

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 8 – The Snake

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“You’re lucky I’m home.” Said Mabina. “This is the one night this week when I’m not at the hospital. Come on..... Follow me upstairs. Let’s have a look at this monster that attacked Simon.”

“So you did go back to work.” Said Clara. “Weren’t you having problems with them ?”

“Night shift geriatric nursing has always had trouble recruiting, plus I used a little mental influence on the manager who interviewed me. He was willing to overlook me vanishing for over a year.”

“You must teach me that, I’m about to start looking for a new job.” Said Clara.

“The skills are there inside you Clara, I keep telling you that. You need to practise them more often and have a little more confidence.”

Mabina hadn’t needed to use her home trauma/treatment unit in a while, though just seeing the equipment always gave her a bit of a buzz. She’d sort of drifted into being a medical professional, but it had well and truly got into her psyche. Money wasn’t the reason for returning to work, even though she’d almost convinced herself with that lie. She loved being at the hospital, it was what she lived for.

“Right Simon, get your jacket off and up on the table with you.” She said.

There was blood on his shirt, yet he didn’t move as though anything was painful. When she saw the snake curled around his forearm, she had to laugh.

“Oh, it’s just a servant of Wadjet.” Said Mabina. “Harmless....No actually more friendly than benign. I can’t think why it would have attacked you.”

“It didn’t, the blood is from where Clara started hacking at it.” Said Simon.

“I wasn’t hacking..... And you wanted to get it off your arm.”

“Hacking won’t work.” Said Mabina. “Wadjet was the patron Goddess of Upper Egypt and she made her little pets virtually indestructible.”

Mabina leant towards the snake and couldn’t resist stroking its head. Not a mark on the God created snake, but Simon’s arm had a few holes in it.

“A couple of these wounds are nasty, one will need stitches.” She said. “What weapon did you use on him Clara ?”

“I wasn’t trying to use it on Simon.....My Yemeni Janbiya.”

“Ooo, nasty.....I’ll get Simon stitched up. Can you get the coffee on Clara ? You know where the kitchen is. There are some macaroons in the cupboard above the sink.”

Getting rid of the spouse or loved ones before getting to work was a trick Mabina had learned decades before. It meant that if Simon griped or squawked while being stitched up, she wasn’t going to get the stink eye from Clara. He did wince as she cleaned the wounds up with copious amounts of alcohol. Purely out of habit of course, vampire were immune to most human infections.

“It’s just getting to know you.” She said. “Wadjet’s servants were immensely sought after in the fifteenth century Simon. One King is reputed to have paid his weight in gold for a good specimen.”

“I can’t go around with a snake attached my arm, even if it is friendly.”

“Cleopatra is reputed to have had one as her constant companion..... And before you ask, no.....It wasn't the serpent that bit her.”

“I don't care Mabina. I want it off my arm.”

“Vampires today.....No feel for the old ways. Once I've finished patching you up, I'll look for a book I know is in the house somewhere. A huge ancient tome from the beginning of my rule, it has instructions for dealing with one of Wadjet's servants.”

“Great, can you get it off me ?”

“Hmmm, wait until I find the book.”

Coffee and something to nibble had amazing therapeutic effects, Mabina had seen it work many times at the hospital. By the time she went looking for the leather bound tome, Simon and Clara were far more relaxed. She left them to look for the book, which she was fairly sure was in the attic, in an old camphor wood chest. In the back of her mind was a worry that the book had been left in the concrete filled basement.

“Oh, so glad my memory is having a good day.” She muttered.

She had left quite a bit of junk in the basement, it seemed a good way to get rid of it, forever. The book was there though and it had the slight, but wonderful aroma of camphor.

“One day I'll set up a room as a proper library.”

By the time she returned to the treatment room, she realised the book was in a language she could read, but only just. She sat and read the two relevant pages, several times. They weren't going to like it, especially Simon.

“So, can you get it off him now ?” Asked Clara.

“The main emphasis of the book is on control and using the.....erm.... Good aspects of having a small snake attached to your arm.” Said Mabina.

“But you can remove it ?” Asked Simon.

“No, I'm afraid it's attached to you for life and as you're a vampire..... It does have some very helpful things it can do for you. I can run through those before you leave.”

“Crap ! I've got this thing forever ?” Asked Simon.

