

## Festina Lente

### (Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

#### Chapter 16 - Zeus

**“There was a look in her eyes, a definite hint at the darkness within. Simon was looking forward to fighting beside the girl. That would come of course, it was inevitable. Maybe they’d be fighting side by side in Leptis Magna.”**

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Making a quick decision, didn't mean she'd made a bad choice. The mercenaries had asked to be taken away from Aten and the dreadful prison cells. Liz Grant hadn't guaranteed to take them to a location that they'd like, or one that was even safe. She dropped into the underworld, dragging them with her. The dragon would follow her, she was certain of that. Liz remembered a town where something terrible had happened. An atrocity so dreadful that the entire town had dropped into the underworld. That had happened a long time ago, but the souls of the guilty still walked the streets. She chose the interior of what had once been a thriving tavern, mainly because she knew the building was largely intact.

“Where have you brought us ?” Asked Ivo.

Ivo was the smallest and probably the brightest of the two. Liz didn't know the name of the other one, though it was really of little consequence.

“The underworld, where I can stop you using your ability to disappear to another world.” She said.

“There are troubled souls walking the streets outside, angry troubled souls. Don't be tempted to run away, or they're likely to give you a worse death than the priests of Aten had in mind.”

Karkengara appeared as just a head coming out of a wall. Liz was getting used to his quirks, but the two mercenaries looked worried.

“Tell them, Andric.” Said Ivo. “You dealt with him and took his money.”

“He'll kill us if he finds out.” Said Andric.

“He'll have to find us.....And I think the dragon really will eat us if we don't tell them.” Said Ivo.

“I knew you were the bright one, Ivo.” Said Liz. “We need a name and where you met him.”

“Fine.....It was Howard Mariette.” Said Andric. “He's collecting items of power, though no one really knows why. We met him in London.....Pays well does Howard.”

“Very well.” Added Ivo.

“I've heard of him....Quite famous in certain circles.” Said Karkengara.

“He operates out of one of those nondescript old buildings in Holborn.” Said Ivo. “We get things people want and sometimes we get rid of a person they don't want. We never ask why, it's bad for your health in our line of work.”

“A lady with your skills.....You'll soon find him.” Said Andric.

It left Liz with a dilemma. Ideally, she'd use the skills of the guardian to end their lives, kill them. They were assassins after all. They might even go running to Howard Mariette, to see if he'd pay for information about her. Yes, killing them was the smart move. On the other hand, they had fulfilled their part of the bargain. She'd removed them from Aten and they'd told her who'd wanted rid of The Last Artisan of Uundenvelt. The dragon was looking at her, in a meaningful way, or maybe she was imagining it. It was no good, she couldn't do it.

“Where do you want me to take you ?” She asked.

“If you’re going to London, take us with you.” Said Andric. “We can get to where we’re going from there.”

“You’ll never see us again.” Said Ivo.

Liz dropped out of the underworld and into the strange supernatural market in London, E1. She’d hoped no one would be amazed at her arriving with two mercenaries and a semi-invisible dragon. One woman looked shocked, but quickly regained her composure. The two mercenaries nodded at her, before vanishing.

“It was a mistake.” Said Karkengara. “Leaving them alive, I mean. I fear your kindness may give birth to unpleasant consequences.”

“I know, but I am, as I am.....Are you still going to travel with me ?” Liz asked.

“Yes....Where you go, I will follow.”

While she was there, Liz decided to talk to the stall holder who’d sold her the tarot deck. She accepted his offer of a seat and brought the pack of tarot cards out of her pocket.

“The cards are beautiful.” She said. “The people of Aten, send their regards.”

Just something to shake the tree a little, to see what fell out. The market trader looked stunned, shocked to the point of avoiding her gaze. He actually bowed in her direction, as though she was royalty. It was totally mystifying, but potentially useful.

“I’m looking for Howard Mariette.” She said. “The information I have, is that he has a house in Holborn. Do you know the address ?”

