

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 25 – Shattered Jade

**“Simon had no memory of sleeping, or leaving the realm of dreams. One moment he was watching the death of a God and the next, he was stood near a very battered looking Giovanni. Judging by his own aches and pains, he probably looked worse than his old friend. They were on the beach near Leptis Magna, with the ancient city not that far away.**

**“Did we win ?” Asked Giovanni.”**

»

Laura woke up, naked and lying on her bed in Horney. Actually their bed, Tim was lying next to her and he too, was as naked at the day he'd been born. Their twenty first century timeline clothes were piled on the chair in the corner of the room. Of the robes and weapons from the realm of dreams, there was no sign at all. She was grubby and covered in small scratches. Blood too, quite a lot of blood. Luckily, most of it wasn't hers.

“Wake up Tim.....I need to check on the others.” She said.

Her touch on his shoulder was intended to be gentle, but Tim yelled and moved away.

“Crap sorry.....It seems whoever brought us here didn't clean us up, or treat our wounds. Mine aren't too bad, but this one on your shoulder, Tim. It needs a couple of stitches. Sit on the edge of the bed and I'll check you over.”

Several congealed areas of blood, that had left marks on the bedsheets. One gash on his lower back needed stitching, as did a nasty stab wound on his right thigh. Laura also discovered a gash on her own thigh, though her wounds would close and heal on their own. Tim's wouldn't though; he needed someone skilled at dealing with wounds and the right equipment. Luckily, she knew someone perfect for the job.

“Ow.....Everywhere you touch, hurts.” Said Tim.

“Sorry.....I never thought they'd bring us back and leave us.....like this.” She said. “No shower, not yet, it'll start your wounds bleeding again. We'll rub the worst of the dirt off each other and get dressed. Then....I know someone who is a wizard at stitches.”

“I ache, every bit of me aches.” Said Tim. “What do you remember ? I'm assuming we won ?”

“Yes, Q'uu'umatz is dead, or more accurately, ceased to exist.” Said Laura. “I can remember falling after he died, though I never hit the ground. Then.....I was here and feeling a bit dumped and abandoned. Not that I expected a parade or anything, but left bloody and filthy.....”

“Who was going to bring us back ?” Asked Tim.

“I guess I assumed Jack would do that.....Look, I only gave myself a one in ten chance of surviving. Getting home afterwards wasn't something I gave much thought. I'm guessing Huh's ladies in lilac robes picked us up and brought us here. What do you remember about leaving the dream world ?” Her own memories were a big foggy, so she wasn't surprised that Tim needed to think for a few seconds.

“Akiva was still close to me, when we saw the serpent falling apart. He was.....Oh crap, I think Brendan might have died. He was on the ground and not moving.....Then I was here.”

That settled it; Laura was determined to know what had happened to everyone, even those returning to Leptis Magna on a different timeline. She had to know, even if it meant pestering Huh. All that had to come after looking after Tim, one of his congealed wounds, had opened up and was bleeding again.

“Liz will know about Brendan and she is indestructible.” Said Laura. “First though, I’m taking you to see Mabina. She has a better equipped trauma unit than some hospitals.”

Laura had her own medical supplies; it came with the territory for a vampire. Humans were clever and hunting them could be tricky and dangerous. Even Simon had been cut a few times and he was the most experienced hunter in their small group. She had a few large dressings in a cupboard and one of them went over the wound in Tim’s shoulder.

“Ok, I’ll rub you over with.... Whatever this spray gunk is....Then you do me.” Said Laura.

The spray had been among supplies given to her by Mabina. It was a general cleaner and disinfectant that seemed to work well. Laura had no idea what was in it, but she trusted Mabina’s expertise.

Once dressed, she held onto Tim and pressed her elbow against the metal disc under her flesh.

“No niceties.....I’m taking us straight to her medical room.” Said Laura.

Being diverted en-route would have been nice for once; Horus could have healed Tim in seconds.

They went straight into Mabina’s home medical facility. It was nice to see it was all clean and unused. Laura was scared they might have found some of the others there, bleeding from numerous wounds.

“Mabina.....Are you home ?” Yelled Laura.

There was even the usual layer of paper on the medical couch, which scrunches up the instant anyone lies on it.