“Yes. Normally they're quite fussy who they choose, but if it was left alone for centuries, it probably became less....Picky.”

Only a joke, sort of, yet they were both glaring at her. Mabina reflected on the fickle nature of fate. If Laura had the snake attached to her arm she'd be excited about it, treating it all as a huge adventure, probably.

“Can we copy the pages out of the book ?” Asked Clara.

“You could, but I barely understand the language. I can write down the words to control Wadjet's servant, but Simon will need to say them. I'll write them down in English, as they're meant to sound. A few need guttural sounds from the back of the throat, though most are fairly simple.”

“Can I talk to it ?” Asked Simon

“If you like, but it won't understand you. Just the words of command and if you take my advice, you'll learn those by heart.”

“You'll need to get used to wearing floppy, long sleeved shirts.” Said Clara.

“Fuck !” Said Simon

“There is a command to make it hide, to effectively become invisible.” Said Mabina. “I guarantee you won't like it though.”

“Why, what does it do ?” Asked Simon.

“It drops through your skin and merges into the flesh underneath.”

“Fuck !” Said Clara. “Does it hurt ?”

Mabina read the relevant section of the notes again. The language wasn't good at gender pronouns, so the writer might be a he or a she.

“Whoever wrote this had just been.... Adopted by one of these snakes. They talk about the hiding process being uncomfortable and feeling strange, for a while. Not painful though, no mention of pain.”

“How long is a while ?” Asked Simon.

“He or she doesn't say. There is a reversal command to make it appear again, if having it under the skin becomes too uncomfortable.”

“Can he hide it forever ?” Asked Clara.

“From the writing.....Yes, it seems as though you can.”

It was quite endearing, the way the two of them moved away to whisper to each other, there was even a little hugging involved. They could have easily been a human couple, faced with a difficult decision. Eventually it was Simon who appeared to make the choice.

“Do it Mabina, make this thing absorb itself into my arm.” He said.

“I didn't like to say, but I think you made the right choice.” Said Mabina. “I'll then start to write out all the command words in the book. There aren't that many, you'll soon remember them all.”

“Does the snake have any useful powers ?” Aske Clara. “Genuinely useful I mean. Not just making him understand Latin or something.”

“Wadjet was the nurse to Horus when he was an infant, or so it's believed. Infant Gods always sounded a weird concept to me. Anyway, legend has it that Horus granted his old nanny a lot of powers. If the book is right, Simon could walk through a burning building without getting a single hair singed.”

“Wow, testing that sounds like it might be fun.” Said Simon. “Come on then, what word do I have to say to hide this damn thing ?”

“Deshret Simon, it means Crown in first dynasty Egyptian. The Crown of Lower Egypt to be precise.” Said Mabina. “Say it exactly as I say it.....Deshret.”

“Deshret.” Said Simon.

The snake quivered slightly, before dropping into Simon's skin. For a fraction of a second it was visible as a lump in his flesh, before that too, vanished.

“Oh wow, that felt weird.” Said Simon.

“Does it hurt ?” Asked Clara.

“No it's just uncomfortable, but I can live with it. Alright Mabina, what else does this little guy do ?”

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That way of walking developed, the one all regular walkers understand. At first she'd watched every step Akiva had taken. She'd been alert as they walked past the smallest shadow cast by a rock. After half an hour of trudging, when nothing had come out to attack them, she'd switched to autopilot. When he finally did gasp and come to a halt, she collided with his back. It reminded her of walks with her dad when she'd been quite small. She even used the exact same words.

“You could warn me when you're going to suddenly stop.”

“Sorry.....Look, up ahead.”

It never had felt as though they were walking through a natural cave system. A path was always there for Akiva to follow, there were always broken pillars and carved pieces of stone around them. Probably all damage from earthquakes in the past. Not that Laura had been concerned. A little mild

curiosity maybe, but she was getting better at thinking like a vampire. There was nothing to be gained by worrying about their surroundings, so she ignored the issue. Simple as that.

"I see it.....A temple perhaps ?.....There's only way to find out." She said.

She pushed past him and took the lead. Made of a stone that reflected the light from their caving lamps, the upright pillars were still some distance away. The sheer size of them only became apparent when they walked closer.

"This cavern isn't natural." She said. "Someone must have dug it out of the solid rock to build this temple here."