“Yes, I do.”

He not only knew the address; he went on to describe the exterior of the building in some detail. The dragon never said a word, until they’d left the market and had reached Holborn.

“Well done Liz, you’re learning.” Said Karkengara.

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Simon had started wearing the aegis under his shirt. He put it on every morning, right up against his skin, like a vest. The Aegis of Samnuha came with its own built-in history, a provenance that had wedged itself into his memory. He knew that Laura had more right to claim it than he did. He also knew that for one reason or another, the oldest of the old Gods, had decided he should be given the aegis. Layers of Gods, that needed some thought, later, when he had more time.

Simon also knew he couldn’t be too aggressive now that he was almost indestructible. That would be considered as abusing the gift. There would be consequences for abusing the gift, unpleasant consequences. He was currently sat in his cabin on The Mermaid, enjoying the calm sea. Niña was with him and looking troubled. Sadly, looking troubled seemed to be her usual look, after events in Syracuse.

“Donna is dead, Niña.” He said. “We both saw her crumble to dust. Weird dreams are normal when you’re newly turned, I had quite a few. It was all just a dream.”

“She gave me the warning about angering Thoth.” Said Niña. “You have to take it seriously.”

“I will be seeing Brother Alberti as soon as I can.” Said Simon. “You have my word that I will ask him about any likelihood of Thoth taking revenge against for us releasing the Djinn. It’s strange really.....The aegis holds so much knowledge, yet it has nothing about the Djinn.”

“Something will happen when we reach Livorno.” Said Niña. “She told me as much....Something as The Mermaid reaches the harbour.”

“Then we’ll do what vampires do, dear Niña. We’ll deal with it when it happens.”

Niña wasn't happy, but she looked calmer than she had since leaving Syracuse. She was still in the emotional turmoil of thinking like a vampire, while retaining some human emotions. It had been hell for him and was probably even worse for her. The girl was unlikely to marry and there was no chance of her having children. He'd given her immortality, but at a very high price.

"Do you want to know where we're going next?" Simon Asked.

"Of course I do, but will you tell me?"

"I need to discuss it with Alberti, though I can't see him objecting. We're going to North Africa, a ruined city called Leptis Magna. The Roman empire built a large city, but they built over far older ruins."

"I will find a book on the Roman empire, when we return to Florence." Said Niña. "Who.....Or what, are we digging up this time?"

"Captain Galeoto has said his Mermaid will take us anywhere we want to go." Said Simon. "I will pay him a retainer and keep him to that. We need to go to Leptis Magna and wait, for as long as it takes."

"Why couldn't it be straight forward?" Asked Niña.

"Nothing worth having is ever easy to acquire." Said Simon. "We have to wait, until someone thinks it's the right moment. They will then come and.....I'm not sure. Not a gift this time though, probably knowledge. First though, I need some time in Florence."

"You really mean time with Juliana." Said Niña.

"Yes.....I don't mind admitting that I miss her company."

"I like her, Simon. I didn't.....But recently she's been different."

"Good, it's important for you to be friends." Said Simon.

It was daylight, though there were only two small windows and they had shutters over them. Ships tend not to have lots of windows, as they can let in the wind, rain and sleet. Simon was used to it now, having an oil lamp in his cabin during the day. As he looked over Niña's shoulder her saw her, as though she was still alive. Fully corporeal even smiling at him, before she vanished.

"I'm sorry for doubting you. I just saw her.....I saw Donna."

"Where?" Asked Niña.

"Behind you, against the wall to your left."

Niña turned and he pointed. Just for a second there was something there, a vague outline. As it vanished there was the sound of laughter and a slight smell of Jasmine.

"Don't you dare say I dreamt that." Snapped Niña.

"No dream, Niña. I saw it too.....We need to think again about the warning. No one will be waiting to meet us in Livorno, we'll be home sooner than I thought. Our captain mentioned a jetty at Ardenza, should we wish to arrive unseen. Not far out of our way and we can hire transport from there. Well, my dear Niña. Shall we listen to your Donna and leave The Mermaid at Ardenza?"

