less tedious. Jim Weaver was exactly as Laura had described him, a full ten on the paranoid loony scale. Not that his over cautious nature didn't mean his plan for a heist wasn't worth considering. In a way, the fact that he wanted to burgle the private museum, added to its appeal.

"He'll have covered every angle and then some." She muttered to herself.

She liked Jim and a huge amount of that had been due to Laura. She'd known Jim a while and there had been talk of a previous heist. Laura knew how to get him to relax, mainly by ordering lots of takeaway food and beer. Their first time in Jim's house had been a little wild and had been mainly a Thai takeaway and booze night. There had been enough hints about Jim's planned burglary to make Ronnie curious, and keen. The numbers Jim had mentioned were staggering and Laura had taken it all very seriously. There was enough money in it to transform Ronnie's life and it was already pretty comfortable.

"There is something about gold." She mumbled.

None of them would tell her where the solid gold scarab had come from, just that Jim had earned it by his part in something illegal. Ronnie had never heard of scarab beetles, let alone ones made from solid gold. It was wonderful, golden objects always are. The colour, the feel of the precious metal. No museum would have allowed her to hold the scarab in her hands, but Jim had. At that moment she was in, fully onboard with his master plan. The real shock had been Laura mentioning the estimated value of the scarab.

"I just can't think of selling it." Jim had said. "I know it sounds crazy, but it would be like selling a friend."

Only it didn't sound crazy to Ronnie, she understood perfectly. There was something about gold, really pure gold. She'd never understood it before, but now she did.

"Don't use your SatNav, they all keep records." Jim had told her. "Come into town by the M62 and park somewhere near the bus station. My place is a bit of a walk from there, but not too far."

Not that using maps and Jim's instructions worried Ronnie. She used her car's SatNav rarely; its records could be used as evidence in court. In her line of work, it paid to go old school, using maps, notes and sign posts on roundabouts. No Laura, so she'd had the long drive up to Yorkshire.

"I always knew there was something unusual about her." She muttered.

When Ronnie had worked with Simon, in the days when they'd both been in Anthony's sales team; it was obvious Simon was a bit of bad arse. He made his calls, took all the shit and called Anthony boss. They all did, but there was something about Simon. When Simon had bought into Anthony's new company, she'd ended up working for Simon. He was always polite and he still did a lot of the work needed to keep the best clients happy. There was just something about his politeness. She'd known a local copper when she'd run with a gang. He was so polite, all the time, the same kind of polite as Simon. That cop had put away a good third of their gang, calling them all sir or madam, as the cuffs went on.

"Simon's not a cop, but the way he says sir.....You can tell he wants to spit in their eye." She muttered.

Ronnie easily found a residential street to park in, quite close to the bus station. There had been a temptation to park close to Jim's house and pretend she'd followed his instructions. Jim was clever though, the professor guy in back to the future clever. One day she'd let something slip and he'd know she'd lied. He seemed the kind of person who'd never trust anyone again if they lied. So, she dug his notes out of her pocket and began to walk. Her BMW looked out of place in the street, but

she wasn't worried about leaving it there. Lots of nice pretty curtain in the windows of clean looking houses with tidy gardens. It meant the same thing the world over, it might not be a wealthy area, but it was a safe neighbourhood, she'd have bet on it.

"If only I could zap myself to that bus stop outside his house." She mumbled.

Wow, that had been amazing, the first time. In the house Laura shared in Hornsey one moment and shivering in Cleckheaton the next. Strangely by the second time, Ronnie accepted it as normal. There had always been something about Simon, though Ronnie hadn't had much to do with Clara or Laura. That had changed when Ronnie had begun to work for Tom Ives, who ran a breakers yard in Erith. Not just any old car breakers, it had won all kinds of awards. The local council were always extolling its virtues, as what every small company could do in the effort for clean sustainability. After all, they did tear old cars apart for the parts to be recycled. Tom had even told her the place made a decent profit. The main source of cash was something Tom was unlikely to get awards for. Tom was an old-fashioned South London gangster; he'd even had his picture taken with the Krays.

