

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 21 – Realm Of Dreams

**“They were in the Blackwall Tunnel before Patsy began to fully relax. She could understand taxi drivers not wanting to go south of the river, especially at night. North London felt like home and the tunnel would take them there.”**

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Clara was tough and she'd been alive for over five centuries. That didn't mean she wasn't cautious in a fight. Every opponent had be treated with respect and Baek-hyun, the martial arts champion was tougher than most. A blade through her eye and into her brain, or a gunshot that penetrated her heart and she'd be dead. Really dead, the permanent kind of death. Baek-hyun let go of Ronnie's leg and stopped dragging her behind him. He then dropped his gun and brought out a knife from under his jacket. A serious knife, any special-ops soldier would have been proud of the weapon. His intentions were obvious, the Korean gang's enforcer, wanted to meet her in fair combat. As for Ronnie.....She was unconscious and covered in blood, but her heartbeat was still strong. The enforcer waved his blade around, but didn't move towards her.

“Arm yourself.” Yelled Baek-hyun.

Clara let her fangs drop and her venom was already dripping off them. One scratch from a fang and the neurotoxin would paralyse the huge Korean in seconds. He looked surprised, but he still had the same insolent smile.

“I'm always armed.” Said Clara. “I have no orders about you. Leave my friend behind and walk away. I won't come after you.....I've already fed well tonight.”

Clara had no idea what got the huge man out of bed in the morning. We all need a reason, though she suspected his would feel less alien to her, than most. Baek-hyun ripped his shirt open, before he used his blade to point at a tattoo on the left side of his chest. The smile went, as he spoke to her. His English was good, but he seemed to need to concentrate on his words.

“This means loyalty.....The boss of bosses is dead, but I still serve him.”

As if to add emphasis, he dug the knife into his chest, which caused blood to flow over the tattoo.

Clara understood, it was a warrior thing. Baek-hyun was a throwback, the sort of warrior who'd served the Shoguns.

“So.....We fight.” Said Clara.

There had been quite a lot of noise, though it was a warehouse district. No one was likely to be wandering about at night, waiting to call the police about anything untoward. Clara assumed there was no need to rush things, until the fire alarm went off. Like a demented banshee, its deafening wails, filled the air. As she looked up, he went for her. Surprisingly quick for his size, his blade bit into her left forearm. Not deep, she moved away too fast for it to do any real damage. Still, the wound made her focus on the matter at hand.

“Whatever you are.....You bleed.” Yelled Baek-hyun.

“I'm a Nosferatu, a feeder on human blood.” Shouted Clara. “I was born over five hundred years ago and.....I'll taste your blood tonight.”

Fellow vampires were the only adversary really worth fighting. Clara had once buried a dagger deep into the head of a legendarily tough vampire, only to have him stand up and come after her. Baek-hyun wasn't going to be that tough, but he had cut her. For some reason, Clara didn't relish the idea of killing him, though he was between her and Ronnie.

"We're all dead people, Nosferatu." Said Baek-hyun. "Eventually death will claim us all. The best any of us can hope for, is to die well."

He came for her, covering the distance between them with surprising speed. Clara wondered how many had died, after being astonished at how quickly the enforcer could move. Clara ducked below his swinging blade arm and went in close. She could easily have written a huge book on hand to hand fighting; she'd had plenty of experience. One major point was never being scared to get in close. For one thing, opponents don't expect it. Clara used her shoulder to lift the huge man, before using the strength in her arms to throw him quite a distance. His turn to be surprised, probably. She couldn't see his eyes in the semidarkness, as he went over the guard rail for the internal stairs.

"Sorry.....You deserved a better way to die." Said Clara.

There was a loud clang, as he hit the metal landing area, quite some way below her. He was tough, but no one could survive that; even she'd have been hurt. Clara knew she should have gone to make sure he was dead, but Ronnie needed help. He knew her though; the Koreans probably had her address. Then there was the fact that he knew she was a vampire.