"Oh, yes please."

There was a look in her eyes, a definite hint at the darkness within. Simon was looking forward to fighting beside the girl. That would come of course, it was inevitable. Maybe they'd be fighting side by side in Leptis Magna.

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At one time Patsy Smart, would have found some way of getting her mum out of the house. At the very least, Evie would have been asked to stay upstairs. It was obvious though, that her mum was well aware that there was something unusual about her pet cat. Evie thought of Zeus as a kind of supernatural guardian, which was fine. Actually, it was better than fine, it was just about perfect. If

only Zeus would stop glowing, growling and pacing about. Her mum was worried about the neighbours.

"He looks calm enough now." Said Patsy, as she stroked Zeus.

"He was growling a little during the night." Said Evie.

"Zeus is doing what he's intended to do." Said Mabina. "He's just trying to protect you Mrs Smart, and this house. What we need to work out, is what is causing your cat to be worried."

"Evie, dear....Call me Evie. You won't take him away, will you?"

"No, Evie.....This is his home now. The place he protects." Said Mabina.

Wonderful, just wonderful. None of Patsy's college friends had ever been invited to use her mum's first name. Very few of her boyfriends had been welcome in the house, let alone call her anything other than Mrs Smart. First Simon had been told to call her Evie and now Mabina. Patsy wondered if her mum had an unconscious thing about vampires.

"It's the neighbours you see." Said Evie. "Sometimes he growls very loudly."

"Don't worry, this won't hurt him." Said Mabina.

Mabina was obviously assuming her mum was safe, someone who'd cope with anything she saw or heard. The interesting thing was that her mum didn't even gasp, as Zeus vanished inside Mabina. One moment Mabina was picking him up and holding him against her chest. The next moment he'd appeared to have been absorbed by the vampire.

"Someone has to say it.....Wow." Said Patsy.

Her mum seemed happy that her much loved pet would return. Were they seeing how Zeus had been created as a kitten with attitude. Mabina said nothing, as she closed her eyes and concentrated for at least ten minutes.

"Is he going to be alright?" Asked Evie

Mabina merely nodded, though of course, it was probably hard to talk with a large tomcat in her abdomen. Zeus came out hissing a little, with a small amount of blood on his fur. He ran across the room and began to furiously clean himself. Mabina's voice was a little strained, but she too, seemed to have come out of it all unscathed.

"Just leave him alone for a while, then he'll be his old self." Said Mabina.

"Did you fix him?" Asked Evie.

"I did and there should be no more growling or glowing, unless....In the unlikely event another burglar turns up."

"What was wrong with him?" Asked Patsy.

"Nothing really, he's an adult now." Said Mabina. "I just needed to adjust a few things. I guarantee.....No more problems with Zeus."

"Good." Said her mum.

Her mum was part of that generation, who believed upsetting the neighbours was the worst sin it was possible to commit. There was also a belief that anyone entering her house, was one meal away from starvation. Evie made them breakfast, Patsy's second for the day. By the time they were on a second pot of tea, Zeus was fussing around her mum, wanting to be petted. Patsy noticed that he was giving Mabina a wide berth.

"Will he ever forgive you?" Asked Patsy.

"Maybe not, but he'll no longer growl for no good reason."

Everything was fine, Zeus was asleep on her mum's lap when Mabina said it was time for her to leave. On the way to Mabina's guilty pleasure, her Lexus, Patsy was invited to sit in the passenger seat for a moment.

"I knew it, Zeus is still a problem....I just knew it." Said Patsy. "My mum loves him though....We can't get rid of him."

Mabina let her get comfortable, before replying.

"No, Zeus is fine, I just had to tinker with what he sees as a threat. He was reacting to the minions of Huh, which I thought might be the problem. It seems the God of time, has taken an interest in you."