“Sit on here; I’ll go looking for Mabina.” She said.

“What if she’s not home ?”

“Then you get me.....I’ve stitched a lot of holes in people since becoming a vampire.”

He didn’t look happy and to be honest, she didn’t blame him. She’d put a few stitches into Tim before and he’d moaned about the pain. It seemed her technique was good, but she was crap at making it painless.

“Mabina.....We’re in the medical room.” She shouted.

“Alright.....We’re on our way up.” Yelled Mabina.

We might mean one of the others, which would be nice. Laura was wondering who it might be, when a face she couldn’t quite place, entered the room. Tim of all people recognised her, though he had become obsessed with various self-portraits of the girl.

“Niña.” He said.

“Oh wow, Huh is going to be beyond pissed off.” Said Laura.

“I didn’t ask to come here.” Said Niña. “I woke up on the kitchen floor.”

Her English was quite good, Simon must have either taught her, or Huh had made sure the poor girl could be understood in Chelsea. Good English, though she spoke it with a pronounced Italian accent.

“Not Niña’s fault.” Said Mabina. “You left a shambles by killing a God, Laura. There are consequences from that kind of thing. Though.....I’m sure Huh will soon get Niña returned to her own timeline.”

Laura remembered Huh telling her that if someone became part of the reality on a different timeline, they were stuck there, forever. If Niña had been asleep on the floor, had she been there all night ? There were so many potential problems, but Tim had to come first.

“Tim has some bad cuts, some might already be infected.” Said Laura.

“Don’t worry, I’ll deal with those.” Said Mabina.

Mabina had years of experience, but her stitching technique wasn't exactly gentle, at least according to Brendan. Poor Tim might be in for a painful time, but the wounds needed to be cleaned and closed up. Laura hugged Tim and kissed him, a proper on the lips kiss.

"You'll be fine with Mabina." She said.

"I'm a qualified nurse; of course he'll be fine." Said Mabina.

Laura leant in towards Tim and began speaking in a whisper. Mabina would be able to hear, vampire hearing was pretty damned good. With luck though, she'd take the hint about private conversations.

"Do you mind if I go and see Liz?" She asked Tim. "I'm still worried about Brendan."

"No problem, I'll be fine.....Just don't be too long."

"I won't."

Laura had almost pressed the Egg, when the other vampire in the room, showed off her hearing ability.

"Can I come with you?" Asked Niña. "I'll just get in the way here."

Laura looked at Mabina, who sort of shrugged.

"Fine....Get a good hold on me." Said Laura. "Close your eyes too, the first time everyone feels a little giddy."

Laura pictured Liz's lounge and pressed her hand against the Egg.

~ ~

Clara had woken up on her own in Hornsey, in the bed she'd once shared with Simon. She remembered fighting what had felt like thousands of large spiders, before seeing Q'uqu'umatz crumble away to nothing. Someone had placed her naked on her bed, still filthy and covered in the blood of the creatures she'd killed. It wasn't the homecoming she'd hoped for, but she was still alive and.....She was home.

"First a shower." She muttered. "Then.....I'll see if Laura and Tim are here."

As she turned there was a sharp pain in her right leg. A Gudara barb was lodged in her calf, not far from her ankle. The barbs were made of a heavy hardwood and had several barbed spikes. The Gudara used slings to aim them at their enemies. Clara had noticed they tended to believe in quantity over accuracy, their barbs had been a menace to everyone on the battlefield.

"The Gudara were brave....Many died." She mumbled. "I hope Laura's personal creature survived."

The barb came out in the shower, causing the floor to turn red. Other wounds began to bleed, as the hot water washed away congealed blood. It looked as though she was bleeding to death, though she knew it was never as bad as it looked. Drying herself left a towel so stained, that it would probably have to be thrown away. No place she had to be, definitely nowhere to rush off to. Her day was her own, so she sat on the floor of the shower, until her wounds stopped dripping fresh blood onto the tiles.

"Fights can be fun.....Cleaning up afterwards, never is." She muttered.

Clara had her own first aid kit that would have put some paramedics to shame. The worst wounds, the ones most likely to open up again, were covered in dressings. The hole where the Gudara barb had entered her leg, was covered in the largest dressing she had. Another towelling down, with just two of three drops of red on the towel.

