

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 14 – Tarot Cards

**“Niña wondered how any living thing could survive for two thousand years in the dark, with no food or water. No wonder it felt angry and dangerous.”**

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Clara was in the shower, when she first noticed something. A small flash of red, a tiny amount of blood on her thigh. By the time she'd seen it, the shower was almost finished getting rid of it. She pulled and tugged at her leg, trying to find an open wound, despite knowing there wouldn't be one. Her bed sheets hadn't been bloodstained that morning and besides, vampires healed quickly, staggeringly quickly.

“It's finally happened, I'm seeing things.” She muttered.

Almost five hundred and twenty six years old, her birthday was quite soon. Not a huge age for a vampire, Simon's next birthday would be his seven hundred and forty sixth. Clara mentally went through the dozen or so essential things in her memory. Her phone number, Laura's phone number. She'd already remembered her own and Simon's birthdays. Her bank card number and expiry date, which she never needed to look up. It was hardly a full cognitive test, though it made her confident that her mind was as sharp as ever. The next spot of blood was closer to her knee than the first. It appeared as she was pulling on her panties. The nice silk ones, the pair Felipe had a bit of a thing for. Clara prodded at the spot of red liquid, not believing her eyes, until she tasted the blood from the small blob on her finger.

“It is blood.....Crap.....I can't be, not after five hundred years.” She muttered.

As far as she knew, all female vampires bought and kept tampons, despite never needing to use them. She had a couple of boxes in her bathroom cabinet, as did Laura. Going to a hotel, or staying at a friend's place ? Out came the unused box of tampons to place in the bathroom. It was all part of the great masquerade, acting the part all vampires spent their lives perfecting.....Appearing to be a normal human.

The next tiny spot of blood scared her. For whatever reason her body had decided to bleed after so long, she was certain it wasn't a good reason. It'd be some dreadful portent of doom, or an equally dreadful vampire plague. Clara laughed at her own paranoid fantasy and reached for the tampons. She was organised and replaced the box at least twice a year.

“Shit.....I've forgotten how to do this.”

Actually, she'd never used anything modern. Her just about first, one and only learning experience had been watching her older sister use cloths and straps. Her fingers were bloody, by the time the tampon was inserted and covered by her silk knickers. Afternoon fun with Felipe was off of course. It gave her a slight buzz to think of being able to tell him her time of the month had caught her by surprise.

“Yeah, about five centuries late.” She chuckled.

Time of the month sounded wrong, the girls at the sales office had called it the curse.

“Mother nature's way of saying, yippee you're not pregnant.” As one of them often said.

Simon would have been her first person to tell. He'd have been awkward and useless, but just telling him would have helped. Then Laura, who was currently off somewhere, probably Africa. With Laura there'd have been the whole sisterhood thing. Plus, Laura had used modern feminine hygiene products until Simon had turned her.

"Oh, feminine hygiene products.....Keep quiet until you've done some online digging on the urban dictionary." She muttered.

Was she scared? Maybe a little. Clara had been turned as a young woman. Her memories of periods were sketchy, though she remembered the amount of blood worrying her. She completed dressing and the idea of having a day off work, never occurred to her. Actually it did, for about five seconds. A few tampons went into her bag, along with three pairs of clean panties. Call Noah to pick her up, say she was running late?

"No, school girls handle this shit." He mumbled.

Was it that though, was she becoming fertile at over five hundred years old? It was weird, but there was no instruction book to being a vampire. Daniel would know, probably, or he'd have an ancient book that'd tell her about it. It was just that she hadn't seen him for a while. Talking to him about.....That. She'd rather dig out her own eyes with blunt sticks. Clara left home a little later than she'd have liked and headed for the station.

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It was hot dusty work, carried out with just the light from oil lamps. Simon seemed unhappy with progress, but Giuseppe kept saying the men were doing wonders. Niña had never seen a group of men involved in that kind of excavation. The house next door in Florence had employed people to remodel their garden, but that had been nothing like watching the six or seven men dig as though their lives depended on it. Almost a whirr of arms, picks and shovels, that went on for hour after hour. They had breaks, but Simon had promised them a bonus, if they shifted a certain amount of rock and soil every day. There was black powder, though Simon had said any kind of explosive had to be a last resort.