"Why ? I've done nothing to upset him."

Mabina rooted through the glove compartment and brought out a huge bag of jelly babies. Despite the large second breakfast, Patsy took a handful out of the offered bag.

"Huh is eccentric, sometimes full on quirky." Said Mabina. "He seems to have taken a shine to Simon. I think you may get an invite to visit Simon in his timeline. Maybe not a long visit and I might be wrong....But I think you need to be prepared."

"Oh, I've just got used to not seeing Simon again." Said Patsy. "I'm seeing someone new, which took me a while."

"It won't be compulsory, but say no and Huh's minions won't come for you again." Said Mabina. "My advice is to think about it and decide whether to go, or not. One thing though.....If you do go back in time to see Simon, I wouldn't tell Clara."

"Jeez, does life have to be this complicated ?" Asked Patsy.

"No, but it usually is."

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Juliana Colombo felt guilty and was sure it fell into the bad girlfriend category of behaviour. Simon had never wanted to know about her past, but she'd had no past, not really. A few stolen kisses with the few boys her father allowed her to associate with. There had been a little fumbled touching once, but nothing more than that. To her father, Simon was the perfect husband for his daughter. Simon was a senior member of the Brotherhood and he was well thought of by the Medici. He was quite happy for her to be intimate with Simon, though he'd never admit it.

If she became pregnant and gave birth just seven months into a marriage, they'd say the child was premature. There were a lot of seven-month babies among the Florentine aristocracy. Simon had told her not to worry about pregnancy, but had never explained why. Like so many other things about him, that had made her need to know more about the man she loved. It had nothing to do with trust, she trusted Simon completely. There were just things she needed to know, or she'd go insane.

"I honestly have no idea why I brought Niña into our home." Said Giovanni. "There was something about her sad little face. She wasn't called Niña then of course, Simon started calling her that."

"What was her name when you found her ?" Asked Juliana.

"Now that you ask.....I have no idea. She must have had a name; all girls have a given name. As for what it was, I don't think I ever knew. Simon might know."

The servants had let her into the house Simon shared with Giovanni and Niña. Poor Giovanni had looked bored and lonely, when she'd found him sitting in the kitchen. He'd soon perked up and hadn't needed any encouragement to open a bottle of wine. Juliana had sipped at a half full glass, while Giovanni drank most of the bottle. Strangely he became very talkative, but didn't seem drunk. She'd seen her father drunk a few times; she knew what it looked like.

"I like Niña, I genuinely do.....But why did Simon take her to Syracuse ?" Asked Juliana.

Giving Giovanni wine and attention to get information, was bad. She'd even flirted with him a little. It seemed the only way to find anything out though, as Simon told her nothing. Once Simon

returned, it could be months until she had another chance to get Giovanni alone. Simon's best friend was gently patting the back of her hand.

"You've no need to be jealous, Juliana." Said Giovanni. "Simon loves you. As for Niña.....He sees her as a child who needs his help. Like a sister, a baby sister."

"I still don't understand why you took the girl in." Said Juliana. "Two grown men, agents of the Medici. It doesn't make any sense."

She had no fear of Giovanni, none at all. When he gripped her shoulders and pulled her forward, she didn't resist. Juliana smelt the wine on his breath, as he whispered into her ear.

"I've done some terrible things." Said Giovanni. "Sins that can never be forgiven. If you knew just a few.....You'd run from this house. It was my idea to bring the girl into our home. Maybe I was trying to do one decent thing. I'm not sure, though Simon thinks so. Once in our home, Niña quickly worked her way into our hearts. You should go now; I'll tell you nothing more."

"Not even what he needed her for in Syracuse?" She asked.

"Trust Simon, he told you the truth. The girl is a seer with the ability to tell him where to dig. Niña has the ability to save Simon a lot of hard work."

"Dig for what?"

Giovanni let her go and smiled. That smile was her moment to leave, she knew that. She could persuade him to open another bottle and flirt with him for hours, but he'd tell her nothing more.

