

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 17 – A Heist

“The renaissance was thought of as an age of enlightenment by some, though they had believed a huge amount of crap, him included.”

»

Tom had forgiven Ronnie for losing the old beige Merc. She had returned with the unopened bag, which was almost certain to contain a huge amount of cash. What was a twenty something year old Merc worth, even if it did have comfy leather seats ? Simon thought three hundred, tops. Tom hadn't even asked Ronnie to pay for it.

“These things happen and you handled it.” Tom had told her.

Simon didn't envy the poor cop who had to try and find an owner for the abandoned vehicle. Tom's people were good at setting up convoluted ownership histories that ended up leading nowhere. He'd dropped Ronnie off at her own car, after once again reminding her there wasn't and never had been a probably dead man in the back of his van.

“Oh George..... Think of it this way, I'd have probably snapped your neck if it had worked. Clara would never have forgiven me for turning you.” He muttered.

The bad news, depending on how you looked at it, was George being permanently dead, his body stiffening. Simon had parked in a part of Epping Forest he'd buried someone in before. That had been at least two hundred years before though and the forest wasn't as quiet as it had once been. Lights everywhere a vampire with a corpse to dispose of, didn't want lights to be. The constant glow in the sky from the lights of London though, that was a good thing. Astronomers might not be able to see the stars through the glow, but for Simon, it was just the right amount of light. He'd be able to dig a grave and fill it with George, without using a flashlight.

“Man walks out of hospital and found buried in Epping Forest.....Let's say ten years later, to allow for walkers with their nosey dogs. One day George, you might turn up on a true crime show. What did happen that night to George Harper ?”

Simon stripped the body, going through the pockets of George's jacket. His keys were there, including the key to his locker which held his personal phone and probably a couple of burner phones. Best to do any looting and checking before the police became involved in a missing person's case.

“I'll go through your place on the way home and pick up that phone.” He muttered.

The timescale depended on how long it took to bury George and drive back to North London. Sunrise wasn't until quite late, so he'd probably be able to get everything done that night.

“Here we go.”

Over his shoulder went the now naked body of George Harper, loyal and valued disposer of dead bodies. Simon concentrated and looked for human heartbeats close by. There were a few, but those were probably asleep in the row of nearby houses. There didn't seem to be any dog walkers heading his way. Simon held a spade in his free hand, shoving the van doors closed with his shoulder. The spade was always fitted into spring clips on the van wall, as though it was part of the fixtures and

fittings. If he was ever pulled over, he doubted if the cops would even mention it. Didn't spades and shovels seem part of the furniture for grubby old vans ?

"Here we go George.....Quite a pretty spot."

Enough space between the trees to make sure he wouldn't be trying to dig through tree roots.

Simon wasn't a newbie to digging graves in woods, in the middle of the night. His strength meant he could dig quickly and go down quite deep. Was there a depth that officially made it a shallow grave ? He had no idea, but he stopped digging at what he hoped was beyond the digging range of the average family dog. He placed George in the hole and remained on one knee, looking at the dead hospital worker, who'd disposed of so many bodies over the years. A few muttered words seemed in order.

"Did I deliberately drain too much of your blood George ? Did I give you too little of mine ? I think I probably did.....You'd have made a truly unpleasant vampire and Clara would have been so angry. Sorry, you did deserve better than this, or maybe you didn't.... Whatever, we'll probably both meet up again in hell."

Simon felt for a pulse, even though the body was cold and stiff. Daniel had come back to life hours after they'd given up on him. If he and Clara hadn't decided to get physical that night, poor Daniel could easily have been buried alive. He drove the spade into George's forehead. There would be no miraculous rebirth that night. Simon filled the grave with soil, before covering the freshly dug ground with dead leaves.

"Bye George."

Back at the van he sat in the driver's seat for a while, wondering what he'd tell Clara. Easy to tell her George had simply died in hospital from his long standing illness. He preferred to be honest with her though and he still wasn't sure why he'd even attempted to turn George. They had owed him though and Clara had made a deal. There was the option of using one of his 'I don't want to discuss this cards,' but he'd used up most of those in the early days of seeing Patsy.

"Fuck..... I'll just tell her he died on the bus to work."

~ ~

"Hang on, my lamp is flickering and playing up." Said Mabina

"Sounds like you need to change the battery." Said Clara.