The two huge pillars looked like gateposts, massive gateposts over a hundred feet high and wider than she could have spread her arms. They looked to have been carved out of white marble, though that might have been the effect of their LED lights.

"Writing carved into them, not hieroglyphs." Said Akiva. "We may have been sent here by Horus, but these ruins don't look to be Egyptian."

The carved writing covered the pillars in characters at least six inches high.

"Can you read what it says ?" She asked.

"No."

"Well..... Let's hope it isn't a warning of some kind."

Laura walked between the pillars and quickly went back into the habit of trudging rather than walking. The walls went from being nothing but rock to what looked like marble panelling. There were a few huge carved animals, mythical beasts of immense proportions. They'd both seen Luxor though and once you've seen one huge carved lion with an eagle's head.....Quite quickly Laura went back into that trudge again, back on autopilot.

"Oh, you could warn me before doing that." Said Akiva.

It wasn't her fault, he should have been watching for her to stop.

"Sorry.....Something moved up ahead." She said. "Left side of the path, near the statue."

"Yes, I saw something."

The statue was twenty feet high and of a man with just one huge eye in the centre of his face, a cyclops. Of course, there was nothing there when they looked around the base of the statue.

"Might be rats, or whatever lives in Ethiopian caves." Said Akiva.

Laura pushed over a few small rocks, just in case, but nothing ran out. As she turned something moved to her right, further along the pathway. Judging by the size, it wasn't a rat.

"I saw that.....It was as big as us." Said Akiva.

"And walking on two legs."

The creature was the only living thing they'd seen in the caves and passageways, which in itself was strange. No scurrying vermin, no sign of droppings to indicate something called the ruins home.

Their new friend was a reluctant buddy, but a persistent one.

"Always keeping right at the edge of our lights." Said Akiva.

"He's seeing if we're friendly, or likely to make a decent meal."

"He ?"

"I hate calling anything an It." Said Laura. "He will do until we're sure."

"Are you and Tim a serious.....Item ?" Asked Akiva. "That's probably the wrong word."

"Why ?" Asked Laura.

"No real reason, just curious."

"Don't go all weird on me." She said.

"I won't, but are you ? An item I mean ?"

"I don't know. He didn't freak out when he found out what I am. That has to mean something doesn't it?"

"Did you think about killing him when he realised?"

"Crap! You're as bad as Liz.....Not wanting to kill him doesn't mean I must love him. I'm almost certain about that. Can we leave it at that?"

"Of course Laura."

The underground structure was immense, though most of it was in a semi-ruined state. Old, very old, Akiva still thought all the statues and carvings were older than the pyramids of Egypt. The dust and debris on the floor became thicker the further they went. Otherwise, they went back into the routine trudging, while keeping a wary eye on their reluctant new buddy.

"That definitely doesn't belong here." Said Laura.

A leather shoulder bag in the centre of the path, so covered in dust that it obviously hadn't been disturbed in quite some time. Laura knelt down to look through the bag, and found a heavy old revolver.

"I recognise the make." She said. "I think this belonged to one of the people Walter and Emily said they had to leave behind."

"Over here Laura.....This must be the owner of the bag, or at least what's left of her."

They'd seen no sign of predators or scavengers, yet something had pulled her skull away from her body. Dry heat had kept decay under control, her breasts were still there, pulled tight by mummified skin. Sadly something had eaten the soft tissues of the woman's face.

"It ate her liver too." Said Akiva. "A sure sign of a serious predator."

"Walter mentioned a predator, though I don't recall the name he used." Said Laura. "It's a pity they didn't seem inclined to tell us more about what attacked them."

"Post-traumatic stress disorder, they're both suffering from it. Weird that ghosts can still have it, and interesting."

"What did they call those creatures that attacked them Akiva? Akhe.... Something or other?"

"Akhetatens Emily called them, people from the city of Akhetaten. Though why she'd choose to call them that.....Never expect logic from dead tomb robbers Laura."

"Bit of a mouthful...How about calling them Akhens?"

"That sounds fine to me."

Laura left the shoulder bag where it was, along with the woman's remains. She could return one day, to the exact same spot to collect the remains. At the moment they both had more than enough to carry.

"No argument about cause of death with this one either." She said.

Twenty yards or so from the dead woman, perhaps he'd been trying to outrun whatever had killed him. The same half eaten face, the same mummified skin. His head too, had been removed from the torso.

