

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 15 – The Gift

**“Do I at least get to choose who we feed on ?” Asked Daniel.**

**“No, I choose.....It’s the most important part of the night. No more drunk guys who look like wife beaters and child neglecters, Daniel. We’re vampires, not social services.”**

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As far as Daniel could recall, he’d never visited South Croydon before. Mabina had parked her Lexus in a street near South Croydon Bus Garage. It seemed she’d hunted there before, but wasn’t an expert on the area.

“We hunt here and then leave it at least a year or two, before hunting here again.” She’d said.

Crunden Road looked like typical suburbia, a street of tidy terraced houses, with no parking restrictions once they were away from the main road. A rainy night, though Mabina had told him that was a good thing. Daniel viewed persistent rain as a bad thing, but Mabina saw it as a hunter’s rain.

“No idle gawpers on the streets.” She’d said. “Everyone has a reason to be outside, somewhere they have to be. They’ll be so intent on getting out of the rain, that natural caution will be forgotten.”

They walked towards Selsdon Road, where Mabina had hunted a few years before. A young man on that occasion, he’d been drunk and his blood had tasted of rum. Mabina was full of such detailed memories, most of them irrelevant.

“You said I’d love this.” Said Daniel. “I’m wet and fed up.....I already hate South Croydon and we’ve only just arrived.”

“Gift it a fair chance.” Said Mabina. “There’s a goods yard up ahead, a kind of small business park. All sorts of weird goings on there at night, from what I remember.”

“Do I at least get to choose who we feed on ?” Asked Daniel.

“No, I choose.....It’s the most important part of the night. No more drunk guys who look like wife beaters and child neglecters, Daniel. We’re vampires, not social services.”

The entrance was just before a railway bridge crossed the road. A goods yard once, though it was now home to a large number of small businesses. Judging by the signs, a lot of them were involved in car maintenance and spares. The street lighting was almost non-existent. Just a few lights on the walls of some of the more permanent looking buildings. Daniel was no expert on what were, or weren’t, bad areas. To him though, that part of South Croydon, looked pretty seedy.

“Just the sort of place working girls bring their clients.” Said Mabina.

“So, we’re feeding on a prostitute ?” Asked Daniel.

“Or.....We may leave them to their chosen profession and see who else is around.”

Fences and locked gates forced their direction on them. Always over to the right, though there were a few more lights over there. No loading or unloading said the sign and there they were, standing right under the light. To Daniel they were just two shifty looking men, but Mabina knew why they were there.

“Drugs, Daniel.....I’d have guaranteed we’d find a dealer and his muscle in a place like this. The rain will have kept some of his customers indoors. Follow my lead.....Use your fangs on his minder when I give the word.”

Mabina had a warped sense of humour and a wicked streak, even for a Nosferatu. Daniel had been dreading her choice for them to feed on. He’d been expecting her to choose a teenage prostitute, or a young couple making out in the back of a car. Drug dealers was a relief, though he accepted his own hypocrisy. Simon and Clara had both been involved with designer drugs, yet he never held it against either of them. Morality changed with how close you were to someone; he’d been around for enough centuries to have learned that.

“Thank you, Mabina.” He said. “I’ll be alright with a couple of drug dealers.”

“I thought you might be.”

Whoever the company were, who discouraged loading in front of their gate, or unloading. They had too many vans to fit inside their yard. Two old and grubby transit vans had been left outside in the road, with the rain glinting off the dirty paintwork and rust. The drug dealer and his colleague were right in front of the gates, probably their usual spot.

“We take them behind the van furthest from the gate.” Muttered Mabina.

Daniel knew Mabina had once bought various drugs for recreational use, after her husband had died. Strange to think of a vampire having deep feelings of loss, but Mabina had needed illegal medication of one kind or another, for quite some time. She knew the right words, the vocabulary of street traded drugs. Despite insisting that he’d never really get a buzz out of the hunt, Daniel was beginning to enjoy himself. Stalking drug dealers was a lot more fun than ambushing drunks in the back streets of Aberdeen.

“Now !” Yelled Mabina.

The bit Daniel was always worried about. The outcome was certain of course, a human being hunted for a vampire’s meal, would always die. It was the risk of it taking a while, of it looking like a common street brawl. The idea of that happening embarrassed Daniel. Yet, when Mabina used her fangs on the dealer, Daniel used his on the younger man, the minder. It was all so quick, over in seconds. Daniel carried the young man behind the old transit van. Mabina followed, dragging the dealer through the mud and dirt. There was enough room, just, between the metal fence and the side of the van.