Despite the constant complete darkness and continued smell of sulphur in the air, gates twelve and thirteen had been fairly uneventful. Something large and probably hungry had snarled at them out of the darkness. The four Hounds of Anubis had seen it off and probably eaten part of it. They'd turned up some time later, licking their lips. Mabina had noticed that their four enormous hounds always seemed to find something to chase and devour.

"Not bad really the first battery change and we're two thirds of the way there." Said Liz.

"Of course, we all packed the spare batteries at the bottom of our packs." Said Clara.

"Good excuse for an unplanned break." Said Mabina.

Unexpected breaks were always welcome, though not as enjoyable as they'd been in a world that wasn't in constant darkness. For one thing their hounds became restless after a while and had a habit of whining, sometimes even howling. Mabina had found it quite amusing, until the second night of interrupted sleep. According to Liz, getting them fully under control was yet another skill she'd acquire after the twenty first gateway.

"Damn." She said. "What the....."

"What's up ?" Asked Liz.

"I upended my pack.....There was something in it, right at the bottom." Said Mabina.

She'd upended her pack instead of emptying it carefully. One of her plastic plates was broken, but the small stone figure had her attention. Like some sort of fertility symbol, the figure of a woman with a huge swollen abdomen, in an overstated parody of pregnancy.

"It's painted in.....That's blood, human blood." Said Clara, sniffing at it.

"How did it get in there ?" Asked Mabina. "I never leave my pack that far away from me, even at night. Most of the day I'm wearing the damn thing."

Having to change the battery in her lamp had altered Mabina's mood and she was aware of it. They had more than enough fully charged batteries to do the journey ten times over. It was symbolic though....Needing to change a battery was a reminder that they were in a world of perpetual darkness. Not having lamps would probably prove fatal, even for a vampire. Then what remained of her feeling of being in control had been shattered. Someone had put something right at the bottom of her pack.

"Change your battery Mabina.....We need to check our packs Clara." Said Liz.

"You know what it means Liz, don't you ?" Asked Clara.

"Look in your pack.....I'm not certain yet."

"Not that shit again." Yelled Clara. "I'll take your best guess Liz.... What the hell is it ?"

"It's what voodoo dolls are probably descended from, the earliest of curses to inflict the ill will of another on their intended victim. This one painted in blood is the worst.....Mabina has been marked for death."

"Fuck !" Yelled Clara.

Clara grabbed her pack, ready to upend it.

"No, carefully." Said Liz. "Take everything out, but try not to touch it if you have one. Touching it could be bad, really bad."

Why the hell hadn't Liz said that right away if it mattered that much ?

"I might have touched mine." Said Mabina.

"Are you sure ?" Asked Liz.

"No, not really."

"Think and remember, it's important."

While the other two carefully dug through their packs, she changed the battery on her lamp. Easy to do with a battery that hung in a cradle on her belt. The expensive batteries were the same ones used by the emergency services, guaranteed to hold a charge for months, maybe even a year. It was still a moment of relief, when her lamp shone brightly and steadily again. In that moment of clarity, she remembered finding the dreadful doll.

"I remember now." She said. "I never did touch it."

"Good." Said Liz. "I've found one in my pack. It must have happened while we were fighting the vargouilles. It's the only time we left all three packs unattended."

"I've got one too." Said Clara.

Liz kicked all three of the stone figures into where her own lamp formed a circle of light on the cave floor. The section of the underworld leading to the fourteenth gate was the dull uniform grey passages they'd become used to. Grey stone walls and grey dusty floors. If it had been created by Osiris himself, Mabina thought he should have contracted out the design work. Liz had told them the fourteenth gateway was likely to be something rather special. Special good, or special terrifying ? She was being her usual annoying self when it came to details.

"I'm going to render them incapable of further harm." Said Liz. "But we'll all still be marked for death. Every creature who serves the same deity as the one who created the figure, will attack us on sight."

Mabina watched as Liz's fingers became dozens of long black tendrils. She moved them around over the top of the stone figures, while muttering something too quietly to hear. First the blood painted on the stone dolls became black. After about two minutes the stone figures crumbled into dust. Liz used her foot to move the dust about, spreading it over a wide area. Mabina had to admire Liz's skill at the dark arts. She knew a few skilled in such matters, but she doubted if any could have destroyed effigies used by servants of the Ancient Gods.