"That'll do."

Panties on and that would do for now. Next it was downstairs into the kitchen to start up the filter coffee machine. Simon had got her into coffee and he was right; everything always seemed better after coffee. On the way back to her bedroom, she banged on Laura's bedroom door.

"Are you home? I've just put some coffee on."

No answer and once she used her vampire senses, the only heartbeat in the house, was hers. Clara entered Laura's room and the bed with both sides folded back, meant Tim had been with Laura. Lots of blood on the bed, with some quite fresh looking stains. It seemed the hero of the hour had been treated no better than her.

"Crap, Laura.....You could have checked if I was home." She mumbled.

It was in Laura's room that she looked at the slight bulge in her knickers and wondered if her vagina might not be totally on her side anymore. Not just her vagina, all of her genital area might well be plotting rebellion. Her pudenda the Victorians called that area between a woman's legs. It came from the Latin pudēre: to be ashamed. Clara had never felt even slightly ashamed of her pussy, but now.....

"What is happening down there ?" She mumbled.

Back to her room to dress in scruffy old clothes, things that could be burned if they ended up with stains of vampire blood. A brief look in the full length mirror on one of her wardrobes.

"Yeah.....Rock chick.....One of my favourite looks."

Dressed and ready to go out, but with no real idea of where to go. On the way back to the kitchen she noticed there was one message on the machine connected to the BT line. It seemed EDF were trying for about the thousandth time, to fit a smart meter. Two letters on the mat and both looked like marketing bumf. Coffee helped of course, to kick start her brain.

"Mabina.....If anyone will understand about the shattered jade, she will."

Clara looked down again, as if hoping to know what the hell was going on, down there. As far as she could see, there were three basic ideas about why the jade figurine of a child had become a pocketful of shattered pieces. She'd fallen through the trees of the forest in Jack's realm and had landed on her rear. The jade might have shattered then. Result.... It was gone forever with no harm done.

"Oh....How I hope that's it."

The next idea was just as good, if you considered it being destroyed a good thing. It may well have been incompatible with local reality in the realm of dreams. Result.....Again the destruction of a beautiful piece of art, with no harm done.

"Whatever deity looks after vampires. Please don't let it be the third option."

She wasn't that religious, at least not in a traditional way. She'd seen too much not to believe in something though; something that sometimes seemed to be on her side. Not always of course, Laura had nearly died after peeing over an ancient church cross. No man on a throne with a grey beard, or a devil who burned sinners for eternity. That was all nonsense, but there was something....Out there, or up there, or maybe down there.....

The third option made her shudder. She'd made love to Simon in the realm of dreams and the jade figurine might have shattered after serving its purpose. A female vampire's womb was about as child friendly as a pack of rabid coyotes and hers might be carrying a child. Not a child yet, still just a few cells that might become a child. Her child, with Simon as its father.

"Fuck.....Mabina will know."

Everything ached, so driving her car from North London to Chelsea, wasn't going to be her first choice. Not something to discuss over the phone though, it was definitely a face to face conversation. Clara called for a cab and was told it was that midmorning time, when cabs were harder to get than on New Year's Eve. Ronnie was probably still in hospital, or recovering at home. That left Noah, who would probably ask far too many questions.

"No he won't, not Noah; he's more taciturn than Simon." She muttered.

A quick call to Noah and he seemed more than happy to run her across town. No mention of where she'd been, or what she'd been doing. One day he'd make the perfect husband for the right girl.  
".....I can be at your place in half an hour."

Half an hour meant enough time to cook a bacon sandwich, with lettuce, tomato and plenty of brown sauce. There was definitely something therapeutic about bacon sandwiches. By the time Noah was there, she felt ready for anything.

"Where to princess ?" Asked Noah.

Why princess ? She had no idea, but he'd been using the nickname off and on for a while. It sounded fine, so she was choosing to let it go.

"Do you know Lots Road in Chelsea ?" She asked.

"Yeah."

"Head there and I'll give you directions."

No asking him if Ronnie was at home, they were probably still in a state of war. Ronnie had dumped Noah for Jim the Hacker, which seemed insane to Clara. All part of life's rich tapestry as they say. Personally, Clara didn't care if Noah beat Jim to a pulp, but that might upset Laura.