"We don't know what might be inside that rock wall." He'd said. "It might be the answer to so many things.....But as fragile as glass."

She'd told them something alive was waiting to be released, but she saw doubt in their eyes. Niña wondered how any living thing could survive for two thousand years in the dark, with no food or water. No wonder it felt angry and dangerous. Not that she ever talked about the dark presence while the diggers were within hearing distance. As the diggers and their foreman left for a short break, Simon beckoned her to where the digging had removed several feet of wall.

"I need a thickness left, Niña." He said "We need to stop the diggers just before they break through. I've even refused to allow Giuseppe to be here. I alone will break through and then.....We'll see what has been hiding in the dark for close to twenty centuries."

"Not just you....I'm stronger than the diggers." She said. "I can use a pick."

Niña leant on the wall and felt for it, the being that still clawed at the walls to be free. It was closer now of course; the rock wall was now just four or five feet thick. Still a day or two's digging, but soon the living presence would be freed.

"Four or five feet, Simon. Two days digging and it'll be free." She said. "It's angry, constantly angry. I worry that so long on its own, has turned its mind."

"You don't need to be here, when I break through."

"I've told you, Simon....When we break through. I'll be here.....It knows me now; it has felt my presence."

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The aircraft from the city filled the sky and some looked larger than drones. Probably a show of force, as none of the vast formation of flying machines attacked them. Akiva was surprised that Karkengara's myrmidons did exactly as the dragon had said. The aircraft didn't attack them, so they ignored them.

"So.....They're changing tactics." Said the dragon.

"I suspect they're as curious about us, as we are about them." Said Liz.

"Who are these people?" Asked Akiva. "Do we even have a name for them?"

"I suspect they are the ones who brought pyramids to the Egyptians." Said Liz. "I have no name for them, or their city."

The city's vast ground army, came out to meet them about a mile from the glittering spires of the city. Akiva heard them first, and saw the huge engines of war, as they came over the top of a dune. Massive mechanical devices, though they were obviously designed for war. Armoured leviathans on dozens of huge wheels. They easily came across the sand, though they came to a halt without firing any weapons at them. The priests in beige robes swarmed behind their war machines.

"I think.....I hope, this means they want to talk." Said Liz.

"Or, they intend to blow us to bits." Said Akiva.

The hover platform might not have been designed to impress, but it did it anyway. A vast floating platform that had to be twenty yards across. It floated silently over the top of the war machines, before landing quite close to them.

"I remember seeing pictures on temple walls when I was last here." Said Liz. "I'm sure these are the race of creatures who visited Egypt. They were worshiped as Gods."

The priests looked like tall, rather thin and gangly humans. The beings leaving the platform and heading towards them were different, very different. Tall, far too tall to ever be thought of as human. Nine feet tall at least, with long thin arms. Long necks too, though most of their bodies were hidden under long, flowing robes. Eyes, two of them in the usual place. The same with ears and each had a nose in the centre of their face. All different in one way or another.

The eyes looking at them never blinked and no human ever had a nose that thin and sharp. It was the head though, that was so different, that Akiva found himself staring. Their heads looked like long elongated eggs, with the thin part at the rear. Heads at least three feet long. A weird thought, but Akiva wondered how they managed to sleep in comfort, with heads that long. One of the creatures walked quite close to Liz and spoke. A melodic language spoken in a calm and even voice. It sounded beautiful, but to Akiva; it was completely unintelligible.

"I know those words.....It's changed a little, but still recognisable." Said Liz. "Archaic Egyptian the historians call it. I can actually talk to them."

The dragon sighed and looked bored, as Liz had a conversation with one of the beings. Eventually she turned around.

"They've apologised for attacking us." She said. "They're happy to forgive the death of their priests, as they attacked us without provocation."

"And so they should, apologise I mean." Said Karkengara.

"So, we're all sorry and now friends." Said Akiva. "Does this place have a name?"