"That will stop them causing harm to any who might find them." Said Liz.

"I'd still like to know what touching one of them might have done?" Asked Mabina.

"There is a wasting disease, completely incurable." Said Liz. "Even I might have died from it.....None of us is infected though, I'd have sensed it by now."

"Which deity did they serve?" Asked Clara. "I mean the people who put these things in our packs?" Poor Liz, it was dreadful to see her face as she shook her head.

"I'm truly sorry.... For now at least, I have no idea."

"Again.....You'll know once the information is no damn use." Yelled Clara. "I'm getting so damn sick of this."

Mabina had known there would be arguments. They'd probably even take a few lumps out of each other before the journey was over. The only surprising thing was that she thought she'd crack first, not Clara. Things had to be cooled down though, Liz was fingering the handle of her war axe.

"Easy..... Easy Clara, it's not Liz's fault." She said. "None of likes the constant dark, but at the end of the day, we did volunteer to come with her."

"Yeah, there is that.....Sorry Liz."

"No problem.... If it helps, we should be out of these grey caves after the fourteenth gate."

It wasn't just Clara looking happier, it was good news to her too. Darkness was one thing, it was almost what vampires were made for. The constant trudging through miles of dusty grey caves though....It felt never ending.

"That sounds more like it." Said Clara. "What can we expect to find?"

"Well, I won't know for sure until....."

Clara was grinning from ear to ear and there was a definite lessening in potential hostilities. Never good when a powerful legendary figure gets attacked by a vampire with weapon skills. Mabina had only seen it once, but that had been enough. Over a hundred of her best warriors had died just trying to get out of the way. She was pleased that Liz and Clara looked to be friends again.

"I do know a few legends though." Said Liz. "And as I've said before.....All legends are based on a little bit of truth, if you look deeply enough."

"Tell us these legends wise one." Said Mabina.

"They do say the pharaohs were exempt from the usual journey through the underworld. The fourteenth gate was said to take them over the sacred river, what we now call crossing the abyss. It is said in many ancient hieroglyphs that there is royal road for the pharaohs, all the way to the final gateway."

"A royal road, that sounds worth seeing." Said Clara.

"Any legends regarding the fourteenth gate?" Asked Mabina.

"Just that it is supposed to be.....Magnificent. It is still at least ten miles away though. We should pack up our things and get moving."

It was at that moment that Mabina realised it was supposed to have been a stop for a break and she hadn't even chewed a mouthful of the mixed nuts and raisins in one of her Tupperware bowls, or even had a drink of water. Habits had formed, traditions had almost formed.

"Oh, can we have another few minutes.....I hadn't...."

"Nibbled at your trail mix." Said Clara.

Liz was chuckling, they were both grinning at her.

"Have I really become so transparent ?" Asked Mabina.

"I'm afraid you have." Said Clara. "By the time we get home we'll all know each other far too well, every guilty little secret, every quirk. We just have to agree that what happens in the underworld, stays in the underworld."

"Amen to that.....but I suppose we could all do with a proper fifteen minute break" Said Liz.

"Well.... At least you two are friends again."

They had the nerve to look at her, as though they hadn't a clue what she was talking about.

~ ~

There was more than enough CCTV to guarantee their faces had been seen. There was a good chance some of the output from the cameras was being put through facial recognition software. Laura wondered if she was still marked as a person of interest after that business with Mike Marcou. She'd done the unforgivable and killed a cop, one of the Van Helsings. She'd never do it again, she did learn from her mistakes, eventually.

"Just be..... Touristy." She said. "We're in London to see the sites. Tourists gawp at everything, taking millions of pics that will bore all their relatives. We're going to gawp and snap like pros."

She was going to use Jim the hacker, even if there were still a few alarm bells ringing about adding an outsider to her group. He'd been left at the hotel, a hotel but not their hotel. He was using someone else's free Wi-Fi to do some digging and delving that might cause problems if the source was traced. Laura was stood on paving slabs in a London Street, Akiva and Tim stood close by. The paving she was stood on was in Great Russell Street, WC1. Not right outside the British Museum, but close enough to see the main gate and the crowds entering and leaving.

"For a day threatening to rain, the place is fairly busy." Said Tim.

"Good, more people to mingle with." Said Akiva.