"Eighty feet onto metal.....He has to be dead." She muttered.

A huge mental argument with herself, that had taken place in a few seconds. Clara hoped the enforcer was dead and picked up Ronnie. No using the internal stairs, the fire people would probably use those. In Clara's experience, the fire brigade got to any call out first, even before the police. Through the entrance to the back stairs, with Ronnie held like a child in her arms. Over her shoulder would have been better, but injured people find it hard to breathe when carried like that. Down, running fast down flight of stairs, after flight of stairs. Clara was fairly sure she'd done nothing to have caused a fire, but there was the glow of flames in a window. The people at the party had been drunk or high and they'd left in a hurry. Someone could have easily left a cigarette burning in the wrong place. No way of knowing for certain, it was likely to remain a mystery. Ronnie must have recovered consciousness; she turned to look at her, as they reached ground level.

"Clara.....Did you get him ?.....The huge guy ?"

"Maybe.....I'm pretty sure I did."

Impossible to see the emergency vehicles, they were on the other side of the building. Clara could see the reflection of blue lights though, against a warehouse wall. There were the sirens of course, lots of them, all loud enough to wake the dead. Avoiding all the noise and first responders meant going in the wrong direction for a while, to eventually get back to the van. Not that Ronnie would mind, she was unconscious again.

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Patsy Smart sat in the van and kept her head down, as the people from the party ran by. A strange assorted crowd with some in suits and some wearing almost nothing. Some were shouting about being attacked, which meant that at least one of them was likely to call the police. Luckily, none of them seemed interested in the van parked up against a wall. Patsy had used a gun before, she'd shot and killed someone who had been a threat to Simon. The experience had been horrific and disturbing. All that noise and blood and they hadn't died immediately. It was definitely an experience Patsy didn't want to repeat. She took the gun out of the glove compartment though and placed it on the passenger seat. Everything was quiet again for a while, until the alarm went off.

“Shit.” She muttered.

There were advantages to lots of run throughs and going over everything many times. Patsy remembered that the building didn't have an intruder alarm, at least not one that went straight to someone likely to call the cops. The banshee wailing was likely to be a fire alarm, which was still bad. Quite soon a couple of fire engines would arrive, maybe more than two. Firemen weren't armed though and as far as Patsy knew, they never actually arrested anyone.

“Come on Clara.....Please get here quickly.” Patsy muttered.

There was a reason she'd put on the interior light, something she needed to look at. There had definitely been a reason, but the face a few feet from the windscreen drove it out of her mind. A man's face that might have been handsome once, but not anymore. The shock stopped her turning off the interior light. For a minute or so, they just looked at one another. That dreadful broken, blood covered face and her.

“Patsy.....Patsy Smart.” He yelled.

A huge guy with muscles, like someone off a wrestling show. His shirt had been ripped apart to reveal a chest covered in tattoos. Tattooed arms too, even some sort of symbol on his neck. The one thing that came across most was his face, which had collided with something. The flesh of his cheek had been ripped away from the jawbone in places. His sheer size was the second thing to grab Patsy's attention.

“Patsy Smart.” He yelled again.

He had to be one of the Koreans and they had to have files on Clara and her friends. It was the only explanation for the huge guy knowing her, when she didn't know him. A massive guy straight out of a wrestling magazine.....She'd have remembered him.

“I don't fucking know you.” She shouted.

That annoyed him, she actually heard him snarl at her. Off went the interior light, though there was still enough glow from a street light, to see him. His left arm looked twisted and he had a limp, but he could still move fast. Around to the driver's side, he arrived like an angry express train. The doors were locked, she'd made sure of that as soon as Clara and Ronnie had left. There was that snarl again as he used his right fist to punch the glass. It held, the glass didn't even crack. He glared at her before walking away, though she was certain he'd be back. He was going to keep trying until he killed her, the guy she didn't even know. Tempting to call the cops, but that could mean prison and not just for her. Patsy picked up the gun.

“Why me ?” She muttered. “Why is nothing ever easy ?”