“Clean, Daniel.....We need to get home afterwards, so no covering your shirt with blood. Bite deep and feed carefully. Once we’re finished, I’ll use a blade on their throats. Just another two knife killings for the police to investigate.”

He usually liked to pull his kills to the ground, but it was wet and muddy. Daniel leant on the metal fence and held onto the tall and muscular young man. He bit cleanly and drank slowly. Almost instantly, there was the low-level euphoria that would last for hours. The fence felt comfortable, as though it had been covered in cushions. Everything felt comfortable, even the rain against his cheek felt.....Wonderful. Once he felt the heartbeat slow to next to nothing, Daniel let the body drop to the ground. He carried on leaning on that wonderfully comfortable fence. Sex with Gwen was pretty fantastic, but feeding.....That was even better than great sex.

“Well.....Did you enjoy it ?” Asked Mabina.

“That was.....Wonderful.” He said. “You were right, we have to do it all again, and again.”

“When you’re able, go through the pockets of your guy.” Said Mabina. “Take anything remotely useful or valuable. The police aren’t going to break into a sweat investigating the death of a drug dealer, who’s been killed and robbed.”

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Donna didn't mind being left on her own, but she'd been born with far too much curiosity. Or at least that was what her mother always said, and her two brothers and three sisters. Her father often said she was an awkward girl, but pretty enough to get a husband; if she wasn't too fussy. Simon had told her to stay with the diggers, while he and Niña dealt with something important in the catacombs. The diggers were all male and tended to ignore her. Their foreman had made sure she had something to drink, but other than that, she might as well have been invisible. She'd been sitting on the back of an open cart for over an hour, when she was sure there was a scream. A long way off and it might have been a wild creature, though she was fairly sure it was a woman's scream. Of course, being bored and a little lonely, did come into her decision to investigate the sound. An excuse was needed to leave the diggers' camp, once Simon and Niña had asked to be alone in the catacombs. Donna said she needed a little privacy to relieve herself.

"Don't wander too far." Said the foreman. "And stay well away from the catacombs."

A few of the diggers had begun to wear a crucifix outside their clothing. A few had heard things, usually the voices of long dead relatives. They needed little encouragement to remain in their camp. Donna was sure the foreman knew more than he was willing to talk about. He was being paid well; everyone knew that. Paid well enough to guarantee his loyalty to Simon.

"She shouldn't leave the camp." Someone muttered.

"Call of nature." Said the foreman.

Dusk, the time-of-day beloved by burglars and pick pockets. Enough light to see, but not enough to see details. Easy to get confused at dusk. Donna picked up a lamp before heading away from the catacombs. A short way into the trees and she swung around, travelling back towards the reason the diggers were all suddenly deeply religious. The main entrance to what Simon called the necropolis, was in the cathedral, through a door in a crypt. No one used that door, or so one of the house servants had told her. The diggers had removed the door and gates from a rear entrance, that went straight into the catacombs. The door was laying flat on the ground, with the gates propped open. The mutterings of superstitious diggers had begun to affect her judgement, she knew that.

"That entrance.....It looks like a gate to hell itself." She muttered.

No light in the entrance chamber, apart from the oil lamp she carried. It was ridiculous to be there and she had no idea why she'd decided to ignore all the warnings. There had been something about that voice, the female voice she'd heard scream. It had sounded terrified, desperate and.....It hadn't sounded human.

"Well....I've come this far." She mumbled.

The scream came as Donna walked along the passage, the only passage away from the entrance chamber. A loud scream, her mind felt as though an angry wind was blowing through it. For a fraction of a second, she saw her dead grandmother in front of her.

"Go back Donna.....Go back, evil lurks in this place." Said the apparition.

Her entire family were religious, believers in the almighty. Donna really believed though, not just when she took the sacrament on Sunday morning. The vision of her grandmother faded, but Donna knew it had been real. Someone who loved her, had crossed back into the world of the living, to save her from.....The scream though, it had sounded so desperate.

"I will carry on." She mumbled.

Donna put her hand inside her blouse and briefly held the small cross her mother had given her. It helped calm her, slowing her breathing and.....It seemed to clear cobwebs from her mind. Three

passageway choices became just one and it was leading towards where the scream had come from.