Akiva was the one who really blended in. His vaguely Middle Eastern looks could have indicated he called home anywhere from Armenia to Uzbekistan, or maybe Hounslow. He'd bought just the right amount of garish clothing and put them to shame.

"Forget we're here to plan a heist." She said. "Have a good time, buy a few souvenirs in the gift shop."

"Do we have to pay to get in ?" Asked Akiva.

"I have no idea, but I brought some cash in case we do." She said.

In some ways coming to wander around the British Museum had sounded a crazy idea. It was essential though, to get an up to date feel for the museum and the streets around it. Were there new road works ? A fence put up where there hadn't been one before ? How about any extra security for a particular exhibit ? Those questions and hundreds of others could only be answered by walking around the place she intended to rob. They did have one huge advantage over normal burglars though;

"Once we've got what we came for, we don't have to worry about getting out. I can use the Egg to take us anywhere we want to go, instantly."

It had sounded so good when she'd said it at the hotel, but now that she was looking at the huge museum building. Laura knew that just getting in there at night was going to be hard enough. "It's free to get in, according to the sign." Said Akiva. "It does mention an expected donation of five pounds though."

He was taking the whole touristy thing a bit far, even putting on a general Euro accent that hinted at somewhere on the borders of Los Angeles and Bulgaria. Strangely he seemed to fit in perfectly with the crowd.

"Come on, this way." She said.

Laura was still thinking about simply asking the Silver Dawn to loan her a fully equipped surveillance van. She had access to their records now and knew they had at least two in the London area. Easier and cheaper to borrow one of theirs, but it would muddy the lines between work and personal enterprise. There would be a van full of computer tech though and Jim Weaver would be sat in it. They'd walked towards the large perimeter iron railings, hoping to appear nonchalant.

"Lots of side roads." Muttered Akiva. "Really you could do with a driver to move the van about if anyone takes an interest in it."

"Yes, someone might wonder why it's outside their building in the middle of the night." Said Tim. Keeping voices down was essential; though Laura realised quiet muttering wasn't that touristy. Most of the nearby crowd seemed to be in a shouting contest with their kids.

"Lose that balloon and I won't buy you another." Shouted an upset looking mum.

It was chaos, wonderful touristy and for the most part, happy chaos. Time mattered, she wanted to get her list of favours for Horus done and finished with.

"I will borrow a Silver Dawn van." She said. "And I know someone I can trust who is used to driving a van through narrow London streets. And I know he's bored and feeling lonely at the moment."

"Do we know him?" Asked Akiva.

"Probably not, his name is Brendan Roche, who runs his own building business. He can be trusted and he can handle himself."

"Romantically linked to Liz Grant." Said Akiva. "He's on the Silver Dawn files, as I'm sure you'll know once you've had a chance to look around. Did he really take out a team of terrorists near Jerusalem?"

"I believe so." She replied.

Not on his own, she'd already killed one and softened up the rest. A little lying by omission was sometimes easier than a long explanation and they'd respect Brendan more if he had a tough guy reputation.

"He sounds perfect." Said Tim.

"I'll go and see him tonight." Said Laura. "Right, lots of pics where they're allowed and.....At least half an hour in the gift shop. I saw a statue of Bast on their website that would look great on my dressing table."

~ ~

"Actually being marked for death doesn't really change things." Said Clara. "When haven't we been attacked by strange creature hurtling at us out of the dark?"

"You're right..... All of them with sharp teeth and claws." Said Liz.

Clara found herself enjoying the trip more as Liz counted down the miles to the much anticipated fourteenth gate to the underworld. She'd heard about the Egyptians obsession with the number seven, though mostly from late night documentaries. The atmosphere in their small group had become almost electric, when Liz went from counting in miles, to yards.

"We're really close now, it must be around the next turn in the passage." Said Liz.

"How far?" Asked Mabina.

"So close we must be almost at the top of it."

A Hollywood set designer couldn't have done it better. They'd been inside the grey passageways for so long, that their eyes had become used to a monochrome environment. As they walked round the final left turn they came out into a world of colour and wonder.

"Wow, I didn't expect that." Said Mabina.

A world still dark, it was their lights bringing out the colours. Actually not a totally dark world, there was a sky above them, a sky full of stars.

"I was brought up on a farm." Said Clara. "Before the electric light, before TV and definitely before the internet. The stars above were our one and only wonder. I know every constellation and that isn't our sky."

