

## Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 9 – Luna Blue

**“The hotel wasn't huge, just two floors. It reminded Laura of a guest house in Cliftonville that her parents booked year after year. The taxi driver parked in front of the main entrance and removed their bags from the back.”**

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Simon had insisted on taking Niña to the meeting. A special meeting with Brother Alberti, one that might well take most of the night. There had been resistance from Alberti, to the meeting itself and the attendance of the new young vampire. Strange, as Alberti had been urging him to move forward with his project to uncover the great secret behind 'Festina Lente.' Simon didn't tell Niña about his suspicions until they were out of the horse drawn coach that had delivered them to the headquarters of The Brotherhood.

“He didn't seem right at our last meeting. He was actually trying to slow down my research. As for you attending the meeting. If I didn't know better, I would say you scared him in some way.”

“Will we be safe tonight ?” Asked Niña.

“I believe so, but be ready if there is trouble.” Said Simon.

It had to be done at night. Not only because vampires were at their best in the hours of darkness. What alchemists called disturbances in the ether, were less at night. Simon understood such things and although there were no radio waves or mobile phones in Italy during the time of the Medici. There was the sun. The sun bombarded the land with all types of particles, which were greatly reduced at night.

“So, you really think I'm the key to something important ?” Asked Niña.

“I do, or I wouldn't have insisted on your presence. Did you bring the blade ?”

“Yes, Simon.” Said Niña. “Though I'm not sure if I could use it.”

“Trust me, your vampire side will take over if it has to. If it's a question of survival, you will use the blade.”

Simon had never been into the arcane arts, it felt unnecessary with the skills he already had. Juliana knew women who claimed to have skills, quite a surprising number. One of them had put a hex on the blue steel blade. It would penetrate any defence and puncture the skin of any living thing, whether it was from their world or hell. Quite a claim, especially as the hex hadn't been that expensive. Even if it didn't work, Niña had vampire strength to drive the dagger home.

The guards outside the nineteen-sided room didn't search him and he was allowed to keep his sword on his belt. To them Niña would look little more than a child. She was waived through behind him. If Alberti had been possessed, could they kill him ? Should they ? He was involved in so many time lines for a such a long period of time. It would probably take a whole army of Huh's minions in lilac robes to repair the damage.

“Simon....I'm not feeling well.” Said Alberti. “I hope this meeting is as you said, essential.”

“It is and I'm afraid.....I'm going to need you to let Niña sit in your chair for a while.”

Alberti sat at the centre of the power nexus for most of the day, but Simon knew he could survive being away from it for a while. Simon had seen him in various parts of Florence, attending various

meetings. The head of the Brotherhood could be almost a recluse, but the role came with obligations. Alberti needed to see the various heads of the Medici family. Very rarely he travelled beyond the outlying regions of Florence. Quite recently, Alberti had attended a conference on papal matters at the Castel Sant'Angelo, in Rome.

"Don't be ridiculous." Said Alberti. "Why would your girl child need my chair?"

"We both agree Niña is very special." Said Simon. "I have had dreams about her that I don't understand. There is a feeling she has huge potential, yet lacks the power to achieve it. I'm suggesting that we put her at the centre of the nexus and.....See what we shall see."

"My chair isn't at the focal point of the room." Said Alberti.

"It is, I've done my research." Said Simon. "The lenses inside the nineteen walls are angled to focus all the power of the nexus, on your chair. I can feel it when I come close to you."

Alberti looked shocked. It had been a bluff; Simon had no real idea about the walls. An educated bluff though and he really did feel more energy when stood near the head of the Brotherhood.

"I will never underestimate you again, Simon." Said Alberti. "Very well, your new born vampire shall have my chair tonight. Get one of the comfortable chairs from outside, I will sit by the door."

The guard wasn't pleased to lose his chair, but no one ever argued with Alberti. Simon placed the heavy chair near the door and went to help Alberti walk across the room.

"No, leave me alone." Said Alberti. "My joints might ache all the time and my ankles swell up, but I can still walk on my own two feet."

Once Alberti was sat, Niña kissed the ancient cleric on the cheek.

"Thank you." She said.

"Ah, go on, get it done. The sooner you're finished, the sooner I'll be back in my chair."

Niña sat in Alberti's large throne of a chair and something changed. Simon could feel it and thought the girl could too. It was like a pulsating all pervasive energy had become a soothing wave.

"Wait a while, be patient." Said Alberti. "The nexus will need to attune itself to you."

Simon expected the girl to glow, or show some physical sign of taking in the energy from the nexus.

Niña just sat there, looking like she always did. She even seemed vaguely bored by it all.

"I can feel it, a wave of power is on the way." Said Alberti.

Not only did Niña glow with a bright yellow light, the room seemed to glow too. A deep throbbing power filled the room and for a fraction of a second, the girl wasn't alone at the focus of the nexus. Something or someone was there with her, sitting at the edge of the chair. The waves of power began to arrive quickly then, one after the other. It went on for several hours, though Simon never saw the phantom presence again. It had looked like something he'd seen before. The problem was the number of creatures and humans Simon had met in the course of his very long life.

"Oh, I feel so tired." Said Alberti.

The nexus was back to being just a comforting wave again, or at least it seemed that way to Simon.

As Niña stood up from Alberti's chair, he noticed her feet didn't quite touch the floor. Only an inch or so, but she was definitely levitating.

"Dear Simon, I have been shown so many things." She said.

She floated past him and grabbed hold of Alberti, gripping his arms hard enough to make him wince.