By the time she came to another choice of passage to follow, she heard Simon shouting.

“Lies.....All lies, how can you be Samnuha ? She’s been dead for at least three millennia.”

“The aegis is yours Simon.....You know that is true.”

A female voice, but not a human female. Donna entered an area of broken rocks and mayhem.

There was more light from several lamps, but it was still difficult to see details. Simon was there, holding a sword in his right hand. Niña was against the far wall, looking terrified. The creature between them was female, though Donna knew she’d never, ever been human. A naked female form, but from somewhere deep inside, came the knowledge of what was stood there. Its face might have been pretty, if it hadn’t been caked in filth.

“Djinn.....You’re a Djinn.” Yelled Donna.

All three of them turned to look at her, though only the Djinn worried her. A creature created by the smokeless flames, if the legends were correct. Besides being naked and filthy, the Djinn had red eyes, that seemed to glow with an inner light.

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The holding cells were deep underground. Liz had noticed that many cultures on many worlds, used the lowest parts of their public buildings, to keep prisoners of one kind or another. Part of it was probably to make escape as difficult as possible. Then there was the psychological effect on the prisoners. Spending a long time in a dank, dark dungeon had to make the closed mouthed, more talkative. Mainly though, Liz thought the deep dungeons were all about keeping the stench away from the streets. Not just the odour of unwashed bodies, or the stink of excreta and urine. Liz picked up the unmistakable perfume of a recent evisceration. She’d heard it likened to the smell of almonds. Correct, if the almonds had been basted in shit and blood for a month. The cells were unpleasant in the extreme. Just where the killers for hire deserved to be. Akiva was still spluttering from the stench, though she’d become used it by the time they’d reached the bottom level of the building.

“Oh, these cells are disgusting.” Said Akiva. “Even career criminals deserve better than a prison like this.”

“It’s not a prison, we’re in the depths of a temple.” Said Liz. “Just about every building in Aten, is a temple of some kind.”

“Temple of the disembowelled.” Muttered Karkengara.

The dragon deity was doing a mixture of visible in wide areas, but invisible in places like winding, narrow stairs. His voice too, was sometimes for her ears only, but sometimes heard by everyone. It was weird, but it worked. The priests certainly coped with his various diverging realities, though a few kept well away from him. Liz was looking forward to seeing how the huge dragon, coped with prisoners in a tiny cell.

“They’re in here.” Said the jailer. “There were four of them, until the incident of gross disrespect. Now there are only two of them.”

“What did they do to show gross disrespect ?” Asked Akiva.

Liz was glad he’d asked; it might help them all avoid a similar fate.

“They spat at a priest.....Such a thing is almost unknown.” Said the jailer. “Their executions were immediate and suitably painful.”

Akiva gave her a half smile that said don’t disrespect the priests, without actually saying it. The cell where the two surviving mercenaries were being kept, was tiny. Karkengara managed to get most of

his head into the cell, but none of his body. The mercenaries looked bruised and battered, though strangely unperturbed by sharing their cell with the head of a dragon.

"I'm told you speak the language of Aten." Said Liz.

One of them nodded at her.

"Someone ordered the death of The Last Artisan." Said the dragon. "He was the last living being in Uundenvelt. Someone paid your people to assassinate him. We want to know who?"

"We never betray a client."

The voice was gruff, but not unpleasant.

"Nonsense, I know your kind." Said the dragon. "Sell your own mothers for the price of a beer. I respected the Artisan, as did my companion. There are worse places to spend a few years, than an Aten jail.....If you get my drift?"

"You killed someone we liked." Said Liz.

Were they worried about listening devices? The jailer was outside the cell, yet there had to be a reason for it. The closest mercenary got inside her personal space, though he didn't speak quietly. He spoke perfect English, with a hint of Bermondsey in the accent.

"Get us out of here and we'll tell you anything you want to know."

English startled her, but she had first seen the mercs in London. It seemed out of place though, the language of another world. Liz looked at the dragon, who simply nodded. Akiva would be heading for home anyway, by some means. Liz still asked him.

"Are you going to help Laura now?" She asked.

"Yes, that was the plan."

"Best go now then."

Akiva vanished in a small purple flash, leaving just her and the dragon with the mercs. Liz was about to seriously annoy the people of the Aten. A pity, as she'd been hoping to look around some of their temples.