"Wrenched off rather than cut." Said Akiva. "Imagine the strength of whatever killed them."

"A quick death I suppose." She said.

Laura didn't bother to look in the man's bag, she was fairly certain there'd just be a water bottle, decayed food and yet another old revolver. Walter and Emily were pros, yet their team had travelled surprisingly light on supplies.

"No bed rolls, not much water." She said. "Not even enough food to get very far. Something about this doesn't make sense."

"Can we trust Walter and Emily?"

“No, of course not, not completely.”

It was nearly night by the time they reached the fissure in the ground, or at least night according to Laura’s watch. The darkness and temperature underground had been the same since Akiva had jumped into the hole and set off down the path; complete darkness and far too hot.

“Looks like there was one hell of an earthquake here.” Said Laura.

The fissure was wide and deep, her light failed to show her the bottom. The path and ruins carried on fifty or sixty feet away, on the other side of the chasm.

“There will be a way across, Walter’s journal talks about them travelling further than this. We just need to find the pathway.” Said Akiva. “We could sleep here and carry on in the morning?”

“I don’t fancy sleeping with our new friend out there.” She said.

“We could take it in turns to keep watch.....Or kill him. I’m sure we can move faster than he can.”

“I’m not sure.....He might be useful. Do you fancy a game Akiva? See who can catch him first.

We’ve plenty of rope to bind him once we have him.”

“And what will I win?” Asked Akiva.

So confident, almost arrogant. Laura was determined he wasn’t going to win. Her speed was better than his, as was her night vision. Just a little.

“Name it, anything I own?..... Apart from my sniper rifle.”

“Sleep with me.”

“What?”

“You said anything that was yours to give Laura. Unless you’re not sure you’ll win.”

She’d already decided to accept, but was pretending to hesitate, to give her time to turn on the vampire side of her nature. Her night vision became better, as her fangs dropped. The reptile part of her brain, the basal ganglia, began to change her perception of movement. No needless distractions, all her mind would concentrate on was the creature. She’d seen him, though she didn’t think Akiva had.

“If I agree, the creature can’t be killed. His death will cancel all bets.” She said.

He’d found a way to circle back through the ruins. Their tireless, quiet and unshakable companion was less than twenty yards back the way they’d come.

“You haven’t told me what you want for winning?” Asked Akiva.

“I’ll let you know when I win.....Unless you’re not confident of winning?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll win.”

Laura had all her senses locked onto the creature and she’d never felt more psyched up. If she lost? Akiva intrigued her and what happened down a hole in Ethiopia, could stay down a hole in Ethiopia. There was no way Tim would ever find out. Not that she intended to lose.

“Alright, I agree.” She said.

No shouting begin or anything, Laura had no intention of playing their game fairly. She instantly hurtled at full speed in the direction of the creature stalking them.

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Simon was still getting used to the weird and uncomfortable feeling of having a snake living under the skin of his right forearm. He needed to be at work though, and he needed to have a serious talk with Ronnie. The whole snake on his arm business had meant not being home when she’d come to the house. A few text messages and she was due to arrive at any moment, for an early morning meeting. Simon thought the delay was probably a good thing. It gave Ronnie a chance to think about consequences. A knock on the door came at one minute before eight, followed by her head peering round the door.

“Come in Ronnie, we need to discuss your trip to Erith.” He said.

A good sign, she was in what looked like her best business suit. Ronnie could dress immaculately if she wanted to, and if she thought it mattered. She sat on one of the chairs in front of his desk and grinned at him.

“So boss.....Do I still have a job ?”

“That depends on one thing Ronnie. Can you keep your mouth shut ?”

She hadn’t picked up that much about Tom and the breakers yard, though she might be able to get the police interested if she felt in a vindictive mood. The problem was that sacked sales staff were famous for holding grudges and being vindictive. He could ask Mabina to make her vanish of course, though that was an option he hoped wouldn’t be necessary.

“Look Simon, I now know you and Tom Ives are into something fairly heavy. I don’t care, it doesn’t worry me at all. Did I ever tell you about my uncle Theo ?”

“No, I never remember you mentioning him. Is it relevant ?”