When the massive man returned, he was carrying a large piece of what looked like a broken paving stone. He held it up for her to see, the sharp end pointed at the window. He actually smiled, before slamming the stone into the window. All that strength and weight behind the blow, the glass shattered into hundreds of tiny glass cubes. A leering bloody face came through the broken glass, as an arm went for the door handle.

“Bastard.” Patsy yelled.

She fired straight into that dreadful horror of a face, but he never fell down. He should have been a body on the ground, but he was backing away from her. It wasn't that wide a road, he was at the far side of it when he fell over. Backwards he went, like a felled tree. He was still moving, shifting around on the ground. Patsy left the van and walked over to the man who should have been dead.

No one survives a bullet in the face, at least not in TV cop shows.

“I don't fucking know you.” She yelled at him.

He was still moving about and there was a spluttering sound coming from his mouth. Patsy aimed at the centre of his chest and fired twice. Now, at last, he was finally quite still. No sounds, no wondering if he was dead.....The huge man was dead, though Patsy did kick him twice, just to be sure.

“Get in the van.....We’re leaving.”

A voice she recognised, Clara carrying Ronnie as if she was a child. No opening the back doors to the van, it had one of those security bar locks. Designed to stop thieves, they took an age to get open. Patsy opened the passenger side door and Clara climbed in, gently holding Ronnie against her.

“No smoking tyres.....Get us to the exchange point.” Said Clara.

There was another car in a car park in North London. There the van would be picked up to go into the crusher, while Patsy drove them to Hornsey. Once Patsy was sure there was wasn’t anyone following them, she relaxed. Not that anyone should have been following them, it had just been one of those days.

“Is Ronnie alright ?” Patsy asked.

“She should be fine.”

“Did you deal with the Koreans ?”

“Oh yes.”

They were in the Blackwall Tunnel before Patsy began to fully relax. She could understand taxi drivers not wanting to go south of the river, especially at night. North London felt like home and the tunnel would take them there.

“Did you see that guy I shot ?” Asked Patsy. “Do you know who he was ? He appeared out of nowhere, all beaten up. He knew me, Clara. The bastard knew my name.”

“Congratulations, Patsy.” Said Clara. “You just killed Baek-hyun. Martial arts champion, enforcer for the Korean cartel and he was rumoured to be their executioner.”

“Wow.” Said Patsy.

“I threw him down some stairs, but you killed him.” Said Clara. “I think you could put a tattoo on your chest, if you wanted to ? Killer of their champion.”

“Wow....I probably won’t.....My mum would go crazy. She hates tattoos.”

Ronnie woke up and seemed to ignore the fact that she was on Clara’s lap. Ronnie turned and looked at her for a few seconds.

“Hi Patsy, someone broke your window.”

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Laura hadn’t intended to dream of the forest. It was an ordinary night, with a meal, a little Netflix and some really good sex with Tim. She was a little tired and expecting to sleep peacefully until the next morning. Natural dreams were more vivid than when she intended to enter the realm of dreams. The colours were often bizarre. Tim’s arm was draped over her and it was now a metallic yellow colour. Tim’s arm seemed to grow wheels and a blower, as it turned into a Funny Car, a dragster. When his arm took off in a cloud of rubber smoke and nitro methane fumes, she knew her dreams were going to be wild.

‘We have a new track record.’ Someone was yelling.

Very quietly in the background, she could hear a pop song, something by Shakira. In her mind, she knew it was a dream, probably made weirder by having the pizza. There was something about eating warm cheese at night and vivid dreams, a definite causal connection.

‘No public in the pit lane....Please.’

Her dream appeared to evict her, which was a first. Awake again, but with that dreadful feeling of being paralysed. That was it, no more late night pizza. She was looking at the side of Tim's head, yet unable to move. The whole world seemed to collapse in on itself and she was floating between two worlds she knew very well. The quiet song had changed, to something by Gwen Stefani.

'What you waiting

What you waiting for?