They were supposed to be in the underworld, stuck there until Liz unlocked the twenty first gate. Yet Liz could feel a cool breeze on her cheek.

"I'm not even going to pretend to understand this." Said Liz. "This gateway might well have been placed on a different world, maybe a different reality....I don't know."

They were still deep inside a cavern, the walls covered in shimmering crystals. The top of the cavern had gone though, probably to become the piles of rubble that littered parts of the floor. Instead of a cavern ceiling, they had the twinkling light from millions upon millions of stars.

"That has to be the gateway Liz." Said Mabina. "Please don't tell me it isn't and we'll need to search for it."

"No more searching, that is the fourteenth gate to the underworld."

Lots of gold that Clara assumed was solid gold. She really couldn't see the Ancient Gods of Egypt putting up with anything covered in gold leaf. The gold contrasted well with the glitter from the predominantly yellow and red crystals that seemed to cover every inch of the walls. No plant life or the likelihood of insects in a world of perpetual dark, though their hounds were growling at something.

"We don't need to worry about being ambushed with them about." Said Clara.

"Dogs of one sort or another have been mankind's watchdogs since.....Well, since there's been a mankind." Said Mabina.

Something had to be finding sustenance of a kind in the darkness. The hounds snapped and snarled at something behind a pile of debris, before dragging out a bloody carcass. Clara just managed to see a little fur and four legs, before the hounds pulled it apart and ate it.

"Guard dogs that feed themselves....Perfect." Said Clara.

"It would have been nice to know what kind of creature calls this place home." Said Liz.

The hounds were trying to get at something else that was clever enough to stay in a crack in the wall, well beyond their reach.

"Leave it!" Snapped Liz.

They actually obeyed and fussed around Liz like happy puppies. It seemed that Liz was still growing in power, now able to fully control the Hounds of Anubis. Gradually, without even realising it, they'd arrived at the fourteenth gate.

"Yes, it's wonderful." Said Mabina. "But it's not that impressive. If we hadn't been in passages with grey walls for so long....."

“Talk for yourself, I think it’s amazing.” Said Clara. “The Ancient Gods are obviously really into gold and that is a lot of gold. Probably more gold than in every ring, bracelet and necklace mankind has ever made.”

Laura had mentioned Horus and his love of gold to her. Clara had also seen some restoration work on the tombs of the pharaohs. The restorers had used a lot of gold leaf, everything seemed to have a golden tinge to it. There was something about their love of gold, a secret waiting to be understood, though Clara doubted if she’d ever discover it.

“I can understand the temptation of precious stones and so much gold.” Said Liz. “Just remember that we are in the realm of Osiris and everything here is his property.”

“I get it, no looting.” Said Clara. “As you say, very tempting. I will behave though, I promise.”

“I am of royal blood Liz, though I will ignore the implied insult....This time.” Muttered Mabina.

Mabina did come from a long line of monarchs from the east, but Clara could remember her stealing anything that wasn’t bolted down, when it suited her. There was no need to dig at old wounds though and besides...The gate made of solid gold had most of her attention.

“Oh wow...I have to touch it.” Said Clara. “Can I touch it before you activate it Liz ? Is it alright to touch it ?”

“Yes.... Go on, get it out of your system.”

Gold, just about impossible to damage or corrode, Clara thought the gate had to have been there since mankind were just about something recognisable as people. No human could have constructed the gateway then of course. She ran her hand over one of the smooth upright stones as a thought struck her.

“This must have been constructed by the Gods.” She said.

“According to the legends Osiris constructed this gateway and the royal road that leads from it to the remaining gates.”

“Thank you Osiris, this is beautiful.” Said Clara.

Just a simple two uprights with the usual lintel on top, but huge, at least a hundred feet high. All made out of gold and everything was flawless. There were precious stones inset into the outer sides of the stones, but Clara didn’t dare touch them. If one were to come loose.....No she’d simply enjoy looking at them.

“I think we should kneel.” Said Liz.

Why, why kneel ? Clara almost asked, until she saw the shape appear from above. Green skin, that meant something, something important. Clara prided herself on her memory, but any memory becomes a bit crowded after over five hundred years of very active life. Her mental rotadex turned and brought up a memory of Laura telling her about the Ancient Gods. Osiris, he was famous for his green skin. The king of the land of the dead had come to see them, the lord of the underworld himself. Clara hoped she hadn’t said anything disrespectful, though for some reason, she didn’t kneel.