“Stop giving me the stink eye Simon, we’ve known each other too long. My uncle Theo runs a string of brothels out near Akrotiri airport in Cyprus. Decent places, the girls are treated well and the customers aren’t ripped off, most of the time. Our family know about Theo’s business but no one else does, no one outside the family. The Corleones were amateurs at keeping secrets compared to us.....I’m just saying you don’t need to worry about me saying something silly at the Christmas party.”

It all sounded so plausible, just the sort of conversation she must have known he needed to hear. She was a sales person of course, a damn good one. She was trying to sell him the idea that she could be trusted. There was just one problem.

“Great Ronnie, apart from you telling me about your uncle Theo.”

“You’re different to the public Simon, the punters. You’re in the business. Maybe not girls, but you’re up to something pretty big and you’re definitely in the business. I might even be of use to you....Delivering this or that, passing on messages. In return for a little cash of course.”

Simon settled back into his chair and thought about it. It was about fifty-fifty whether she really had an uncle Theo. He was an idea, a concept to show him she would keep her mouth shut and might be useful, for a price. There had been things to pick up, a trusted helper would definitely be useful.

“Your curiosity worries me Ronnie, it’s why we’re having this conversation. Can you keep it firmly under control ?”

“Yes I can..... You have my word.”

“Alright, we’ll start you off doing a few pickups and see how it goes. As for payment.....I guarantee you won’t be disappointed.”

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After several failed attempts to capture their stalker, Laura had decided to spend some time watching him evade Akiva. At least seven times she’d been so close to capturing the strange creature that vaguely looked like a man. Every time he’d side stepped, or leapt out of the way. Once and only once had there been physical contact. He’d used an arm to block her wrist from grabbing him. Apart from that one touch of his cool skin, they might have been trying to catch a ghost.

“Stand still and fight me.” Yelled Akiva.

Laura had been quietly following them around the ruins, as their new friend continually made Akiva look like a clumsy fool. She’d been right, the creature was male. No clothing at all, not even a strip of cloth to cover his genitals. Two arms, two legs and a head at the stop. Laura would have called him human, if it hadn’t been for the head.

“Laura.....Come and help me.” Shouted Akiva.

Oh no, she was quite happy to watch and wait and learn. Besides, helping him would cancel their game and she was still determined to win. The head of the short manlike creature was long and thin. A skull barely three or four inches across, it extended right down across his chest, almost to where his belly button should be. So far at least, their adversary hadn't shown the slightest sign of being violent. True his only weapon appeared to be a long row of sharp looking teeth, but he hadn't bitten either of them.

“Laura !”

She ignored Akiva and carefully followed the creature. Night vision seemed to be Akiva's downfall, or rather the lack of it. There was part of him that wasn't human, but whatever had been latched onto his DNA, it hadn't given him better night eyes. The creature moved with ease through the ruins, while Akiva walked as though he was walking on eggs. No lights of course, they were trying to catch their stalker using stealth and LED lights weren't stealthy. Laura quietly kept up with the beast and heard it make a low chuntering sound. Unhappy at being chased ? She still wasn't picking up hostility from its movements. It simply found what it obviously thought was a good spot and waited for Akiva to leap at it again.

Laura had an idea, the beginnings of what she hoped might be a game winning plan. Her night eyes were good, definitely better than Akiva's. She was beginning to suspect she might be able to see better in the dark than the creature. Laura moved even closer, as Akiva climbed up and onto the base of a broken column. It was exactly what he'd done for every failed attempt. Definitely a night vision problem. The creature clearly saw Akiva getting ready to pounce, while Akiva probably saw the creature as just a few movements in the dark. It was always going to be a very one sided contest. Not for Laura though, she could see both of them with some clarity.

“Fuck ! Laura ! We need to hunt together.”

Which is what they were doing, only Akiva didn't know it. He'd leapt and the creature had moved to the left, before Akiva had a chance to grab him. Only a few feet to the left, but it was enough to hide him in the darkness. Laura could see him though and she was there, waiting.

“Got you.” She said.

No one had ever escaped her grasp when she was hunting as a vampire, no one. Her arm went round the creatures neck, holding him firmly against her chest. Her other hand grasped his hand, twisting his fingers.

“Don't struggle and I won't hurt you.”

Akiva was there in an instant, looking amazed at the scene of her with their adversary, as she held him tightly in her grasp.

“I won.” She told him.

“Can he talk ?”

“I'm not sure. Even if he does, I doubt that he speaks English.”