"Alright, I'll get you out of here, but I'll want answers." She said.

"Go back on the deal.....And I'll feast on your entrails." Said Karkengara.

"Trust me.....He means it." Added Liz.

"We'll talk, Ivo already sold his mother to a Dinka fighter."

"For less than the price of a beer." Said Ivo.

Liz ran her hand over the dragon's snout, it helped him follow her into the gaps between worlds.

There was a little vortex of wind and the cell was empty.

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Evangeline Smart was Evie to her friends and Mrs Smart to anyone else not at least ten years older than she was. Retired many years ago and prone to spontaneous napping, but she was far from being the confused old lady a lot of people considered her to be. She knew Patsy, her daughter, was upset that Simon didn't come around anymore, even though Patsy refused to talk about it.

"What do you see out there?" She asked Zeus, her cat. "All I see is the boy next door, fiddling with his motorbike."

Evie knew her cat was a little out of the ordinary. Zeus had been a present from Mabina, one of her daughter's friends. A tiny black and white kitten to replace poor Timothy, who'd died of old age at about sixteen, or maybe seventeen. Mabina had said a few strange things about Zeus protecting her, when he was fully grown. Evie opened the lounge curtains to get a good look at her front garden.

"See.....Silly cat." She said. "No one out there, so stop growling."

There had been a burglar once and Zeus had dealt with him. Actually, Simon killed the burglar, though her daughter still thought she didn't know that. Evie was far sharper than most thought, including her family. Zeus had terrified the burglar by growing to ten times his usual size and playing with him, the way an ordinary cat worries a mouse. The burglar became a broken thing, hiding in a corner. Simon killing him was probably an act of mercy. At the moment, her loving bundle of fur, had grown to twice his usual size and was growling, a deep threatening growl.

"Just don't scare the neighbours." Evie muttered.

Zeus had terrified a neighbour's yappy dog. The dreadful thing had deserved it for trying to bully Zeus. Her cat could also glow a little, though that was rare. It was happening now though, a golden glow that surrounded him. Evie closed the curtain.

"Please yourself, but there's nothing out there."

Evie watched TV, as her cat grew to about seven feet long. He put his front paws up on the windowsill and growled. As he looked at the closed curtains, Zeus glowed. A golden glow that lit up the room. Evie was worried about the neighbours hearing him, though she was never scared of her pet. Zeus was her guardian, there to keep her safe. If another burglar entered the house, he'd deal with them. Evie would look away next time though. Halfway through the late news, Zeus shrank back to his normal size. He came to join her, curling up on her lap and purring. Evie stroked her cat and rubbed his ears, which he liked, a lot.

"Good boy." She muttered.

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Simon didn't enjoy manual labour, especially when it left him covered in dirt and lumps of stone. He swung a pick at the wall, while Niña used a shovel to move the resulting debris. She was filthy too, though strangely happy. A girl who liked to be useful and would do just about anything to feel she was contributing something, anything. A less scrupulous person than he, might have abused that. Simon was just happy that Niña had a smile on her face.

"Stop." Said Niña.

Niña put her forehead against the wall and closed her eyes. It was the third time she'd done it, they had to be almost through to where the creature was imprisoned. She needed quiet, so Simon held his breath while she concentrated.

"Oh, I feel its pain.....Its anguish." Said Niña. "We're so close, three more hits with the pick....It knows we're coming, Simon."

"Any idea what it is?" Asked Simon.

"No idea at all, not yet."

Maybe he was using more strength, but it only took two more hits with the pick. Simon used his bare hands to pull at the rubble. A hand from the other side of the hole touched his. A cold hand, as cold as a corpse. The hand would have looked human, if it hadn't had six fingers.

"Don't stop.....We have to get her out." Said Niña.

Her.....When Simon looked again, there was the hint of a face in the darkness, a female face. Simon used his hands like spades, pulling away a pile of rock fragments. Vampires aren't provided with a bestiary as part of being turned, though Simon knew what he was helping climb out of its prison. A Djinn, a fairly ancient one if she'd been entombed for several millennia. Simon had met a few over the centuries. Sometimes indifferent to him, sometimes foes. One in Jerusalem had left Clara with a few nasty bruises and it had managed to escape unscathed. An angry Djinn had to be taken seriously, but the female he was helping, seemed more happy than angry.