"It's Aten, the original Dazzling City of Aten." Said Liz. "These are the people of Aten, worshippers of the great sun God."

"Something I didn't know." Said Karkengara. "It's rare and pleasurable, for me to learn something. Did they construct this strange solar system?"

Liz began another long conversation with what were probably the high priests of Aten. Akiva sat on the sand and crossed his legs. One of the priests in beige robes had obviously been told they were all friends now. He, or maybe she, brought him a tall glass of what looked like fresh water. Akiva put his finger into the clear liquid and then sniffed it.

“Careful, I’ve known a few people killed by unintentional poisoning.” Said Karkengara.

Even if was unintentional, it sounded like a challenge. Akiva knew water when he smelt it. He drank the entire glassful and it tasted wonderful. The dragon just stood there, shaking his head at him.

“Oh, parasites, unknown bacteria.....” Muttered Karkengara.

“You sound like my aunt. She used to go on holiday to wonderful places abroad and live on McDonalds.”

“What’s a McDonalds ?” Asked Karkengara.

No time to explain and give the dragon another piece of new knowledge. Liz turned and told them what she’d been told.

“They found this strange system with its multiple suns.” Said Liz. “They assumed it had been meant for them and that they were destined to find it. They also have a legend about the creators returning one day.”

“Pretty much the standard stuff of legends.” Said the dragon. “Have you asked them about the mercenaries we’re looking for ?”

“I did and it seems they were picked up for thievery here, in Aten. Their skills of simply vanishing to another world, don’t work too well here. I’ve been told I may speak to the prisoners.”

“Good.....And of course, where you lead....I will follow.” Said Karkengara.

The floating platform had never been designed to carry anything the size of a dragon, even one with the ability to become invisible. Then there was the question of the massed ranks of the myrmidons. They’d have to walk the mile or so to the City of Aten, The New Dazzling City of Aten; to give the city its full name. Out of politeness, the high priests were going to walk with them. It wasn’t easy, but Akiva managed to get a few quiet words with Liz.

“Where you go, he follows.....Bullshit, I don’t trust the dragon.” He whispered.

“Oh, you’re right, Akiva.” Said Liz. “I don’t think he means to harm me, but he’s definitely playing me in some way, I’ve yet to understand. We’ll have to watch him.....Very carefully.”

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Sudan time was only two hours ahead of London. After giving Nathalie Aurigny the gold Buddha and the other items, there had been fresh orders. It seemed senior people like Hassan and Leila Bashir were usually dealt with quickly, once they were known to have gone rogue. Matching fingerprints was easy, done while Laura talked to Nathalie. Although most were the prints of persons unknown, one clear set of prints on the cup, belonged to Hassan. Nathalie mentioned there had been some suspicions about Hassan in the past. Laura didn’t know why it worried her, though she had to mention it.

“Dealing with them sounds so cold, so easy.....They have children.” Said Laura.

Nathalie laughed, a long genuine laugh.

“A vampire who cares about people’s kids.” Said Nathalie. “Now I’ve heard it all.....But you are a relatively new vampire. Hassan has worked for several well-known institutes and still deals with some on behalf of the Silver Dawn. He and his wife can’t simply vanish, even if I was tempted.

They’re thieves after all, not assassins.”

“They did try to kill Tim and I.”

“Ahhh...So are you arguing for mercy, or their deaths ?”

"I'm guessing you're just going to sack them." Said Laura.

"That is the usual way, we'll even give them a little from the resettlement fund, to help them move house. We could get you to dig and find evidence, I'm sure it's there. In the end, it's easier to invite them to resign. We will whisper the truth to a few people though. With luck, Hassan Bashir will never get a senior role in any other museum or institute."

"So, I'm assuming I can get my final bill at the hotel and come home?" Asked Laura.

Nathalie was prodding the gold buddha, she'd been doing it while they'd talked. It suddenly appeared to come to life, as a toad. The largest green toad Laura had ever seen. It walked twice around Nathalie's mahogany desk, before becoming a solid piece of gold again.