Tied up first of course, there was no way she wanted the hard work of capturing him again. He didn't struggle as she bound him at wrists and ankles. Laura wasn't cruel and tried not to hurt him. After all, he hadn't attempted to use his teeth on them. Their prisoner had chuntered a little, but hadn't made any sounds that resembled words.

“We're not going to hurt you.” She said. “Can you understand me ?”

Nothing.

“Try him in a few different languages Akiva.”

“I understand you well enough.”

Terrible English in a broken deep voice, spoken as though it was about his eighth language. He'd spoken though, a creature who looked barely human had replied in understandable English, even if it was only barely understandable.

"I was beginning to think you'd never arrive." He said.

Liz Grant felt guilty as the doorbell rang. She'd already been feeling bad about upsetting Brendan and now she'd lied to Clara. Not a bad lie, or that much of a lie at all, not really. Not the truth either though. Something about halfway between the truth and a lie, a sort of halfway point between the two. She had the feeling in her stomach, the one that meant she'd be puking up a weird looking mess by the end of the day.

"Hi Clara, please come in."

Clara had a bag in her hand, she was known for never arriving empty handed at any social occasion. Not that just the two of them discussing a work opportunity could be called a social occasion.

Actually there wasn't a job opportunity, that had been the small, harmless, sort of lie.

"I come bearing gifts." Said Clara. "Wine and lots of delicious things.....All bad for you I'm afraid."

"Well.....As neither of us has to worry about our health. I bought lots of unhealthy things too."

"Yay, Simon won't be in until late, so I intend to get home feeling a little tipsy." Said Clara. "No Brendan?"

"No, we had a row.....Quite a serious one." Said Liz.

"All the more reason to drink and eat too much.....I brought lots of ice cream."

In her past life Liz had lied quite a lot, though some of the lies had made her clients feel better about themselves. Married men were told it wasn't really cheating. Ugly clients were told they were handsome and the occasional female client was told it was probably just a phase. In her experience escorts were like bar staff, there to reassure and listen. After becoming rather good at it, Liz needed to stop lying to Clara. They had wine and nibbles, a perfect moment to unburden herself.

"I feel terrible Clara, there is no job opportunity. Actually there is.....Just not in the way you think."

"Ahhhh....I should be annoyed but I'm not. Any excuse for wine and nibbles is a good excuse. So Liz.....Why did you really want to see me?"

She'd rehearsed her piece into the mirror, several times. Now a kind of brain fog robbed of the prepared words. Would Clara risk her life to help her? If not it meant going on her own or taking Brendan. That was unthinkable though, no human was likely survive the journey.

"I went to see the Seer, Wiremi." She said. "I'm sure Laura must have mentioned him."

"Yes, Simon and I have heard a lot about him. Some sort of holy man I believe. He certainly seemed to help Laura when she needed to adjust to life as a vampire."

"He told me I'm the Unnamed, which I knew already. He then told me I need to visit the Last Gate to Duat, The Underworld, which I didn't know. As the keeper of the Last Gate, I need to accept my duties, though he assures me the duties are mainly symbolic. I won't have to stay there, or remain forever in my true form."

Clara had drunk half her glass of wine and was actually laughing, as though it was all a huge joke.

"I'm not lying or joking Clara, this is very serious. I've thrown an age old battle out of balance in a way I don't really understand. If I don't accept my duties in person, at the last gate to Duat....The entire universe will unravel."

"Crap, you mean it.....Don't you." Said Clara.

“Yes I do, Wiremi showed me so much, most of it in dreams. I’ve seen what will happen if the gates to the underworld are thrown open. Brendan wants to come of course, but he wouldn’t live to see the first of the twenty one lesser gates.”

“And it really has to be you ?” Aske Clara. “You’re definitely the only person who can stop this....Unravelling ?”

“Yes and I have to take over from the last keeper, which should be interesting.”

There was an eagerness in her eyes, as Clara sat forward on the sofa.

“Will you have to fight it ?”

Liz didn’t want to shrug, but the movement was almost a reflex when asked something that imponderable.

“I have no idea Clara, maybe.”

“Then I must come with you.”

“I was hoping you’d say that, it means I don’t have to beg you to come with me.”