"You.....I have been waiting so long." Said the Djinn. "My name is Samnuha and I have been waiting over three thousand years to meet you."

"You're not her, I know the last of her descendants." Said Simon.

"I am Samnuha and it was my destiny to keep the aegis in my care."

"Lies.....All lies, how can you be Samnuha ? She's been dead for at least three millennia." Shouted Simon.

"The aegis is yours Simon.....You know that is true."

Simon only noticed Donna because of her lamp. Grown men, diggers, had jumped at the opportunity to leave the catacombs. Nearly all of them claimed to have experienced something that wasn't right. A voice of a loved one, a hideous creature on one occasion. Yet there was Donna, smiling at him and holding her oil lamp.

"Djinn.....You're a Djinn." Yelled Donna.

"Of course I am.....Stupid child." Said the Djinn. "Leave this place, or suffer my wrath."

"No.....Let her stay." Said Simon. "All of my diggers and their foreman are cowards. Donna has come here on her own, unarmed from what I can see. She may be useful.....She's earned the right to stand among us."

"I have a knife.....A small one." Said Donna.

"Ahhh....A worthy adversary." Said the Djinn. "Come here then, show yourself."

Donna veered towards Niña, which was understandable. She came though, with no hesitation.

Simon had one of his feelings, or hunches, or whatever. He didn't know how he knew, but Donna had to be there, it was important.

"There was talk of a gift." Said Niña.

"Yes, the Aegis of Samnuha." Said the Djinn. "Mine to give to whoever I think worthy, though ancient powers have insisted it should go to Simon. Not that I knew a name then, but I recognise that like me.....Simon is cursed by prophecy."

"What does the aegis do ?" Asked Simon.

"Where is it.....Our new friend is carrying nothing, not even clothing." Said Niña.

"It's here.....The Djinn is the Aegis." Said Donna.

It all made sense to Simon, as Donna said those words. The snake under his skin woke up, tearing through his skin to be free. Despite the pain, Simon knew, that too.....Needed to happen. He remembered everything about the Aegis of Samnuha, despite having no recollection of reading, or hearing anything about it. The aegis was the first major gift on his quest. Perhaps a curse too, but mainly a gift.

"Let the serpent have its way, Simon Atherton." Said the Djinn.

"Are you sure ?" Asked Simon.

"No, but it has to be done."

Simon grabbed the serpent by its neck and placed it on the Djinn's right forearm. It instantly burrowed into her flesh, causing her to scream out.

"I'm.....Sorry." Said Simon.

The screaming seemed to have an echo, until they came out of the walls. Dozens, hundreds of shrieking apparitions. Some looked like angels, some like hideous gargoyles. None tried to harm them. They all just shrieked for the Djinn, in a strange otherworldly eulogy.

"She's dying." Said Niña.

"It is her destiny." Said Donna.

The Djinn became a dry husk, yet her lungs still provided enough air for her to scream. The husk became a heap of dust on the floor, which eventually.....Became a grubby piece of clothing. Simon moved to pick it up.

“No, let me.....It knows me.” Said Donna.

Donna’s mouth moved, yet the voice was the Djinn’s. Were they both in there, living in the same body ? Simon was unsure, his memories weren’t perfect. He did know that the grubby jacket Donna was handing to him, was the Aegis of Samnuha. It changed as he handled it, becoming a fine mesh, like chain mail constructed out of fine golden threads. As for the shrieking apparitions.....There was no longer any sign of them.

“What does the aegis do ?” Asked Niña.

“Protection, Simon is now almost indestructible.” Said Donna. “Don’t abuse that part of the gift, or the ancient powers may punish you. Mainly though.....The Aegis is knowledge, the combined memories of thousands of wise men and women. Everyone who ever looked for the great secret.....Their knowledge is held within those golden threads.”

“I feel it.....I know where to go next.” Said Simon.

“Just a moment.....How does Donna know all this ?” Asked Niña. “She’s just my companion, scared of her own shadow when we left Livorno harbour. Now she’s a holy woman, who knows everything. What the hell, Simon.....Explain it.”

“Nothing left to.....Explain.” Said Donna.

She too died, becoming a small pile of dust on the floor. With the death of Donna, the Djinn died too. Simon felt the deaths were a waste, but it had all been foretold a very long time ago. There was Donna’s death to explain to her uncle, but she’d foolishly gone where sensible girls of her age, would have avoided. The snake appeared from the dust on the floor. It went back under the skin on his arm, healing the flesh as it went.