"I told you, they all do something." Said Nathalie. "Though what that was all about.....Anyway, yes.....After you've had your takeaway with Tim. I want you to go back to Sudan, the dig site. Just the once, Hassan has no idea you've found his hiding place. Try to catch him red handed if you can. He'll be more likely to agree to putting in his resignation. It'll also knock a zero off what we offer as resettlement money."

Laura had to prod the gold buddha before she left and it was once again, a golden piece of art, an ornamental large toad.

"That was it, all it does?" She asked.

"Hey, in an African temple three thousand years ago.....A gold toad coming to life and walking about, probably brought the house down." Said Nathalie.

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"No Mabina, I'm not imagining it." Said Daniel. "There are side effects from visiting the places where the Wanderers congregate. I've more energy than I used to have, far more aggression too. I threatened some fool dawdling in the supermarket. Trolley rage I think they call it."

"Did they deserve it?" Asked Mabina.

"Yes, but that's not the point. It wasn't me, not my usual way of dealing with day-to-day annoyances."

Mabina kept saying she'd felt no different, but she wouldn't. She was always aggressive at the best of times, a vampiric hand grenade with the pin always half removed. She was giving him her condescending look. The trouble was that after sleeping with her, he found it hard to have a serious argument with her.

"If you tell me one more time that I'm imagining it....." He yelled.

"No.....I'll be honest, I feel it too, slightly." Said Mabina. "I think we're like batteries and the energy in the world of the Gods, overfills us. Not much to do about it really, we can't stop going. The GRAWs, Gods from another world, need our updates. There is one obvious way to burn off the energy."

"What way?" He asked.

"We feed of course; we could even hunt together." Said Mabina. "Vampires can survive on two or three feeds a year, but where is the fun in that? If we feed twice a week, the aggression will burn off us."

"Oh, I'm not sure." He said. "I have trouble getting in the right frame of mind, for that sort of thing."

"Need to wait until you're starving huh? I understand, Daniel. More vampires than you might think have that problem. Come hunting with me just once and I guarantee you'll begin to love it."

"Just the once?" He asked.

"Yes Daniel, just the once.....But I bet you want to do it again."

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Liz thought London would have had trouble, finding a room where they'd be comfortable, with space outside for the myrmidons. Horse Guards Parade maybe, with a hospitality suite in a nearby government building. She wasn't that fussy about her surroundings, neither was Akiva. A dragon deity though, he needed a lot of space and he could be awkward and demanding. The people of Aten managed to provide somewhere comfortable though, with food and drink that wasn't likely to poison them. It had all been arranged so quickly. All they'd had was the time it took a large dragon to walk about a mile. Bathroom facilities were perfect, she'd known they would be. They looked different to humans, but the people of Aten had pretty much the same bodily plumbing.

"Oh, these cake things are delicious." Said Akiva. "You should try some."

"You're far too adventurous with what you eat and drink." Said Karkengara. "It doesn't bode well for you having a long life."

Like doughnuts, there was even a kind of jam in them. They'd been brought a large dish covered in them, with promises of a grand feast later. A feast in their honour, she'd been told several times. Liz was sure the food was safe, so she nibbled one of the doughnuts.

"Wow, he's right." She said. "That is the best thing I've eaten in.....Quite a while."

Karkengara ate six in one go and merely grunted his approval. Different drinks were brought in and some tiny biscuits covered in something that looked and tasted, like chocolate. Boredom arrived unbidden, after two or three hours.

"Do you think they have something like the internet?" Asked Akiva. "I'd love an hour on Aten social media."

"Great, but who would you talk to?" She replied. "Plus, you don't speak Archaic Egyptian."

Liz still had the tarot pack in her pocket, the one she'd bought in the weird market in the east of London. She dug the pack out, marvelling again at the beautiful artwork on the box.

"Alright, I'm no expert, Akiva." She said. "I think I can give you a tarot reading, if you're that bored."

"I've heard such things should never be taken lightly." Said Akiva.

"I'd be quite interested in watching." Said the dragon.

"So..... Are we doing this?" She asked. "I'll probably screw it up."

"Fine, but only because I'm bored." Said Akiva.