"Alright, I'll leave." Said Juliana. "Thank you for setting my mind at rest, just a little."

"He loves you, let that be enough." Said Giovanni.

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It wasn't exactly an emergency klaxon, but the phone next to their bed, had never made the sound before. The bedside clock was saying it was half past five in the morning. After swearing a few times, Tim was looking over her shoulder, at the phone. There was no need to be up early and they'd been out quite late. A small get together organised by Nathalie Aurigny, to celebrate a successful resolution to matters in Sudan.

"Are we supposed to be somewhere?" Asked Tim.

"No.....Well, I don't think so." Said Laura.

In an emergency, vampires had a quick wakeup ability. Like big cats, they could go from, fast asleep to fight ready, in a split second. Laura rarely did that, as the hormone rush tended to screw up the rest of her day. She lifted the handset off the phone.

"Hello.....This had better be good." She said.

"Sorry Ms Selway, this is front desk security. Someone appeared in the front lobby. He appeared out of nowhere, inside the locked doors. A friend of yours, or so he claims. Are you expecting a visit from an Akiva Yatsko?"

"No, but I know him." Said Laura. "Give him a coffee and keep him there. I'll be along once I wake up properly. He's a friend, so be nice to him."

"Of course, Ms Selway."

Laura wondered why the guards were so nice to her, before her brain woke up enough to remember the nature of her job at the Silver Dawn. She was head of security, their boss.

"Can we go back to sleep?" Asked Tim.

"You can, I have to get dressed and go to reception.....Akiva has just shown up."

"Oh.....Him." Muttered Tim.

Tim rolled over and went back to sleep, or at least pretended to go back to sleep. She'd been more than a little keen on Akiva once and Tim knew that. Her experience with long term relationships

wasn't huge. She was willing to bet though, that no current lover, likes exes to turn up out of the blue.

No shower, Laura pulled on a pair of jeans and a T shirt. She put on Tim's flip flop sandals, that he used as slippers. That was it, ready to leave their apartment in less than thirty seconds. She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror and cringed at how bad her bed hair looked. Laura used her fingers, to flatten it down a bit. That never really worked, but it would have to do.

"It is only Akiva." She muttered.

"What ?" Called Tim.

"Nothing, go back to sleep."

The corridor lights were still in low level night mode. Nathalie had not only given them one of the best apartments in the modernised chateau, it was also quite close to the main entrance reception area. The guards on duty must have heard her flip flops, long before they saw her.

"Ok...Where is he ?" She asked.

"He's in our break room....We gave him coffee and a few biscuits."

No wonder the guards had been nervous. The Akiva Yatsko drinking coffee and nibbling digestives, looked to have recently been in battle. For one thing, he was carrying a sword, a long thin blade. His clothing consisted of the bare minimum to conserve dignity, with a poncho type thing thrown over his shoulders. There was dried blood on his clothing too, presumably not his. The smell was the worse part, the odour of violent death, again, not his.

"I'm surprised they let you keep the sword." Said Laura.

"There was an argument about that." Said Akiva. "They were a lot friendlier after calling you. Nice to see you again.....By the way."

No hug, though she did sit in the chair next to his. Akiva felt like someone from her past, but the past often refused to go away. Tim was her lover now and Akiva was just.....An ex.

"I have to ask, what is that smell ?" She asked. "I don't feel at all bad now, for not showering."

"I was in the prison cells, below a temple in the City of Aten. Someone you know was there too, a Liz Grant."

"Ahhhh, I know Aten." Said Laura. "Worshippers of the sun. That may be their downfall, if it starts to really annoy Horus. How is Liz ?"

They were into the game again, the one they'd played while she'd completed favours for Horus. The game of pretending to be nonchalant about anything they said to one another. Taking it all in their stride, while pretending to be unimpressed.