“I.....I’m so confused Simon.” Said Niña. “I saw it all happen, but I don’t understand it. Is Donna dead.....I mean really, not coming back....Dead ?”

“Yes, she is.....And the Djinn, though I still doubt if she was really Samnuha.”

“What happens now ?” Asked Niña. “What are we going to tell Giuseppe ?”

“Nothing, we explain nothing.” Said Simon. “We’re leaving Syracuse and going home. Back to Florence my dear Niña. From there.....I need to talk to Alberti about that.”

It wasn’t the time to talk about it. Simon felt different though, since he’d been given the aegis. It was as if something he couldn’t quite see on a dark night, had suddenly been revealed. He was changing, growing, in ways.....It was too soon to tell. Once he felt calmer, he would talk events over with Niña.

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Patsy Smart watched Zeus as he walked up and down, always looking at the back door. The cat was pacing, the way she sometimes had before taking exams. His look was so intense, as though something dreadful was in the back garden. Patsy moved the net curtains and looked outside.

“Just a few pigeons out there, mum.” She said. “Has he been like this for long.”

“A couple of weeks. He’ll stop soon, he always calms down.” Said Evie.

Patsy trusted the cat’s instincts, but it was a sunny day and there was nothing in the back garden. A few pigeons, her mum insisted on feeding them, despite the neighbours moaning. Unless something invisible was stalking her mum, the garden was empty.

“I’ll have a quick look in the garden.” Said Patsy.

The business with the gold snake was still in her mind and Patsy had never believed in coincidences. On the other hand, it would take something with incredible strength to get past Zeus. Her mum was



safe, or as safe as she was likely to be anywhere else. No point in upsetting her by putting her in a hotel for a while. Evie loved her house, her home.

“Come on, you can come with me, Zeus.” Patsy muttered.

The back door was only locked at night, which was an obvious thing to change. The lock was years old and half the neighbours seemed to have a key to Evie’s back door. Zeus became calm as she picked him up and walked out into the very ordinary North London garden. He even purred as she ruffled his fur.

“Anything ?” Her mum asked, from the back door.

“No.”

Nothing at all and even the pigeons had flown away. The neighbours were the same as they’d been for years and her mum rarely saw them. A few numbers to call in an emergency, but for the most part her mum rarely saw anyone to talk to over the garden fence. Of course, Zeus going for the neighbour’s yappy dog, hadn’t gone down well. No neighbours in gardens on either side, or even any washing hanging on lines. It was peaceful and quiet.....As quiet as the grave. Zeus didn’t growl, but he moved his head and glared in the direction of her mum’s row of tomato plants.

“I’m going further down the garden, mum.”

“Be careful.”

Ridiculous really, it was an ordinary looking garden, in a row of terraced houses built between the wars. Very ordinary terraced houses. Patsy wondered again about the snake. Anyone to talk to about it was away somewhere, but there was the computer nerd up north somewhere. Patsy had a number for Jim Weaver and had decided to call him. He was weird, but a lot less weird since he’d been seeing Ronnie. Patsy prodded one of the tomato plants and her mum’s cat settled in her arms and purred.

“Jeezzz Zeus, are you fucking with me ?” Patsy muttered.

She wasn’t someone who saw auras, or was sensitive to things that went bump in the night. She’d slept with Simon for a very long time, without realising her boyfriend with the strangely cool skin, was a vampire. To her, the garden looked well kept, green and very, very, normal. The problem was that it would still have looked normal to her, if it had been full of invisible monsters. She went back into the house, Zeus still held in her arms.

“I think we need to get better locks put on your doors mum, back and front.”

“Did you see anything ?” Asked Evie.

“No, but there’s someone I can call.” Said Patsy. “You do realise that Zeus is a.....bit special, don’t you ?”

“I’m not silly dear, I saw what he did to the burglar.” Said Evie.

Her mum had changed since her dad had died, which was probably normal. Because Evie looked quite frail, there was a tendency for people to think she was slow on the uptake. Her mum wasn’t though, far from it.

“We’ll do the locks and I’ll call a few people.” Said Patsy. “The important thing is that Zeus will make sure you’re safe, I’m sure of it.”