Tick-tock

Tick-tock

Tick-tock

Tick-tock

Take a chance you stupid ho.'

Ahh, it all became clear. Wiremi had been an old school seer, a traditionalist. Every hint and instruction was delivered in terms of the wisdom of the forest. Jack had said he was different. It seemed his wisdom was delivered by memorable lyrics. The 'Stupid Ho' seemed a bit extreme, but she got the idea.

"Ok Jack, I get it.....I need to take a chance." Laura muttered.

Above her and apparently upside down, were the dunes. Vast sand dunes in a limitless desert. Laura had been there a few times to meet Wiremi and others. Below her was being waged the endless war. Order in the form of a cold deep ocean, fought the fires of Chaos. Not symbolic either, or at least not totally symbolic. She'd never survive setting foot on where the ocean appeared to be boiling.

'You never know, it could be great

Take a chance 'cause you might grow

Oh, oh-oh.'

Up to the dunes was safe, it wasn't taking a chance. Yet down....That seemed certain death, even for a vampire. Yet, she had to choose and by implication from the lyrics, choose quickly. Laura pictured the ocean in her mind and managed to move downward, at some speed. Flailing her arms didn't work, nor did getting in a panic. She'd tried all physical actions in the past and none of them had changed her course by half a degree. Laura closed her eyes and thought about the open area of the ocean, well away from the eternal battle with the fires of chaos. Cold waters, but she could handle that.

"I hope there's a point to all this.....Jack." She muttered.

When she opened her eyes the ocean looked close enough to be real, rather than a distant picture of an ocean. She could see the waves, feel the spray and smell the salt in the water. The battle still looked too close, but there was no time to do anything about that. There were rumours, ancient carvings in hidden places across the globe. Some spoke of mortals who had entered the eternal battle. Some had lived, though there were no details of their fate.

"Into the eternal darkness, into fire and into ice." Laura muttered.

Dante had written those words. He'd been there, he'd seen the constant struggle between Order and Chaos. As Laura's foot touched the top of a wave, everything vanished.

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Endless days of waiting were having an effect on Simon. He prided himself on surviving boredom that would have most people going crazy. By most people, he meant humans of course. All vampires could sit in a tree and watch their selected prey for days. That was all part of the stalking process though, with a meal of blood to look forward to. It wasn't boredom that was making him restless, it

was seeing Juliana's scars all day, every day. They could be healed, once they were back in Florence, but that might not be for some time. Then there was the worry that whatever had hurt her, might return. He'd woken that morning lying next to Juliana, with the rising sun showing a lattice of scars across her pretty face. That was the moment when he'd decided to be proactive. He was going after the evil presence in Leptis Magna, before it came for them again.

"Here, I feel it here, whatever it is." Said Niña.

Niña was great at finding the important places in the ancient city, but she was often unable to say why a certain place was making her senses tingle. He'd asked her to find the centre of the evil in the city, the place where it was likely to call home. She was currently pointing down, at what was left of a ruined mosaic inside a destroyed building.

"Deep...Very deep." Added Niña. "I have no idea how you'd get to it, but I can begin searching for a way down there. If you'd like me to?"

"We may end up fighting whoever we're here to see." Said Giovanni.

It was a risk Simon was aware of, but thought was unlikely. There were many forms of darkness and evil, like layers of an onion. His kind, the vampires, were called the Children of Satan in some ancient scrolls. Simon was certain the one coming to see them, wasn't in Leptis Magna. It was something Niña and he agreed on.

"No, I had a taste of whatever is coming, from the temple." Said Niña. "It is a dark force, but not related to the ancient evil in this city."

"She's right.....Look down, see what you've been ignoring." Said Juliana.

Juliana was feeling much better, so getting her to sit in the temple all day, had become impossible. She was young and curious, especially since Niña had told her what they were planning. Simon looked down at the mosaic floor and he saw it. A ruined design, almost half the small tiles that made up the image were gone.