"Liz is fine, now, though it was touch and go for a while." Said Akiva. "After saving her, I was sent to save you.....It seems a large serpent deity wants to swallow you, whole."

"Yes, someone else mentioned that.....Who sent you ?" She asked.

"One of the debt collectors, a minion of Horus."

Damn, it looked like Akiva was going to be in her life for a while. Tim wouldn't like that, though he was unlikely to push the issue.

"I'll get them to assign you a room." She said. "Clean clothes too and some decent food. We can get together to discuss this later, at a more civilised hour."

"It matters, Laura." Said Akiva. "You can't ignore this. The feathered serpent, Q'uq'umatz, means to kill you. It really does intend to eat you. They've been calling on it to appear, the wandering Gods."

"I know....Eat, sleep.....We'll meet again over lunch. You can relax here, it's one of the best protected buildings on the planet. Leaving aside the practitioners of the dark arts, there are defence missiles on the roof. Installed by the same people who did The Whitehouse, or so I'm told."

"The White House ?"

"Yes, Akiva.....The White House."

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Liz knew Holborn quite well. A mixture of various government buildings full of civil servants, to up-and-coming media companies. Brendan used a shoe repairer on the corner, as he swore they were the best in London. There was even still a group of drunks on the pavement outside the tube station. Liz was leaning on the wall of a building over the road, from where they hoped was the business address of Howard Mariette. The dragon's head was sticking out of the wall next to her, though she was certain only she could see him.

"I'm picking up no defensive spells." She said. "How about you ?"

"No, just a large and very ordinary office building. Though if Mr Mariette is good at that sort of thing, we might be seeing what he intends us to see."

"Not comforting.....Come on. If we're breaking in, we should do it from the alley at the back of the building."

No quick lecture on why that was a bad move. Either she was getting better at assessing risk, or Karkengara had written her off as someone doomed to fail. He was still following her though, which was encouraging. Getting to the back of the building was complicated and involved breaking open a gate to a private garden. There were trees and bushes in the garden though, that were ideal to hide behind. Howard's building had one rear entrance, a very solid looking door. No sign of any cameras, though the small modern ones were often hard to spot.

"I could bring a few of my myrmidons here, if you'd like ?" Asked the dragon. "They can do the hard work of breaking in and looking for trouble. If they're killed....They come back. On the other hand, if you die....."

"I'm pretty tough, but I get your point." Said Liz. "Yes, send in a few of your warriors."

A dozen of the myrmidons appeared among the bushes and shrubs. Wearing armour and carrying short swords, they looked like fighters from Greek mythology. Difficult to be certain, though she thought it likely that only the dragon and her, could see them. Karkengara waved a claw at the building and his warriors ran at the door. It didn't survive their first attack. Once the door had been reduced to pieces of wood and fragments of broken hinges, they were inside. After that, the private garden was once again, a place of peace and tranquillity. The dragon had to be watching his warriors in some way, he actually jumped at one point.

"Oh dear, booby traps." He said. "Everything is fine though; they'll return to life."

It had to be mayhem inside the building, but the only sound Liz heard was a loud thump, as though something had exploded in there. Karkengara smiled at that, so she assumed it was the work of his warriors. Nearly half an hour after his myrmidons had gone into the building, it seemed there was an impasse, a standoff.

"My myrmidons are capable of killing Howard, but I'm sure you don't want that." Said the dragon.

"No, I want to talk to him."

"Then we must go in there....Otherwise. He has said he will fight beside his guards and die with them." Said Karkengara.

"Are you still following where I lead ?"

"Yes."

"Then we're going in there, to confront Howard Mariette." Said Liz.

The damage was extensive inside the building. Blown open doors and even a few body parts that looked human. There had to be some kind of soundproofing spells in place, or half the police in



London would have arrived. The worst explosion, the thump Liz had heard; had ripped out three internal walls.

"When they fight....My myrmidons do a thorough job of it." Mumbled Karkengara.