Not her first tarot reading, though the earlier attempts had been in her teens. Crappy cards bought for her by a boy, as a Christmas gift. She had read a book on it though and still remembered the basics. The problem was that the cards in the deck she'd bought were very artistic and different to the cheap pack. Bluntly, she had no idea what some of them were. Liz was winging it, while trying to look confident. She cut the deck before handing it to Akiva.

"Please cut the deck." She said.

"Twice." Said Karkengara. "Humour me.....Cut it twice."

By the time she was ready to lay out four cards for Akiva, the priests in beige robes had become interested. Liz did wonder if they'd become bored too. There had to be a dozen priests, forming a circle around the table, as she placed four cards in front of Akiva, all face up. She hadn't looked at them while placing them on the table. Trying to explain them, while sounding knowledgeable.....That would come after a few minutes of panic.

"What the.....Your cards have upset the priests." Said Akiva.

The priests were bowing a lot and muttering something about begging forgiveness. Soon most of them were lying prostrate on the floor. The muttering became what sounded like a prayer, a prayer for forgiveness. There was a trend developing and unintentionally, she seemed to have started it.

"What did you do to them?" Asked Karkengara.

“Nothing.....You’ve been here all the time; I never spoke to them.”

The prayer for forgiveness was taken up by every priest arriving to see what all the commotion was all about. Soon the floor was full of them, all repeating the prayer, over and over again.

“Crap.....This isn’t good, Liz.” Said Akiva.

“I know.”

A strange world full of huge weapons of war and she appeared to have caused a major incident of some kind. The cards, her mind was trying to rationally work out what the hell had happened and it had to be those damned tarot cards.

“Oh fuck.....Yes, I see it now.” She said.

The high priest came in while she was holding the card. He was one of the priests with long egg-shaped heads. Liz hoped his arrival would restore order, but he crumpled to the floor. Again, that damned prayer for forgiveness.

“What are you doing to them ?” Asked Akiva. “Whatever it is.....Stop it.”

“Not me, look at this card.”

“Yeah, some bright orange baubles, flying around a big red bauble.”

“They’re not baubles, they’re suns.....Now look again, properly.” She said. “The same pattern is above nearly every door we’ve passed through. It’s everywhere.....So common we’ve been ignoring it.”

“Yes.....It’s this unique solar system, with the planet Aten at its centre.” Said the dragon.

“I’m pretty sure they see us as messengers from the Gods.” Said Liz. “Instead of a welcome, they attacked us. Hence the lamentations and general toadying.”

“The cards are right of course.” Said Akiva. “You chose my cards and it seems we are destined to be here.”

“Again, a new event I’ve never experienced before.” Said Karkengara. “I was right to join you, Liz. But you must now calm these priests, or we’ll get nowhere.”

“I’ll try.”

Putting the offending card face down on the table was the first step. Liz knew their language well, yet calming the high priest wasn’t easy. Lots of assurances that she was merely a messenger and the Gods weren’t about to bring destruction to Aten. Eye contact took a while and he kept staring at the pack of Tarot cards, as though they might bite. As the high priest calmed down, so did the ones in beige. All in all, Liz thought things hadn’t worked out too badly. As she said to Akiva...

“I think we’ll get access to everywhere we want to go.”

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“I’ll sense them, if they decided to clear everything out.” Said Laura.

Tim was happy that Laura was pleased he’d offered to be there with her. After the wide part of the tunnel, where they’d found someone’s den and the gold toad, there was still a few feet of tunnel. It ended where they’d dropped a blow-up mattress on the floor and a couple of blankets. Being comfortable was important, they could well be sat there all night, in the dark.

“I won’t use my flashlight until you say.” He said.

“We need a code.....If I kiss your cheek, I’ve sensed someone is in the tunnels.” Said Laura. “If I kiss your cheek twice, I’m fairly certain it’s Hassan. I have his scent in my memory, I’ll know if it’s him.”

“What does a kiss on the lips mean ?” He asked.

“Nothing.”

“It has to mean something.” Said Tim.

He kissed her, they'd been kissing and cuddling in the dark for a while. Occasionally Laura would use her flashlight, but on the whole, they'd become mole people for the night. Laura giggled and began to push her fingers down the top of her jeans. He felt her shake her head, mid-kiss.