Extortion, demanding money with menaces, right through to money laundering. Tom was no dinosaur; he'd shifted his core business to meet modern demands. With Simon's help, he'd moved into the business of bringing designer drugs in from Eastern Europe and China.

"Oh Simon, I had no idea how bad arsed you really were." Ronnie muttered.

Tom's breakers yard served a purpose that definitely fitted both the old days of London gangsters and the new age of designer drugs and credit card fraud. There are times, when someone needs to get rid of a car, confident in the knowledge that it will never be seen again. There's more to crushing a car than seen on TV and movies. Glass needs to come out, engine blocks need removing. For a start the petrol tank needs draining, unless you fancy a nice explosion in your breakers yard. The shell of the vehicle is all that goes into the crusher, to be turned into tidy cubes of recyclable steel. Yes, it was a costly matter that needed to be done right. Tom charged a high price to get rid of a car, permanently, and any evidence it might hold.

"Bradford Road.....At least I'm going the right way." She mumbled.

Ronnie actually slowed her pace. She was early and if Jim said seven in the evening, he meant exactly seven. Not a minute early or a minute late.

Yes, working for Tom Ives had definitely revealed things about Simon and the two ladies, he shared a home with. Ronnie knew Simon, so she was alright. That had been the attitude of most of the people who worked for Tom. Ronnie had worked with Simon, so she had to know about the cars brought in, that had to get the extra special, vanish the same day, service.

It seemed Clara had once brought in a pink resprayed Saab, with a lot of blood on the back seat. Laura had brought in an old van, with a hell of a lot of blood in the back. Tom's people had assumed Ronnie was in the know about such things, which she was, after they'd told her about it. One guy everyone called Beetle, because his second name was Bailey....Yeah, she hadn't got it at first either. Anyway, Beetle had told her everything he could remember about the special same day crushes Simon had paid for. Beetle had touched the side of his nose in a meaningful way, after telling her a huge amount of gossip she'd never actually asked him about.

"All that blood.....Taking care of the competitors if you ask me." Beetle had said.

Simon was looked up to, as a kind of North London version of Pablo Escobar. As for Clara and Laura...They were his molls of course, or at least that was how Beetle Bailey saw it. Ronnie was still early as she arrived at the street where Jim lived. She didn't sit at the bus stop outside his house. There was another just up the road a little, though the shelter did little to stop the cold wind. Laura said she'd been to see Jim during a snowy February.

“Crap, Cleckheaton must have permafrost in February.” Ronnie Muttered.

Of course, Ronnie had been shocked by how Laura had brought her and Patsy, that first time. They held onto her as best they could, while Laura pressed her side with an elbow. Strangely, it hadn't shocked her to the point of disbelief. They had teleporters in Sci-Fi movies and technology was bound to come up with the real thing one day. Everything in Sci-Fi became real one day, everyone knew that. Laura had talked about divine artefacts, which sounded like hocus bloody pocus to Ronnie.

“I bet she stole some new weapons tech or something.” She muttered. “I bet the CIA have had a functioning teleporter for decades.”

Anyway, who or what Laura might be was her own concern. Once Ronnie would have made a huge amount of fuss, asking everyone she could get to listen to her. There had been a meeting with Tom though, with several of his most gnarly looking men in the room. Ronnie had repeated a piece of gossip, something minor she'd now forgotten. Tom had given her the consequences of being a busy body speech, combined with the evils of nosiness in their profession. There had also been an anecdote about a man who hadn't listened and his body being found in the river, way down past Gravesend. Ronnie tried to have no curiosity now, or at least not one she talked about.

“Laura can keep her secrets.” She mumbled.

It was almost seven, so she got up and walked towards the bus stop outside Jim's house. The bus stop was still a key part of getting into the house. She stopped there and sent a quick text, saying she was there. A count of about ten, as he probably looked out of the window. The text was short, as it had been the last time, though she hadn't been on her own then.