~ ~

Brother Alberti had seen the great feathered serpent disintegrate. For once the Eye had remained focused on what he'd wanted to see. Rather alarmingly, the last person he'd seen was Niña. In view of Simon's prophetic dreams about the girl destroying parts of the London from his times; there she was.....Lying in a kitchen that looked far too modern for the time of the Medici. It might have been anywhere of course, but Alberti found it hard to relax. He'd seen too many alarming prophecies turn out to be true. He hadn't eaten or slept and the following morning, he was still at his desk, staring at the Eye of Solomon.

"You should eat." Said one of his guards.

"Later, I'll eat later." He'd replied. "Now leave me, I have work to do."

He hadn't worked of course; he'd carried on looking at the Eye. Could he still use it to track Niña ? He had no idea, but thought the attempt was worth a small amount of his blood. Alberti had a blade aimed at his finger, when the woman in a lilac robe did the impossible, again. There she was, inside his impregnable vortex room.

"No, the Eye will no longer work for you." She said.

She seemed to move without walking.

"I need just one more look." He said. "The new young vampire may be in the wrong timeline."

No good, she had the Eye in her hands and was obviously going to take it away. Alberti had known though, he had been told. The Eye was only ever going to be his on a short term loan.

"I can tell you Niña is where she shouldn't be." Said the minion. "None of us took her there, yet there she is and.....likely to remain. It's very strange, almost....Incomprehensible."

"Will she destroy that timeline ?" Asked Alberti.

"There is so much work to.....But that is a possibility. How is she there ? A thousand of us can't undo what we never did. It's....."

"Incomprehensible." Said Alberti.

"Another of the Gods, interfering.....Though you never heard me say that." Said the minion.

"We did win though, didn't we ?" He asked. "I saw Q'uq'umatz become nothing but dust, until even the dust became nothing at all."

She was holding the Eye, as if making sure he couldn't grab it. He'd seen many of the minions, but never before had one of them looked worried, bordering on terrified.

“The serpent is dead, this world will survive.” She said. “Niña being where she is though, that may well be a consequence, a potentially catastrophic consequence. There were others, but they’re all quite minor. There is the gravity adjustment, but you have no need to know that.....”

“Tell me.....Please, tell me ?” Asked Alberti.

“Really, it will be a problem if you know.” Said the minion. “Like every other human, you’re part of the construct, a machine if you prefer, part of this reality. Once I tell you, something you now think to be ordinary, will seem strange and bizarre.”

“I can cope with that.....Please tell me ?”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes..... I’m probably one of the few people who could handle the impossible.”

“Very well....Take a book off your desk, any book. Then drop it somewhere away from your desk.”

“Is that it ?”

“Do it, Drefan Alberti.....Then you will never be quite the same.”

He picked up a long and very boring book on ecumenical matters in a tiny offshoot of his order. A very dry and tedious work, that was also rather heavy. Alberti turned to his right and let go of the book. It fell towards the ground, before swerving off at the last minute, just above the floor. Just as with anything else dropped close to his desk, it landed on the edge of his desk, with a loud thump.

“Nothing strange there.” Said Alberti.

“But.....You are part of the machine.” Said the minion. “I can show you a true memory from before the change. It will change you, your perception of reality. You’ll begin to question....Everything.”

“Show me....For better or worse, please show me.”

He saw many memories, of things falling and hitting the ground. It was insane, an abomination of natural laws. After he’d seen a few objects hit the ground, his mind began to accept that what he was seeing, had once been normal.

“Enough.....I understand, though I wish I didn’t.” He said.

“There were a few other minor consequences.....If you’d like to know about them ?”

“No....Take your damned Eye and go.” Said Alberti.

“Sorry.....I did warn you.”

His whole life had been about understanding the parts of reality, that most didn’t even comprehend. Rules were always rules though, no matter where you were. Only he now knew they weren’t the same and could be changed....Almost at a whim. There was no order, just a thin veneer of order over the chaos beneath. Alberti placed his blade against his throat and came close to opening up his arteries. No.....If anyone could cope with what he now knew, it was him. He did wish though.....That he’d never asked the question.