"No, they could be here any moment." Said Laura. "Business now, fun later."

Even though there was no light at all in the dig site, Tim still closed his eyes once the flashlight was turned off. The darkness was so complete, that there was something unnerving about staring into it. Nathalie had given Laura her orders to be there, confident that Hassan would come to clear out his den and take what they all still called, the golden buddha. Laura wasn't so sure Hassan would show. As for himself...Tim could think of worse ways to spend a night. He was in the dark with Laura, making out at least once an hour, mainly to alleviate the boredom. No full-on sex of course, but he quite enjoyed snogging and groping.

"Quiet now.....I heard the elevator on its way down." Said Laura.

He couldn't hear anything, other than the sound of dripping water somewhere and that sounded a long way off. Laura had better hearing than him though, a lot better. Tim felt for the gun in his pocket, just in case it was needed.

"The elevator has three in it; I sense three heartbeats." Laura muttered.

Tim heard nothing, until the three men were in the main chamber above them. Only the occasional flash of light made it into where they were, but the three people were taking no precautions when it came to noise. Three men, Hassan and two of the diggers he'd recommended and hired. Laura had her lips against his left ear.

"Only Hassan is coming down here." She whispered. "That could make it awkward."

In the main chamber, there was actually laughter. Three voices, though his tone made it obvious Hassan was in charge. If only Hassan was coming down, how did Laura intend to catch the other two? They'd talked over a few plans, but none dealing with that scenario. Supposing the other two men were armed. It might all end up as a shambles, but he had faith in Laura to sort it out. There was shouting from above. Laura was talking well above a whisper.

"Crap.....Hassan has noticed the ladder has been moved." Said Laura. "Come on, we're going after them."

Tim was sure the folding aluminium ladder had been left exactly where it had been, at least by them. There was a chance some of the security team had been there. For all they knew, Hassan might have left something on one of the rungs, something that dropped off if the ladder was used. It was all an unknown. The fact was that Hassan and his two accomplices, were running towards the elevator.

"I'll get Hassan.....Go after the others." Yelled Laura. "Use the gun if you have to."

Tim went up the ladder and had the gun out of his pocket, by the time he'd taken two paces. If either of the two thieves looked at him sideways, he'd put a bullet into them. He still had a grudge against them, after one of them had tried to shoot Laura and him.

"Stop Hassan, you can't escape these tunnels." Yelled Laura.

Two shots and then a scream, in a voice that wasn't female. Tim knew how Laura behaved in a fight; he'd been through several with her. Hassan was dead or dying, so he could concentrate on the other two. So far, he'd been relying on the shaking flashlights of others, but he now used his own.

Someone tried to shoot him. The bullet went wide, leaving him alive and very, very angry.

"I'm fed up with this dust filled shit hole." He shouted. "I'm just as sick of being shot at in the dark. I'm going to kill both of you."



Not exactly berserker rage, but anger did make him braver. Tim knew where the wall in front of him was, even though he'd turned off his flashlight. Five quick paces, then hand out to feel the wall. Turn and up with his gun, aiming where he thought the shot had come from.

"Hey.....You." He shouted.

On with his flashlight and a confused digger was aiming his gun where Tim had been. No mercy, it was them or him and for some reason, Laura wasn't there to help. Tim fired twice aiming at the man's chest and then turned off his flashlight. A few quick paces following the wall and there was the gunshot he'd expected. Luckily, he heard it hit the wall where he'd been, rather than where he was. For a second or two it hit his consciousness, he was in a life-or-death battle in the dark. He might actually be killed. So easy for the thought to turn him into a terrified, curled up ball on the grubby floor. In that dust.....All that fucking dust.

"Behind you.....I'm behind you." He yelled.

Away from the wall this time, Tim was up on his toes and running. Just a short distance, but he had an idea where the last digger was standing. Muzzle flashes were the key, sounds tended to echo everywhere. He'd seen a muzzle flash, roughly in front of where he was now stood. A fresh muzzle flash as his enemy fired towards where his voice had been. Tim turned on his flashlight and dazzled the digger. He was that close to him, almost close enough to touch him.