‘Fine come to the door.’

Laura had told her Jim might misread Ronnie asking to see him on her own.

“He's almost a lock in, Ronnie.” Laura had told her. “Howard Hughes probably got out more than Jim does. I like him though and he's useful. When you burst his bubble, do it gently.”

Which begged the question, why had she wanted to see him alone ? Laura had understood her need to get a feel of the guy, they were about to use his plan for a major burglary. Patsy had just nodded, though there was still a troubled look in her eyes. Ronnie had no intention of muddying waters or poaching the heist. She just needed an evening with Jim, to suss the guy out. Was he reliable ? Did he talk bullshit ? Actually, everyone talks a certain amount of bull shit, though there were acceptable levels.

“I'm sure he's the real deal, I just need to be certain.” She muttered.

No special ring, which was a little disappointing. Ronnie pressed the bell push and Jim had the door opened within a few seconds. Was he waiting the other side of the door ? Yes, he probably had misunderstood why she'd arranged to see him on her own.

“He'll think it's a date.” Patsy had said.

Patsy had been right. Jim had a brand-new haircut, far shorter than suited his face. He'd also sprayed himself with enough Lynx body spray to make her eyes water. Yep, Jim thought it was a date.

“Hi Ronnie, come inside.” Said Jim.

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~ Simon's House – Prato – 13th Century Italy ~

Simon had decided to keep his bible full of notes, rather than starting a proper journal. The very first scrap of paper he'd flattened out and pushed into the bible, simply said ‘Keep Niña Alive.’ Journals could be a problem, they required hiding from prying eyes, or writing in ciphers, or both. No one bothered picking up a bible and most burglars thought stealing one would condemn them to hell. It

made a perfect hiding place for his notes, though he was still working on a way to organise everything. It was an old family bible, though not belonging to his family. He's stolen it off the shelf, after feeding on the woman who had owned it. The bravado of a newly turned vampire, almost daring the almighty to smite him. Simon never had been smited and the large bible had become his journal, of a sort. There were several pages to record births, deaths and marriages. He'd carefully used those empty pages. Simon had written in an index for the next two hundred years, ending with making sure he met Machiavelli in fourteen ninety. That was the first key date Alberti had given him. Two hundred years was the blink of an eye to a vampire and once he'd seen Machiavelli, he'd write a new index.

"Yes, for once I'm getting organised." He muttered.

"What was that?"

"I'm getting organised my dear Niña. The problem will be keeping myself organised."

Simon liked to sit in her top floor studio, watching Niña draw the view from the window. The walls were covered in rough sketches and just watching the girl work had a calming effect, if he was having a bad day. For her part, Niña seemed to enjoy his company.

"You need a journal." Said Niña. "I can help you, if you want me to?"

"Maybe, one day. For now, I'll keep putting notes in my bible."

If he concentrated, Simon could see the minions of Huh, though he now tended to ignore them. It wasn't as if they were just mindless messengers. The women in their colourful lilac robes were part of the God of time. Each one was a part of Huh and he could talk through their mouths. Simon treated the minions with huge respect and rarely acknowledged their presence. He had trouble remembering the last time one of them had spoken to him.

Actually, when he thought about it, Laura and Clara had talked to the minions, but he hadn't, not even once. Not that he was about to worry about it, you'll never find a vampire with OCD. He would never have thought about it again, if he hadn't seen one of minions looking at the drawing Niña was working on. The minion said something to Niña, who actually turned and replied. Simon carried on flattening and reordering his notes, before asking Niña about it.

"I saw you talk to the woman in lilac robes." He said.

"Yes, that one likes my drawing of Juliana."

Clara had always told him he didn't notice the little things, the parts of the external world that didn't seem important. She'd been right and sometimes the little things mattered. The drawing was of the view from the window, but Niña had drawn Juliana looking out of that window. He stood up and had a long look at the drawing.