“Clara.... At least lower your gaze.” Hissed Liz.

She didn’t and by some means, she knew he didn’t want her to. He was also known as the Lord of Silence and it didn’t surprise her that he never spoke. He seemed to glide through the air towards her. Clara lifted her hands up, palms facing upward in supplication. Osiris dropped something into her hands and vanished. It wasn’t her imagination, she knew it, but the golden uprights of the gateway seemed less perfect once the God had gone.

“What did he say to you ?” Asked Liz.

“Nothing, not a word.....He is the Lord of Silence.”

“Where did you hear that ?”

“I have no idea.....He gave me something.”

It looked hot for a few seconds, yet her hands hadn't been burned. Resting on her palms was a large diamond. Huge, bigger than anything in the Crown Jewels. Clara knew that for a fact, she'd been obsessed with those jewels in the years between the wars, visiting the Tower of London many, many times. Where it had come from, who had cut and polished it ? None of that mattered as it now seemed to be hers.

“You did pay him a compliment.” Said Mabina. “Though that is a hell of a reward for something that wasn't that much of a compliment.”

“Careful what you say ladies.....Though that is a hell of a reward. I'm sure Clara will share the proceeds with us.”

“Yeah right.....I'm not selling it anyway....Ever.” Said Clara. “It was a gift from a God.....A fucking gift from a God.”

Liz looked as though she expected a lightning bolt from above, but it never came. Did Gods even understand the whole idea of bad language ? Clara carefully wrapped the diamond in the wad of toilet tissue she kept in a pocket of her jeans, and put it into her jacket pocket.

“Toilet roll, she used toilet roll.” Said Mabina. “If she hasn't been well and truly smited by now, she can probably get away with anything.”

“It was all I had to wrap it in.”

“Are you both ready ?” Asked Liz. “Where are those damned hounds ? Here....Come to me you stupid dogs.”

Once again their hounds appeared licking blood off their lips.

“I know they're good to have around.” Said Liz. “I just worry that..... It's like mass murder of the creatures that live here.”

“It saves us having to worry about feeding them.” Said Mabina.

“Hey, I said that.” Said Clara.

It had become a routine now, even the hounds seemed to understand. Liz activated the gateway and everyone followed her through. It was still a land of darkness on the other side of the gate, but the smell of brimstone had gone.

“Now..... That is what I call a Royal Road.” Said Mabina.

~ ~

Twice they'd passed Laura on the stairs in just three or four days. There had been the smell of fresh coffee in the kitchen, but on the whole; they never saw Laura and she never bothered them. Simon was having a play fight with Patsy on the stairs, when Laura came out of her room. She was carrying a large open box of what looked to be computer parts.

“Laura....It's been ages.” Said Patsy. “We left some pizza in the fridge.”

“Thanks, I'll grab a mouthful before going out.”

Men tend to grunt and bump knuckles, but women hugged if they hadn't seen each other in a while. Simon watched the women hug and had a brief pang of guilt about having Patsy in the house so often. Clara would hear about it and he would suffer.

“We're getting an Indian takeaway later.” He said. “I always order enough for three or four.”

“No, I have to be somewhere.” Said Laura. “You know how it is, laws to break, artefacts to acquire and all that.”

“We have to have a boozy night out soon.” Said Patsy.

“Yes, we must.....Once I have this thing sorted out.”

With that Laura picked up her box of computer parts and walked into the kitchen, but only after giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Clara will castrate you." She'd whispered in his ear.

He heard the fridge door open. There was always going to be a paternal feeling towards Laura, he had turned her into a vampire. Simon wasn't too worried about Laura though, she was as tough as old boots.

"By the sound of it, she found the pizza." He said.

"What did she whisper to you?"

"Festina lente." He lied. "It's become a bit of a house joke."

"It's important though, I've picked that up.....Stop walking away Simon. Why is that phrase so important?"

Crap, telling her the truth about Laura's warning would have been easier. He stopped and looked at Patsy, wondering if he should have ignored the pretty girl on the Piccadilly Line that Friday evening. He could understand how Laura felt about Tim. He knew vampires didn't feel love the way humans do. The thought of Patsy not being in his life though, the thought of her not being there, was..... terrifying.