"Got you." Muttered Tim.

Twice he fired into that confused and scared face. The man fell backwards and Tim swung his flashlight around. The other digger he'd shot in the chest, hadn't moved and was in the centre of a pool of blood. Strange how the blood looked almost black in the darkness.

Back to the man at his feet and Tim was tempted to shoot him again, just in case. He was dead though, no one survives with the back of their head missing. The dead man had a better light than his, a proper handle, with a large battery box. Tim took it and began to spin it about, looking for Laura.

"Laura !" He shouted

"Over here."

He found her sitting on the floor, quite close to a very dead Hassan Bashir. She'd torn his throat out with her fangs, judging by the blood covering much of her face and the front of her jacket.

"Did you get them both ?" Asked Laura.

"Yes."

"Good, I knew you would."

Laura had her jeans pulled down a little, far enough for her to get at a bullet hole in the top of her thigh. He'd seen her dig out bullets before, though he'd never get used to it. They both carried first aid kits in back packs, just in case. As he watched her dig into her thigh with a scalpel, he realised she'd been doing it all the dark, just by feel. Tim sat on the floor, aiming the light at her leg.

"Is it bad ?" He asked.

"Hurts like hell, but it'll heal." Said Laura. "Mabina once gave me a nasty chest wound, before we became friends. That hurt like hell for days. This.....This is just a scratch."

Fascinating to watch her use the scalpel. She seemed to push it in so deep, but vampires knew where all the major blood vessels were and what to avoid.

"Leave it too long and the muscles heal over the top of the bullet." Said Laura. "That makes it really unpleasant to dig the bullet out. You can leave them; I did leave one in there once. A huge mistake, it began to move about and drive me crazy. The best thing is to dig it out right away, if you can. I knew you'd take care of those two diggers."

The squashed bullet came out on the point of the scalpel. Laura caught it in her other hand and looked at it for a moment, before pushing it into a jacket pocket.

“Pass me a bandage out of my pack, Tim. I need something to stop the bleeding. It’ll heal quickly, but not that quickly.”

Laura used the bandage, pulled up her jeans and looked as good as new, if it hadn’t been for Hassan’s blood all over her face. She rested some of her weight on him, while she tested the DIY repairs to her leg. A few paces around him and she seemed happy.

“So, what do we do with them ?” Tim asked. “Dump the bodies or leave them here ? Tell Nathalie or pretend we have no idea what happened ?”

Laura actually ran on the spot, despite wincing a little.

“Hmmm, I had been thinking about that.” Said Laura. “Nathalie didn’t want Hassan to simply vanish. Mystery disappearances cause public interest. I’m sure there are people still reporting seeing Lord Lucan somewhere in Kenya, despite him being an immense age by now. And probably long dead.”

“Please don’t say we’re chopping up the bodies.” Said Tim.

“No, I’m much too lazy to do anything energetic and my leg still hurts.” Said Laura. “I can dump the diggers somewhere they’ll never be found; the Egg has its uses. There’s too much blood in this cave to get rid of, so we use it. We create a tableau of the brave Hassan Bashir, dying while fighting intruders. Nothing too elaborate, but definitely no mystery disappearance. You and I will then pay our hotel bill and get on a plane to London. Yes, we flew in, so there must be a record of us flying out.”

She was right, though the idea of a long flight home wasn’t filling him with joy.

“How about the wife, Leila Bashir ?” He asked.

“Ahhhh devoted wife and mother. Personally, I think she was part of it all and knew exactly what her husband was doing. Proving it though.....Thankfully not our problem. I wouldn’t mind betting Nathalie still pays her resettlement expenses to wherever she wants to go.”

Tim felt the job was only half done, but there had been other times he’d thought that. He and Laura lived well compared to many and after a while in London, they’d probably be living in France for a while. Then there was waking up next to Laura most mornings. Life might not be perfect, but it was damned close to it.

“So, what do you need me to do ?” He asked.

“Grab Hassan’s feet, I’ll get the head end.”

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