"Yes.....She's right." Said Giovanni. "It's him, Lucifer himself. Baphomet if you like that name better, the Goat of Mendes."

At the centre of the mosaic, right under where Niña stood, was the incomplete image of a huge goat. Up on its hind legs, with huge hooves on its feet and horns on its head. The face appeared to be snarling, though much of the head was gone. Nothing to do with Satan of course, but the horned goat, which personified evil, had existed in many ancient cultures. Someone had sensed the evil thousands of years before, when Leptis Magna was a thriving city. They'd left a warning in that mosaic, which had probably been ignored.

"Thank you, Juliana." Said Simon. "It took your fresh eyes, to see what we couldn't."

"So, you want to fight Satan now?" Asked Giovanni. "I've said it before, your hubris will be the end of you old friend."

"The goat is merely a symbol." Said Niña. "Stolen by Christianity as their devil, their Lucifer. The devil doesn't exist, but this goat does, I feel it."

Even for vampires, the heresy was shocking. All of them attended mass when in Florence, to do otherwise brought all sorts of risks. Believing most of it was nonsense was one thing, but to openly say it....

"Never say that in front of my father." Said Juliana.

"I've no intention of doing so." Said Niña. "Have you made up your mind, Simon? Do you want me to find the path to this Goat of Mendes? I'm sure there will be one."

"Only the path dear Niña." Said Simon. "Just the path, but don't descend too far. When you've found a way, come and let me know."

“Good luck and be careful, Niña.” Said Juliana.

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Tim woke to find himself looking straight at Laura’s head on her pillow. Her eyelids were wide open, but her eyes were going through REM sleep, rapid eye movements. Fast random movements of her eyes. Up, down, then fast to one side, before returning to the left....It went on and on and looked so unnatural. Tim was worried it might be damaging her eyes in some way. He stretched out a hand to touch her, but she woke up before his fingers reached her face. He saw her take a deep breath and she was there, blinking her eyes and looking at him.

“Laura....Are you alright ?” He asked. “Your eyes.....You were sleeping with your eyes open.”

“I was dreaming.”

Tim searched for her hand under the blankets and held it. She was so cold, far colder than usual.

“Are you alright now ?” Tim asked.

“I saw.....’It’, Tim. I’m not sure what it was, maybe what was here before there were any Gods. ‘It’ spoke to me, but I’ve forgotten some of it. I know it’s on our side, though ‘It’ can’t fight the battle for us. I saw ‘It’ though and even though I can’t describe ‘It’, I know ‘It’ was wonderful.”

Tim stroked her cheek and that was cold too. It was Laura lying next to him, but there was something different about her.

“Are you sure it wasn’t all just a very vivid dream ?” He asked.

Suddenly Laura was his Laura again, the one who laughed over inappropriate things and sometimes scared him a little. She chuckled and pulled the blankets off them both.

“I hope not, or I’m going to look very silly.” Said Laura. “Move back.....Further, right to your edge of the bed.”

She moved away from him, right over to the other side of their bed. They were in Hornsey for a while, it seemed the best place for organising the fight against the great feathered serpent. For over five minutes, she looked at him, smiling occasionally.

“What is supposed to happen ?” He asked.

“Patience, Tim.....Patience.”

Just as it was all becoming an awkward length of time to wait, there was a popping sound. Not a loud pop, but it grabbed his attention. The object falling through the bedroom ceiling, arrived about thirty seconds later. No damage to the ceiling, or the bed, though the object looked solid and heavy. It thudded into their mattress, though for some reason, he couldn’t see it in detail. Just a bright red object, about four or five feet long.

“Don’t touch it, let it settle in our world.” Said Laura.

“Touch it; I can’t even see it.”

Just a long red object, even its basic shape was hard to see. The glow stopped, yet Laura didn’t attempt to pick it up, or even touch it. For nearly half an hour, they lay on the bed, just looking at it.

“From another place, a different reality.” Said Laura. “It needs to....Adjust to this one.”