"I'll tell you, but first I need to show you something. I think it's all connected with the haunting I keep seeing. I don't think the images of my friends in Italy are a haunting. I'm beginning to think it's real and can be changed."

"But you were in there."

"Yes and something is different now.....Come and see."

Even Laura had stopped asking him to nail up the door. It seemed that after no one had been attacked or any phantoms had been spotted roaming through that house, that the new door was trusted. Or if not trusted a period of giving it the benefit of the doubt had begun. Simon ignored the rooms to either side of the hallway and entered the room with the dragon statue.

"Take a look at the dragon. Look at its neck Patsy and tell me what you see."

He watched her use her fingers to feel the statue, which he did all the time. It wasn't only very tactile, it felt friendly. Silly really, but he could tell Patsy felt the same way.

"There are tiny cracks." She said.

"Cracks that weren't there before I went into the mirror. Things have changed and maybe they should have been left alone. The view of the room has changed...Come on, I'll show you."

"Then you'll tell me the big secret?"

"Don't treat it lightly Patsy, many have died to keep the secret safe."

"I wasn't.....I suppose I was.... Sorry."

The pushing of books to get into the secret room with the mirror had become so routine, that it barely crossed his mind at how weird it was. What worried Simon wasn't getting stuck in the haunting, or recording, or whatever it was. He was really concerned with breaking the mechanism in some way and losing that view of Giovanni and Niña.

"We'll need to let the entire sequence play through, or whatever its doing." He said

It took longer than he remembered, even though he'd watched it nearly every night. Giovanni going on about wanting more wine, while Niña tried to draw him with pen and ink. Simon was beginning to recognise other sounds too, the noises from the street outside. Could he go there, out into that world he'd once known so well. The entire idea excited and terrified him.

"Now.... Here it comes. Watch her Patsy, keep your eyes on Niña."

The sequence ran until a point where Niña had been chuckling over something Giovanni had said to her. That entire second or two was now different. Instead of chuckling, the girl was looking straight at the mirror, a look of horror on her face. A quick flash of darkness in the mirror followed, just before everything began again.

"I believe you Simon, she did see you."

"I'm glad you saw it too. There was a point where I.....Let's just say vampires aren't exactly famed for their mental stability."

Patsy grabbed his hand and held it very tight.

"You're not going crazy Simon. Do want me to stand guard while you go in there again?"

"No.....Never....Not until I understand what's going on. Supposing I break the mechanism. I'll never be able to see and hear them again."

At least the view from the window hadn't changed. It was still showing the river behind Giovanni's house and the bridge that led to the centre of Florence. Simon found looking at the bridge brought back so many memories.

"Can we find out about the rooms?" Asked Patsy.

"I wouldn't even know who to ask..... Safer to leave well alone."

"The crate came from those tomb robbers didn't it? Laura seems to know quite a bit about them. I could ask her if you like, when we have our next girls night out?"

He wanted to say no and leave the mirror alone, but deep down, he knew that getting out of that room, getting down the stairs and into the town square.....It was too tempting not to try.

"Alright Patsy, it can't hurt I suppose. Laura does seem to have a lot of contacts in that part of the world.... You never know what she might turn up."

She was still holding his hand, looking at him expectantly.

"Come on Simon Atherton, tell all. What is the big secret about Festina lente?"

He could never resist a really good opportunity for some gentle teasing.

"Now, after what we just saw?" He asked.

"No, you're not wriggling out of this, you promised."

"I'm sure I never used the word promise."

"Fuck Simon..... If you expect to sleep with me tonight. Get talking!"

Would she think he was crazy to believe an old tale.....From an age that had believed in alchemy and the nonsense of Michel de Nostredame, better known simply as Nostradamus. The renaissance was thought of as an age of enlightenment by some, though they had believed a huge amount of crap, him included. There was something about the great secret though, a feeling of authenticity. For one thing only a vampire could ever achieve the ultimate goal....

"Come on then, let's order a Chinese and get comfortable downstairs. Then I'll tell you a story few have heard and very few of them are still alive."

"Wow Simon, I can feel the back of my neck tingling."

"You'll need to take the oath first, an oath that will bind you for the rest of your life."

"I don't mind, anything....I just have to know."

~ ~