~ ~

Niña had been left in Liz’s spare bedroom, so that Liz and Laura could yell at each other in the lounge. Of course, her vampire hearing meant that although not every word was clear, she knew the gist of what was going on. Laura thought Liz hadn’t done enough to help her fight the great serpent. Liz was yelling because Brendan had been close to death and Laura hadn’t helped him. It was all very loud, but Niña wasn’t feeling much in the way of genuine anger. Two old friends who were both glad the other had lived and that Q’uq’umatz was gone. The argument was really about tension after a battle where they might all have died. Post-traumatic stress disorder according to Simon, though that had been about a different fight in a different time. Liz and Laura would eventually hug, but they needed to yell for a while longer.

“I hope they’re not arguing about me.” Said Brendan.

Brendan didn't look that good, but Niña's senses were telling her he'd live. He'd been so close to death that some might say his essence had already begun to move on. He'd already crossed the abyss once before, she could tell. Twice pulled back.....There would be consequences, but Liz had to know that. Niña shuffled her chair forward and held Brendan's hand. She didn't really know him, yet it felt the right thing to do.

"Don't worry, they're still friends.....They'll be hugging soon." She said. "They just need to let out the tension, before they can relax."

"You pick things up fast."

"So I've been told.....How are you feeling, Brendan ? Everyone was worried about you."

"I've been better. Laura told us you know, Tim and me. She said we shouldn't be there. Not a place for normal fragile humans. We were so determined though and I think we helped.....How is Tim ?"

It was a miracle they were alive, both Brendan and Tim. If she'd been Laura, she'd have locked Tim up somewhere until it was all over. Respecting the wishes of a loved one mattered, Niña had learned that one. But not if it meant them dying.

"Tim has a few holes in him, but not anywhere essential." She said. "Mabina will patch him up.....Good as new."

"Great.....And you.....Do you still have the ability to throw things through the air ?"

Did she ? Niña had assumed that was a one-time thing, caused by being in the land of dreams. The idea that it might be permanent, was exciting.

"I don't know, Brendan.....Let's see."

Not either of the two ceramic dogs on the windowsill, they looked expensive. She might be about to break something, so it was best to experiment on something ordinary and inexpensive. Brendan's cup was empty and it didn't look special in any way. Niña stretched out her hand and imagined closing her fingers around the cup.

"I can feel it.....I can really feel it." She said.

Up it came from the bedside cabinet. Feeling confident, she sent the cup towards Brendan and placed it in his hand.

"Wow, you can still do it.....That could be useful. Are you staying here for a while ?" Asked Brendan.

"I'm not sure....Simon needs me in Leptis Magna, but I'd like to get to know everyone here. It probably isn't my decision, but I'd like to stay here, for a while. Though....I have no money here."

"I can't see them letting you starve." Said Brendan.

The shouting had stopped; the fighting friends had probably reached the hugging stage. Niña knew why Simon was scared about her being in Clara's timeline; she'd seen all of his memories on Malta. Was that really her though ? Niña didn't feel like that crazy version of herself, who delighted in death and destruction for its own sake. Liz entered the room and smiled at her.

"Laura had somewhere to be, but she'll be back later." Said Liz. "I was going to order pizza....Are you hungry, Niña."

"Oh yes, Simon says I have hollow legs.....I'm always hungry."

~

~

Simon had no memory of sleeping, or leaving the realm of dreams. One moment he was watching the death of a God and the next, he was stood near a very battered looking Giovanni. Judging by his own aches and pains, he probably looked worse than his old friend. They were on the beach near Leptis Magna, with the ancient city not that far away.

"Did we win ?" Asked Giovanni.

“Yes, Laura slew the great serpent. No fanfare though, no statues of her in prominent places. The only people who will know about it will be us.....And a few special friends.”

“Did that dragon survive ?.....He knew how to fight.”

“Yes, I believe he still lives.....Now, I need to wash off all this blood and dirt.” Said Simon.

Undressing quickly meant pulling scabs from wounds yet to heal. By the time Simon was waist deep in the ocean, he was surrounded by light crimson water. It felt good though, to let the stinging salt water, get to where he'd been hurt. Giovanni wasn't far away, rubbing at anywhere he thought needed cleaning.

“Never again, old friend.....Never again.” yelled Giovanni. “We're both getting too old to fight Gods and their demons.”

“I agree.....Until we get bored with a quiet life.” Said Simon.