"That is a wonderful drawing, you've captured her, as I see her." He said.

"Yes, the lady said that."

"Do you know what she is?"

"Not really, but they told me not to be scared. They're here to help you." Said Niña.

Did Giovanni see them, was he having conversations with the minions of Huh? Simon doubted it, his friend was unlikely to keep quiet about such a thing.

"Think of them as friendly ghosts." Said Simon. "You have nothing to fear from them."

"I know, I'd know if they meant us harm."

She would too, there was something about the girl. Alberti knew Niña was important, but being Alberti, he wasn't about to give many details, at least not yet.

Niña left to do something downstairs, while Simon looked at the drawings she'd been working on. Most were in charcoal drawn on cheap paper. Pens and inks were expensive, but he made a mental

note to buy her whatever she needed to improve her art. Somewhere in his weird mix of memories, he knew that in his life as Piero, he'd done the same thing. The day might have gone a different way, if he hadn't seen a minion admiring the drawings.

"She has a rare talent for such things." He said.

"Yes she has, though they will leave cracks in time."

"How ? They're just drawings."

"Your Niña only has so many free hours. These drawings will mean the ones Laura and Clara have seen, will not now exist. A minor thing in many ways, though we will need to fix it."

Simon had the idea there and then, there had been no inkling of it a few seconds before. If the minions could repair such intricate fractures in time, there was no need to put off meeting Niccolò Machiavelli. Not that he could travel through time at will, they'd need to help him with that too.

"Could you take me forward in time ?" Asked Simon. "I was thinking of speaking to Niccolò Machiavelli when he was in his twenties, say around fourteen ninety."

"Not that year, you will attempt to meet him then. There can be no repeat of two Simon's in the same temporal event."

"But if I go now, why would I go then ?" He asked.

"Time moves, time never rests, time is never set forever."

She repeated it and several other minions appeared and joined in. It occurred to Simon that he didn't understand time well enough to even ask the right questions. He decided to keep to the task at hand and rely on the ladies in lilac robes to fix what he might break.

"You can be sealed in a bubble of time, Simon. Then we can send you to see Machiavelli in fourteen ninety-one."

"That sounds perfect."

"There are rules, you can leave nothing there, nothing at all. He may give you something, which is fine. Or of course, he may not. Time never rests Simon, never."

"I will obey the rules, when will you take me there ?" He asked.

"Now, the best time is invariably now. The version of you from an earlier period would be confused and putting it off looks like indecision. If you're serious about this, we'll take you now. Are you serious about this, Simon Atherton ? There are risks."

There wasn't really any other way to answer her, without looking stupid or indecisive. Perhaps he was being played, but if that was the case, he didn't mind.

"Alright, let's do it." Said Simon. "Take me now, right now."

There were supposed to be fifty of the minions watching him, all of them protective minor deities, angels in a way. Suddenly the room was full of them, far more than fifty. All of them were smiling at him, rather than their usual fairly neutral expression.

"Well done Simon, we may yet see the man you could be."

The world around him shifted a little, enough to make him feel slightly nauseous. It might be a once in a lifetime experience, so he resisted the urge to close his eyes. The room appeared to swing left, then to the right, before vanishing altogether. He fell through empty space for a while, before the room and garden solidified around him, as if by magic.

Simon had never seen Niccolò Machiavelli in the flesh and there had been no cameras in his day.

There was one particular painting that seemed to be the default image of the man in front of him.

That painting had always seemed sinister to Simon, as though the artist had an agenda. A lot of people had been jealous of Niccolò during his lifetime, he was a very clever man. Perhaps the artist had been jealous of his intellect. No one likes a smart arse, as the saying goes.

In the flesh Niccolò was attractive, the kind of man who gets a lot of female attention in night clubs. Probably a certain amount of male attention too. Dark eyes and longish hair with a natural curl in it. No thin hawkish face as the painting implied. The man standing up from his work table, had a natural easy smile.