“Beg ! This sounds like the opportunity of a lifetime and vampires have very long lifetimes. We’ll need a third of course. Daniel is busy with his small holding and we can hardly expect him to abandon Gwen and the boy. Laura could be away for quite some time and anyway, she has her own battles to fight.”

“Do you think Simon might come with us ?” Asked Liz.

“I’m sure he’d love to, but we need someone in the house with a paying job, even if just for the sake of appearances. Plus he has a few side hustles that need looking after. There is one obvious choice and I can guarantee she’d love to come.”

“Oh, you mean Mabina, don’t you ? I’m not sure Clara, she still.....Look, I shouldn’t say too much, she’s been very good to you and Simon.”

“I’ll let you into a secret, Mabina still worries me.” Said Clara. “Once a monster, always a monster.....I no longer think about killing her, but she does make my skin crawl. The thing is, the three of us together should be fairly unstoppable.”

“Do you think of me like that....Once a monster...? “ Asked Liz.

Clara actually put a hand on her arm.

“Oh Liz, never, ever.....I met a truly ancient vampire once. So old he looked more ancient than.....Erm.... Daniel. I was ready for a fight, but he was a real charmer. A gentle vampire, or at least he seemed that way to me. Monster is as monster does Liz. Mabina tied Patsy to a chair and tortured her. That I can never truly forget or forgive.”

“But you still want to take her with us ?”

“Yes, three girls together....Two vampires and the Unnamed. We’ll be unstoppable.”

Liz picked up a chocolate éclair and ate it in one mouthful. The sugar rush was instant and satisfying.

“Alright, but.....Will you ask her ? You know her better than I do.” Said Liz.

“No problem, when do we need to leave ?”

“Wiremi kept talking about time being an illusion. Soon after that he’d tell me that haste was required. He can be very confusing. He actually said I should make haste slowly a few times. I think it’s safest to assume we should have left yesterday.”

“Festina lente, as Simon says it.” Said Clara. “Or make haste slowly....That saying keeps cropping up and Simon goes quite dark and moody when I ask him about it.

“So it seems we should get a move on.” Said Liz

“Right..... Do you want me to get the airline tickets ? Where are we heading, Cairo to begin with, and then Luxor ?”

“Oh no Clara, it’s not that kind of journey. It’s definitely not going to be that method of travel. We’ll need lights and weapons though, heavy edged weapons. The bigger and heavier the better.”

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Patsy Smart watched the small black and white kitten, as her mum teased him with a catnip mouse. It was difficult to believe the creature would become a protector for her mum when he grew up, but Mabina wasn’t the sort to lie about such things. Evie, her mum, laughed as tiny Zeus hissed at the toy mouse.

“He’ll be a big cat Patsy, look at the size of his paws.”

“I’ll get him to the vet next week mum. About time he had his jabs.”

“Oh, poor thing.”

Zeus had already grown quite a bit, it was what kittens did. They ate a lot, they slept a lot and they grew really fast. Her mum had been taking less naps since Zeus had arrived and she’d been doing more in the garden. Timmy had been an affectionate old tom cat, but he hadn’t been that active for a long time. Actually he’d become about as active as a throw rug for quite a while.

“I’m going to bed mum, it’s been a long day. Simon will be coming over tomorrow.”

“Good, we haven’t seen him for a while. Nice boy.”

The only boyfriend Evie had ever taken to and he was a vampire. It didn’t say a lot for the supposed infallible intuition all mothers were supposed to have. Patsy was so tired that she almost sat on the note left on her bed. It was dusty and there was a little red sand on her duvet.

“Have vampires as friends and you’ll never have a dull moment.” She muttered.

A note from Laura, she recognised her dreadful writing. Probably delivered by one of her weird and wonderful minions. Patsy shook off the dust and read the few untidy lines.

‘Yes, I would like to meet the Silver Dawn.

Tell them I’ll be in back in London next week.

Please arrange a meeting at The Orangery Café at Hampton Court.

Wednesday next week, about lunchtime.

Laura.’

It seemed an eccentric choice of venue, but that suited Laura. David Huynh from the Silver Dawn had been incredible sweet and polite, he’d even sent her flowers and chocolates. He was keen on seeing Laura though and his calls were becoming more frequent. Patsy instantly sent him a text, telling him to meet Laura at the Orangery Café at the date and time Laura had requested. It took him less than ten seconds to confirm that he’d be there.

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