“Not me, I'm going to pack away my blades when we get back to Florence.”

“Then you'll starve.” Yelled Simon. “Fighting for the Medici is how we earn a crust.”

They were back on the beach, pulling on their filthy clothes, when Giovanni asked the obvious.

“No Niña with us.....Do you think she survived ?”

“She was alive when the serpent died.....She's probably with Juliana.” Said Simon.

“Yes, you're probably right, Simon. That girl seems indestructible.”

It was a relief to see their camp was intact, as soon as they entered Leptis Magna. There were a few dots moving around, who were obviously their friends and guards. Even a few children from the tribal camp were there, which was good news. Whatever had happened after he'd left the city, the creatures of darkness and chaos, hadn't won.

“It looks as though.....nothing happened here.” Said Giovanni

Normally Giovanni found it hard to take a hint, but he wandered away to give them privacy, as Juliana threw herself into his arms. They kissed for a very long time, before she spoke.

“It was not knowing, if you'd ever be back.” Said Juliana.

“I'm back now.....Is Niña with you ?” He asked.

“No, but I wouldn't worry.....She seems indestructible.”

“Everyone says that.....I need clean clothes, talk to me while I change.” He said.

Their quarters had a little privacy, enough to allow them to kiss and touch while he changed.

Giovanni was right, it did all seem so normal, as if nothing had happened in Leptis Magna. Juliana made it all seem far less idyllic by telling him about the death of her maid and the guards who she'd seen buried.

“Without Rice, if he hadn't been here.....We need to reward him in some way.” Said Juliana.

“I'll arrange that when we're back in Florence.”

Up until that moment, Simon had been wondering what to do next. Wait for Niña of course, their strange girl child was certain to turn up. Then though.....As he spoke to Juliana his destiny seemed clear again. It was as if Juliana could read his mind, or at the very least, read his mood.

“Where do we go next ?” She asked.

“There is still someone coming here, an entity I need to see.” Said Simon. “Niña should be here by then. Then we go back to Florence to get your poor face healed properly. After that.....”

“Yes, Simon.....After that.....Stop teasing.” Said Juliana.

“I'm not teasing and what Laura has just achieved is momentous. My own destiny is still in front of me though, and Leptis Magna merely one of many stepping stones on that journey. I have many journeys to make, Juliana. Will you stay with me as I search for my true destiny ?”

“Of course I will.”



~ ~

Liz had left Niña to look after Brendan; they seemed to getting on like a niece and her favourite uncle. He'd only need the occasional drink and someone to watch the TV with him. Anything more complicated, including helping him to the bathroom, could wait until she returned. Liz had no intention of spending long in Duat, The Underworld, but there was no putting it off.

"Why.....Why did I form a bond with that monster ?" She muttered.

Only Karkengara wasn't a monster and she knew it. He was a dragon deity, who'd asked for a few sacrifices; was that unreasonable ? Seen from his point of view, it wasn't. A few hundred sacrifices, all of them intelligent creatures. He'd carried out his part of the deal; Laura couldn't have beaten the serpent if the bringer of fire hadn't weakened him. Now Liz was about to renege of their deal.

Actually she was going to try and persuade the dragon to release her from the deal. Reneging was impossible; she was a servant of the Old Gods. Any deal Liz agreed was effectively entered into on behalf of the Gods and had to be honoured. If not.....Liz had heard how unpleasant Horus could be, if he felt one of his servants had let him down.

"To think, I once liked to come here." She mumbled.

Uundenvelt, the place where the Last Artisan had worked. He'd been the last living person to live in the ruined city; its streets were now quiet and dark. Liz made her way to the temple where she'd first encountered Karkengara. Maybe a temple to him, though that wasn't certain. He had a reputation for being a little creative when it came to his own history. The temple right in front of her, might well have been erected as a place to honour far older deities.

"You're here.....I can feel your presence old friend." She yelled.

"I am here, I will always return to this place." Said the dragon.

If he insisted, she would collect his hundreds of sacrifices. All of them human, the only way to be sure there'd be records on them. All of them had to be criminals, preferably murderers, but all of them had to deserve a painful death. Did anyone deserve to die ? Was it her decision to make ? Liz knew she was about to commit a terrible act, but there was no way to avoid the deal.