"I'm sorry to arrive unannounced and inside your home." Said Simon. "I can assure you; I mean you no harm."

"I know you don't Simon, I was expecting you." Said Niccolò.

It was idyllic, Niccolò had his work table just inside a set of doors, which gave access to a beautiful garden. Simon had no idea where he'd been sent, but he assumed it was Florence in the early summer. Everything in the garden was either in bloom, or about to bloom. He should have been enjoying it all, but Simon was having a genuine jaw dropping moment.

"Oh, yes.....I must have come last year and mentioned I'd be back." Said Simon.

"No, why would you do that ? His creatures came to me, the servants of the Hauh, or you may know him as Huah or even Hehu. The Gods have are known by many names."

"Huh, I should have guessed. Huh told you I'd be arriving." Said Simon.

"I don't know him as well as you, but yes." Said Niccolò. "The great Hauh did briefly honour me with his presence."

"I don't claim to be his close friend." Said Simon. "My friend Laura appears to be on first name terms with Huh, which I find a little annoying."

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~ Bishopsgate, London – Recently ~

A perfect meal in a restaurant recommended by Mabina, who knew all the best places to eat. Followed by a few drinks in a grubby little pub near Bishopsgate, where the bar staff actually smiled as they served drinks. Such evenings can go either way, but for Laura and Tim, everything had been perfect. Still fairly early and they were on the pavement outside the pub, wondering where to go next. Vampires were good at handling alcohol, their bodies metabolised it really quickly. It wasn't booze making Laura feel in the mood to throw caution to the wind. It was the first night for quite some time, when her mind wasn't full of Simon being gone.

"I know a great bar in New York." She said. "We could step into a dark alley and be there, instantly. What time is it in New York ?"

Tim scrunched his face up into his concentration face, the one he used when tackling crosswords.

"Not sure, but I think it'll be about four in the afternoon." Said Tim.

"Oh no, it'll be daylight there." Said Laura. "Nothing is guaranteed to kill the vibe, quite like going from a nice dark night, to daylight. Trust me, I've done it. There must be somewhere about the same time as London."

"Then we need somewhere straight north, or south." Said Tim. "North is a bit cold, but south means North Africa. Do you know anywhere good in Tunisia, or Morocco ?"

"I do, a wonderful hotel with a private garden. It's in Marrakech."

Tim looked quite excited by the idea, but she was beginning to feel differently about using the Egg to take them both to Morocco. Not just Morocco, she felt a need to stay close to home and home meant one place.

"Or, we could buy a decent bottle of wine and go back to my room, in Hornsey." She said.

"I'm glad you suggested it.....I'd love that." Said Tim.

There was a corner shop less than ten yards away, there was even a rare thing, a cat that didn't hiss at her, or try and hide. Tim bought wine and junk food, while she stroked the cat. There are lots of

dark alleys in most cities, they found one further along the same street. Anyone seeing them enter the alley would think they were looking for privacy for a snog and a grope. Laura held onto Tim, while pushing at the disk under her ribs. She pictured her room and they were there.

“Wow, I will never get used to travelling like that.” Said Tim.

“It beats hanging around for an Uber.”

Laura had gone through a clean and tidy room phase when they’d moved from Wood Green to Hornsey. It hadn’t lasted, parts of the floor were covered in discarded clothes. Her clothes from the day before were still on the bed, exactly where she’d dropped them. In truth, though she’d have died before admitting it, Laura felt more comfortable when her room looked a bit lived in.

“I’ll go downstairs and get glasses and a corkscrew.” She said.

Her shoes had to come off first of course, and that meant finding her slippers. By the time Laura was opening her room door, Tim had noticed something.

“Hey, your antique drawings have changed.”

“They can’t change, they’re over seven hundred years old.” Said Laura.

“They have, the one with Giovanni in his expensive boots has him sitting differently. It even has his name written on it.”

It was crazy, the girl Giovanni had rescued off the street was a natural artist, but she’d never been taught to read or write. Someone was looking after her education. Giovanni was written a little crooked, but it was legible. As was the signature in the bottom left corner, Niña.