When he could see it clearly, his mind refused to believe what his eyes were showing it. Long and thin, with a silver blade and a handle as dark as ebony. It looked dangerous, though he couldn’t have said why.

“It’s a sword.” Said Tim. “I wasn’t expecting it to be a sword.”

“Not a sword there, when ‘It’ showed it to me.” Said Laura. “More useful as a sword though, than how it was. ‘It’ can’t fight our battle, but this will make a huge difference. What were you expecting it to be ?”

“I’m not sure, but a sword seems a bit....Ordinary.” Said Tim.

Laura picked up the sword with ease and suddenly the sword didn't look ordinary any longer. It seemed part of her and she seemed part of it. A weapon from another reality, the original reality. "Now I see you with it." He said. "I really do think we can beat Q'uq'umatz." "In the end Tim, every battle boils down to a hero with a sword."

In many ways Aberdeen was perfect for them. The offshore petroleum industry meant the city had an international population, with plenty of hotels and guest houses. People arrived and left all the time, often barely recognised by hotel staff, before moving on. It was the melting pot feel to the place, which made it so perfect. No small town busy bodies, who thought they had a right to know everyone's business. Liz Grant could understand why Daniel had used the city as a source for most of the people he hunted and fed on.

"When you said a hotel in Aberdeen, I had thoughts about something far more swanky." Said Brendan.

"Cheap and cheerful, the sort of place where we'll be forgotten ten minutes after we leave." Said Liz. The glorified guest house hadn't been her choice; Daniel had called with the details. Quite a way from the sea, quite a way from anywhere worth seeing in Aberdeen. The bed and breakfast rate was almost worryingly cheap and they hadn't tasted the breakfast yet. They were passing through, though even the girl who'd booked them in, had shown no curiosity about their final destination. "Cheer up, it's not that bad." Said Liz. "I've known far worse. There was a place in Nairobi once, but I won't bore you with the details."

Nairobi had been with a client once, during her days as a very expensive escort. They had an agreement on not talking about that part of her past, at least not in details. She'd actually travelled with Brendan as an escort once and necessity had brought them together. As for love.....That had arrived some time later.

"I bumped a flower vase in the hall." Said Brendan. "It didn't move.....It's bolted to the table."

"So, oil workers can be a rough crowd. It isn't for long and we can eat out if the food is awful."

"The plan was for us to wait in London, in our own home." Said Brendan.

"Plans change." Said Liz.

He was worried about money and losing work. The loft conversion quote had been accepted and meant work right through the coming winter. Liz kissed him on the lips and felt him relax. Why had she fallen in love with the huge dumb guy? She had no idea; there had been far better looking admirers, with far better bank balances. But, there was something about the large Irish guy and on the whole.....She was happy when she was with him.

"It won't be for long." Said Liz. "And let's be honest, we know people who'd think this hotel is a five star paradise."

"Oh yes, Steve and Janice would want to move into this place." Said Brendan.

"And the bed looks nice and comfortable."

They exchanged a look, a mutual agreement to christen the bed that night. That would give the hotel room a few personal memories, really excellent memories. By the end of the week, they'd be talking about the hotel with affection. No daytime sex though, the damned dragon's head could appear without warning. Not at night though, they'd come to an agreement with Karkengara.

"Do you fancy a walk around Aberdeen?" Asked Brendan.

It was one degree outside, with a cold wind that came straight off the North Sea. A dreadful day for a walk around town. For some reason it sounded like a wonderful idea. Maybe that was what love was all about, risking hypothermia because your partner fancied a walk.



“Great, I brought my fur lined boots.” Said Liz.

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Tim was in the room across the hallway, with Akiva, who was looking out of the window. Tim had taken the call from Brendan. It seemed there was a new player in the game and Jack wanted everyone together, preferably close to the small holding in Pitmedden in the Parish of Udney. A cheap hotel in Aberdeen had seemed a perfect choice. Frequented by oil workers, the hotel had a massive turnover of short stay guests. Daniel had called Aberdeen the Texas of the north. Tim had been to Texas and didn't remember cold winds and a wind chill of about minus five.