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Niña couldn’t sleep, not after the things she’d witnessed in the catacombs. Simon had argued with Giuseppe about them leaving Syracuse, but no one seemed to have noticed they’d returned without Donna. For all she knew, Simon might be intending to let people think the poor girl had simply vanished. She’d liked Donna, which made her not just someone never to be fed on, it meant her life mattered, at least to her.

"Oh, my head aches." Muttered Niña.

The early hours of the morning and someone was outside, moving between the bushes. Occasionally the moonlight caught whoever it was, as they moved. Probably her imagination, but their walk. She knew that walk; it was Donna's.

"I'm probably going insane, but as I can't sleep....."

No getting dressed; she simply threw a cloak over her night time attire. No going through the house either, a jump from her first-floor bedroom, was no problem at all. There they were, showing no signs of running away as Niña approached. A little moonlight, used efficiently by her vampire eyes. It was Donna in the orchard, she was certain of it. No calling out though, until she was very close to the girl. Donna, who'd been nothing but a pile of dust, now seemed alive and well.

"Donna, it is you?" Said Niña.

"Part of me, but not all of me.....Is Donna."

The voice sounded like Donna, but different. It definitely didn't sound like the Djinn.

"Are you.....Alive?" Asked Niña.

"Oh, define alive after what you've seen? Simon, you and every other vampire, died as a human. You've become something not quite alive, nor quite dead. In the end, the whole question of what is, and isn't alive, boils down to semantics." Said Donna.

Donna would never have said that in a million years.

"You're not just Donna, is the Djinn still inside you?" Asked Niña.

"No, the Djinn has gone....Her body has become ashes, but Djinn's are older in creation than humans. Her essence may still be out there, somewhere."

"Who are you then?" Asked Niña.

"Oh, I'm Donna, but there's something else here too. I'm not sure what, but it feels friendly. I came with a warning.....You've angered Thoth by releasing the Djinn. You have to tell Simon before you reach the port at Livorno."

"I will tell him."

"Remember.....It's important. He has to know before The Mermaid reaches the jetty." Said Donna. Whatever Donna was now, appeared to be melting away, like an early morning mist.

"Will I see you again?" Asked Niña.

"Of course.....After all, I am your companion."

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Patsy had called Jim, forgetting how paranoid he was. There had been a very one-sided conversation. No mention of gold was allowed and he'd simply told her his items made of 'that material,' weren't acting up. Though as he didn't own a cat, he didn't feel qualified to say what was worrying her mum's pet.

"Sarcastic bastard." Muttered Patsy, after she'd ended the call.

To add insult to injury, he'd suggested her coming up to Cleckheaton for a long weekend. As far as Patsy knew, he was still involved with Ronnie. Not just a sarcastic bastard, but a two-timing sarcastic bastard.

"Men!" Patsy yelled, as she decided what Thai food to order.

Having her own place was wonderful, though ordering food for one still seemed a bit sad. Her mum ate like a horse, but ordering half the menu for just herself, seemed both sad and a little greedy.

"A girl has to eat." She muttered.

After ordering, her mind went to Mabina, who might know if Zeus was alright, or going a bit nuts.

Patsy had been trying to contact Mabina for a while, with no luck. There had been a message left in

reply to one of her messages. Mabina had sent a text at two in the morning, saying she was giving Daniel's education a few finishing touches. Daniel.....Were they an item now ? With no real hope of her call being answered, Patsy clicked on Mabina's number.

"Hi Patsy, been a while." Said Mabina. "Is that snake thing sorted out ?"

Patsy knew how to deal with Mabina. No getting diverted to other weird bits of conversation, or the call would end with her feeling dazed and confused. Worse.....She'd have no answer to what she'd called about.

"I'm calling about Zeus." She said.

"How is the little fella ?"

"Growling at something only he can see in my mum's garden." Said Patsy. "Glowing too, according to my mum. I've seen him pacing up and down and looking very stressed."

"Are you at your mother's house ?" Asked Mabina.

"No, I'm at home.....My new place."

"Is he growing larger as he glows ?"

"Yeah, my mum said he was as big as a man." Said Patsy.

There was a period of silence, where Mabina took a little time out to think. Telling the person on the other end of the call would have been polite.....But Mabina rarely did polite.

"Are you busy in the morning ?" Asked Mabina.

"I'll be at my job, I'm still with Hayle's."

"Can you call in sick and be at your mum's house ?"

"Yes, no problem." Said Patsy.

"I'll be there about nine.....This could be serious, Patsy."

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