“You’re right, they all looked to be changed.” She said.

“The one at the end was a self portrait of the girl, now it’s of a woman looking out of a window. Who is Juliana?”

There she was, the woman Simon had talked about quite a few times, his voice full of regret. Tall and slender in a long flowing gown. Juliana was looking out of a window at a garden, with a domed building in the distance. For a drawing created by a young girl, it was amazing.

“Ahh, the lovely Juliana.” Said Laura. “It seems Simon finally seized the moment.”

“Come on, Laura, tell me everything.” Said Tim. “Who is this Juliana?”

Laura pulled Tim about, getting him so his back was towards her bed.

“Oh Tim, that wouldn’t be a good idea. If I tell you everything, a very pissed off God would probably come and zap you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

A little push and he was on her bed, with her next to him. Kissing began, which became touching, which led to a lot of eager undressing. They could have been doing it at the hotel in Marrakech, but her room in Hornsey was fine, it was her home.

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~ Cleckheaton – Recently ~

The house in Cleckheaton was warm, which probably had something to do with the corporate sized IT setup in the main bedroom, at the front of the house. Ronnie had pulled on her discarded knickers, but couldn’t spot her top anywhere. One of Jim’s grubby T shirts had passed the sniff test, so she’d put it on. An Everton T shirt, her dad would have been so ashamed, he was a lifelong Tottenham supporter. Jim and her had spent a couple of hours sharing bodily fluids, so a grubby T shirt didn’t bother her that much.

“It was a mistake.” She muttered. “A nice mistake, but a mistake.”

Jim was the clingy sort, she could spot them for miles in open country, or the other side of the room at parties. It wasn't as if geeks were her thing. Ronnie frantically ran through her mental Rotadex, looking for any geeks she'd had a decent relationship with. There had to be one, she wasn't going to admit defeat after the first night getting hot and sweaty.

"Relax you idiot.....Just let what happens, happen."

Laura had told her that if things had been different, if she hadn't been with Tim. Then she might have been tempted by Jim. He was a geek she'd said and he was a paranoid eccentric. According to Laura the slightly crazy guys were the most fun. That had seeded the idea in Ronnie's head, which had led to her sitting at a table in Jim's bedroom, at about three in the morning.

"Shit, Noah could snap him in two." She mumbled.

There was Noah to consider, things had been going well lately. Pissing off Noah would affect things at work. That meant she had to decide if Jim was going to be her bit on the side, or something more than that. Not that Jim looked that impressive, lying on his back, snoring slightly. He even had a bit of a beer gut, though there was something about him that pressed her buttons.

It was all giving her a headache, so she carried on studying the plans of The Monkman Family Museum. They'd left the table light on, sex in the pitch dark is rarely as much fun as it sounds. There was just enough light for her to clearly see the plans. Monkman Hall was the name of the building, with the family museum in a new wing built at the back of the house.

"You must have dropped someone a few quid to get that past the planning people."

A brand-new wing with better security systems than the average bio-warfare laboratory. That was the best part of the challenge for Laura, getting in and out without getting caught. For Jim it was all about the rare antiquities collected by the wealthy Monkman family over several centuries. For Ronnie it was all about the gold, she'd developed a thing for the wonderful soft metal. As had the Monkman family, who had a staggering number of golden artefacts in their private museum. Hence the need for a security system the Bank of England would have been proud of.

"What are you doing?" Asked Jim.

"Just going over the building plans."

"What do you think, can we do it?" Asked Jim. "Laura and Patsy seem to think we can."

"Yeah, we can do it. Ideally, we could do with two more people on the team, but we can do it."

Ronnie took off the T shirt and got back into bed, shoving Jim over a bit. She rolled him away from her and leant her face on his shoulder. The sex had been pretty good, but now she needed to sleep. Actually, pretty good was damning with faint praise, it had been bloody good.

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