“Do you think it ever warms up out there ?” Said Akiva.

“It can reach nineteen degrees in August.” Said Tim.

“Wow, be still my heart.” Muttered Akiva.

Laura had developed a thing about them travelling in traditional and verifiable ways, just in case the authorities decided to ask questions. The trip to Africa had been via various airlines, using several different makes of passenger jets. It had been comfortable, but mind numbingly tedious. Plus there had been a bit of turbulence while flying over the Gambia, that had been fairly terrifying. It had been a huge relief when Laura had said she'd use the Egg of Astaroth to take them all to Aberdeen. The sword had been the cause of her choice of travel. It seemed that taking a five foot sword on a plane was a non-starter. Daniel had booked the hotel and they'd arrived in a side street, complete with luggage and the sword in a bag, just after dusk. Akiva had his own room, a little further along the hall.

“Laura will be a while.” Said Tim. “We could go out....I quite fancy a burger and fries.”

“Do you know where she is ?” Asked Akiva.

“She went to see Huh.”

“Wow, just like that.....She dropped in on the God of time.”

“Yes, they're buddies now.....Do you fancy a burger ?” Asked Tim.

Akiva looked out of the window again, as if working out survival times in the wind chill.

“To think I once moaned about winters in Jerusalem. Twelve degrees and I reached for thermal underwear.” Said Akiva. “Come on then, there must be a decent burger place within walking distance.”

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They were deep below Leptis Magna, at least twelve hundred feet. It was the build one city over the ruins of an older one, thing going on. Twelve hundred feet deep and the passageway had a cobbled floor and there were ruined buildings on either side. It had been a thriving street once, probably when Leptis Magna had been part of the Carthaginian Empire. Simon had one of their precious, yet smelly oil lamps, as did Niña. He'd made sure they were prepared, just in case something happened to keep them stuck underground for a while. Not that he intended Niña to go much deeper into the ancient Carthaginian city.

“There are marks, when you know what to look for.” Said Niña. “An arrow with a feathered tail, they seem to point towards the deep, dark heart of this dreadful place. It took me a while to realise their significance.”

There in front of him was the mark, carved into a stone by the side of the cobbled road. Like milestones, but they were covered in carvings you had to understand, to realise their significance. Niña was clever, but she freely admitted that understanding the meaning of the arrows, had been largely down to luck.

“How much deeper have you been ?” Asked Simon.

“There is an archway ahead of us, with a sloping stairway leading down.” Said Niña. “There is something on those stairs, invisible but definitely there. We both know Carthage was the centre for the dark arts at that time. It may just be a guard dog of some kind, a magical creature left to deter intruders. Or.....”

“It might be something more dangerous than we can comprehend.” Said Simon. “Show me the top of the stairs and then leave. I’ll give you time to get away, before annoying the guard on the stairs.”

“You can’t face it alone.” Said Niña.

“I must and I will. If I don’t return in one day, get everyone to the Mermaid. If I’m not back in three days, get Galeoto to take you all back to Florence. If I die my destiny dies with me. No one else should seek out the great secret.”

Niña actually cried for him, just a little, as she left him at the stairs. He could feel it too, something evil on the stairs. Not necessarily an enemy or a trap left for his kind. There were as many types of evil as there were grains of sand on a beach and most weren’t his natural enemy. Simon waited for quite some time, to make sure Niña was a long way from the arch and the stairs that went even deeper below Leptis Magna.

“Whatever deity loves vampires.....Watch over me now.” He muttered.

Simon had the same blade he’d used for centuries, though it was now fairly new. Blue steel and made by the best weapon smith the Medici had ever employed. No special charm or enchantment on the blade, but just holding it made him feel more confident. He’d won more fights than he could easily count with his assassin’s blade, it was an old friend.

“Alright.....Whoever or whatever you are..... Show yourself.” Simon shouted.

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