Liz needed a hand to jump past three broken stairs, but eventually they were in the corridor; where Howard and his surviving human guards, faced the myrmidons. Karkengara suddenly vanished to somewhere else, which made it easier to see what was happening.

"Howard.....Howard Mariette." Liz shouted. "My name is Liz Grant, keeper of the last gateway. I wish to come in there and talk to you."

"Very well, but just you. None of those warriors....I mean it." Yelled Howard.

His voice was old fashioned educated, the way Liz imagined the Dickensian male characters talked. She walked into the room where Howard was sat at an ordinary looking office desk. He had less than half a dozen men left and two of those were wounded. Liz sat on the chair opposite Howard, without being asked.

"Well.....We seem to have a problem." She said.

The dragon chose that moment to enter the room, though only the front third of him fitted. The rest of him had to be hanging over Holborn, though she now trusted him to make those parts invisible. Howard looked past her and simply stared at Karkengara.

"That's erm.....My travelling companion." Said Liz. "He may introduce himself, or he may not."

"I am Karkengara, bringer of fire."

"I've heard of you." Said Howard. "Weren't you imprisoned in...."

"Heard of, doesn't mean gossiped about." Said Karkengara. "Learn to hold your tongue on such matters."

"I apologise, no harm was intended." Said Howard.

"Talk to Liz....She's actually interested in what you have to say."

Liz was enjoying them quarrel, as long as it didn't get out of hand. It also gave her a chance to get a good look at Howard. At first glance he looked about fifty, but she was sure he was much older. Men getting on a bit are usually happy with getting hair implants to get rid of the bald spots. They may often use spray tan, to make their skin look healthier, younger. There are those, who will do more for the effort to look younger. Magic users, casters of spells; even your local shaman needs to eat. Expensive and sometimes there were side effects. Looking at his profile, Liz decided Howard had spent a hell of a lot to look the wrong side of fifty. His real age was impossible to judge. She interrupted the quarrel.

"I need.....I need." She shouted. "To talk to you about the golden snake. Let me speed things up, it'll save time. You knew it was at the Monkman Museum, but their security is legendary. When you heard the Artisan had it, you sent mercenaries to kill him and bring you the snake. Why you'd need it, is now obvious. You're collecting items of power, to create a spell of....Or maybe to invoke a creature, who can grant you immortality."

"You're right, I sent several of my people to burgle the Monkman museum. That was a few years ago and none of them returned. As for immortality.....Call me vain, but I think that I deserve longer than a relatively tiny three score years and ten."

Liz could have given him the full lecture, on how the only thing more horrific than death, is the reality of eternal life. Even vampires weren't silly enough to think immortality meant living forever. There were accidents and one day, the entire planet would end up circling a dead cinder of a sun. Only a fool would crave eternal life. No need to tell Howard all that, his addiction to prolonging his life, could be useful.

“If you’re looking for immortality.” Said Liz. “Have you asked the vampires ?”

“Oh, them....Chance would be a fine thing. They’re ridiculously aggressive and tend to wipe each other out. I did find one who was quite ancient, but his mind had gone. He just kept laughing at me, when I said I desired the blessing of his bite.”

Inwardly Liz cringed, though she knew there were actually vampire cults. Whole groups of people, seeking vampires to bless them, with the bite of immortality. Luckily, vampires despised such fools and avoided them.

“A fool who wants to live forever.” Said the dragon. “Can we go now ?”

“Don’t be rude....I know several vampires and some owe me favours.” Said Liz.

“Will they bless me ?” Asked Howard.

There would be no mention of the less than two percent chance that Howard would survive being turned. He was a crazy guy who’d probably caused the deaths of a huge number of people. If he lived, the world would have another crazy vampire to cope with. If he died, it was no great loss.

“Yes they would, though there would be a fee.” Said Liz. “You mentioned collecting many items of power.”

“Yes, I have some that are quite famous.” Said Howard. “Which one do you want.”

“It sounds quite rude I know, but what have you got ?”

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