"Are you fit and well now, dragon ?" She asked.

"Yes.....If you're hinting I owe you my life, I'll admit it." Said Karkengara. "Your healing skills saved me."

"And an immortal life must be worth many mortal lives." She said. "Several hundred at the very least."

Karkengara leant forward and nuzzled at her face with his warm breath. He was her friend and always would be, even if he insisted on her gathering hundreds of human sacrifices.

"You really wish to be released from our deal ?" Asked the dragon.

"Yes, it matters to me.....More than I'd like to admit."

"Then I will release you....I require no sacrifices from you."

"Thank you." She said.

She'd reached the entrance to the temple, when she heard him calling to her.

"No more deals, but if you need my help.....Please call for me." Said Karkengara.

"Thank you, I will."

~ ~

When Laura destroyed a God, Akiva was still fighting the spiders. Brendan was on the ground after being struck by one of the myrmidons who'd turned against them. A truly massive blow with a war axe, it seemed impossible for Brendan to survive such a blow. After that, everything had become

darkness. Akiva Yatsko felt as though he'd slept for a very long time. He woke to the sound of giggling.

"He's waking, that will make it easier to wash him."

He was naked, lying on golden tiles, beside a large sunken bath. Judging by the rising vapour, the bath was full of hot water. No less than three young women were using cloths to remove the blood and dirt from his body. He stretched and sat up, which didn't even slightly deter his bathers. Lots of bright eyes and giggles, though he knew the workings of the Gods well enough, to know such things can often be illusions. His bathers could be young women, or ancient minions of whatever God had decided to drag him into their realm. The gold was clue, the huge red flag. Everything around him was made of gold, from the floor tiles to the huge taps on the bath. Only the Old Gods were eccentric enough, or wealthy enough, to use pure gold in such a way.

"Where am I?" He asked. "Who brought me here?"

"Keep still, let us do our work.....He wishes to see you."

"Who?"

No good, just more giggling as they used the cloths on him with some vigour. Once the worst of the filth had been removed, they prodded him in the direction of the bath. Strong for what they appeared to be. Akiva had already decided they were minions of one of the Old Gods. Which one though.....Who wanted to see him?

"Out now.....You need to be oiled and dressed.....Hurry!"

Another minion arrived with a flask of scented oil, which was liberally wiped over just about every part of his body. Although Akiva hated to admit it, being clean and smelling nice was a pleasant experience after the blood and filth of battle.

"Put these on.....Hurry."

Clothes fit for a King, even though they looked absurdly old fashioned. There was even a flat turban kind of headwear that they insisted on winding around his head. No mirror to see himself, though Akiva was sure he looked ridiculous.

"Couldn't I wear normal clothes?" He asked. "Or at least something less.....Flashy."

"Shushhh.....He expects you to be clean, oiled and well dressed."

More giggling, he'd never known minions with such a love of giggling. They pulled and adjusted until they seemed happy with the way he looked. Akiva was then taken through a door in the bathing chamber and into a large throne room. He recognised the thrones, before he recognised the God sat on one of them. Horus, he should have known it would be him. Probably wanting to hear all about Laura's bravery in the fight against Q'uq'umatz. Akiva found it annoying, that Horus doted so much on the female vampire.

"Come, sit before me." Said Horus.

No chair, Horus pointed at the floor and Akiva sat on the golden tiles. Horus looked at him for a while, out of birdlike eyes. Not for the first time, Akiva wondered if he'd served his purpose and Horus was about to give him an unpleasant death.

"I have need of you Akiva." Said Horus. "Will you serve me once again?"

There was no saying no of course, unless he liked the idea of dying slowly, while suffering unimaginable amounts of pain.

"Yes of course....It would be an honour." Said Akiva.

"Good.....Good...I will explain the task I require of you."

~ ~

~ The End ~

Simon's search for the great secret will continue in the next book and probably the book after that. Don't worry; every vampire book will have its own stand-alone goals and exciting adventures. The next vampire book will be posted in 2024, after something different. We're going back to the rifts and The City of the Lost God. Lots of sword and sorcery in a world where many consider evisceration to be an art form.....

What ? Is Clara with child ? You'll need to read the next book to find out.

~ ~

© Ed Cowling ~ June 2023