Alberti groaned a few times and yelled once. Eventually the head of the Brotherhood looked at the girl who was still gripping his arm.

"Thank you." Said Alberti.

"That's alright, I don't think it will attach itself to you again."

Simon wanted more details, but it didn't seem the right moment to ask. Niña was still levitating when she moved to the table where Simon usually sat to hear his orders from Alberti. Simon was quick, even for a vampire. He caught her as she collapsed and laid her on the table. As far as he could tell, the girl was in a deep sleep. Alberti looked at him with a query in his expression. Simon just shrugged in reply, he had no idea what was going on.

"If she needs sleep, we should let her sleep." Said Simon.

Simon paced for a while, before leaning on the wall for a while. Eventually he was sat on the floor, next to where Alberti was sitting. Something had left Alberti, or had been expelled by Niña. Simon had seen an exorcism once, a dreadful thing to see. Whatever the girl had done had been gentle and quick.

"I saw a few things too." Said Alberti. "Did you see things, Simon?"

"No nothing, just the yellow waves of power."

"Promise me you'll never take her into the future." Said Alberti. "I saw such terrible things. No matter what she says, never move her through time. I want your oath on that."

"You have it, I've seen the horrors you've seen and probably more." Said Simon. "They fill my dreams and wake me in the middle of the night. I will never take Niña out of her own timeline."

"Good, good."

It was Alberti's turn to fall into a deep sleep. To Simon it was all still confusing. Something had happened to Alberti and Niña; they'd seen and felt things he hadn't. He sat on the floor and knew it had to be close to dawn, when the girl woke up. As she got off the table, her feet now touched the ground.

"You were right, Simon." She said. "The nexus has given me its power and.....so many visions. I now know where we have to go. Syracuse on the island of Sicily, there is a codex waiting to be found. The journal Machiavelli gave you will tell you more, I'm sure of it."

"The first object in my mission." Said Simon. "I sometimes wondered if this moment would ever come."

"Maybe not an object, the codex.....The journal will know." Said Niña. "You'll need to hire workers, there will be some digging, a lot of digging."

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Clara knew she was going to love the Luna Blue, almost the instant the bouncer opened the door for her. Simon and her had never been club people, or they'd have probably been regulars. Lots of young people, clubs were like that now, according to Alex. The numbers Cyril had told her for selling pills of various kinds, were amazing. They really could have had a free bar every night and still made a fortune. The drugs didn't worry her, though she was never tempted to try them. For a vampire, survival was all about self-discipline and meticulously acting the part of a normal human. Alcohol she could handle, but modern psychoactive drugs.....They might turn off her self-control. Clara didn't fancy waking up surrounded by hundreds of dead young adults she'd fed on. As for the morality of it all? Everyone finds their own road to hell and it wasn't her job to interfere.

"Oh, I can see me falling in love with this place." She said.

"There's a spare desk in the office." Said Noah. "Come on, the heart of the operation is upstairs."

"Prepare to be amazed." Chuckled Alex.

They were different now, since she'd saved their lives. Actually, more than likely just a serious beating, but they were treating her differently. They'd seen her handle a tough situation and come out on top. For a while at least, she'd be their hero.

"We get the occasional pick pocket." Said Alex.

“Yeah, there are some funny people about, so keep your hand on it.” Said Noah.

Clara had to laugh, which she knew was probably a mistake. Noah would try to be the group comedian for a while. There were two ways to get upstairs and three ways to get down again. The third way out was through a hidden door into the building next door, through a wardrobe in the room where the drugs were stored.

“The fuzz raid the place and we have our own door into fucking Narnia.” Alex had told her.

One way to get upstairs was a door on the other side of the main dancefloor. People were dancing and there was quite a bit of cuddling and a small amount of far too much public displaying of affection. Not that anyone seemed to mind.

“If things get too amateur gynaecologist, we throw them out.” Said Alex.

Clara put her wallet in an inside pocket of her jacket and braved the crowd. It wasn't unpleasant, but she instantly understood the whole smelling of teen spirit, thing. Cheap scent, patchouli oil and a slight tang of sweat. It was the aroma of youth, the scent of a generation. Wading through it all was actually fun and gave Clara a real feel for the place.

“I do this every night.” Said Alex. “It's the only way to really see what's going on.”

Through a door guarded by a bouncer and there were two flights of stairs to get to the main office. Someone, probably Cyril, had arranged to have a wall of monitors installed. Each one was fed from a camera above the dance floor. It was like having a huge window onto where the dancing and drug peddling was going on.

“A few cameras have image intensifier, like gunsights.” Said Noah. “They can zoom in if with we think someone is causing trouble.”

“Are you impressed ?” Asked Alex. “I can remember being gob smacked the first time I came up here.”

“Oh yes, my gob is well and truly smacked.” Said Clara.

She'd been given a list of employees, or at least the legal ones on the payroll. She knew the manager's name and zoned out a little as he turned on the charm. There was a desk she could use and watch the monitors while she worked. As working conditions went, it beat a cubicle and gossip around the watercooler. He said all the right things and she smiled and replied. It was all going in, somewhere, she would remember the conversation. Her main focus, her vampire brain attention, was on those screens. It was the perfect machine on the dance floor, to turn various types of pills into mountains of cash. Any freelancer coming in off the street could be quickly dealt with. None of your own sellers would try and skim the take, as they knew the cameras were there. Even the occasional piece of violence could be seen and calmed down. He saw her looking at the screens.

Rory she thought, yes, his name was Rory.

“I can tell you like our setup.” Said Rory.

“It's perfect and thank you for the desk. Promise me you'll never install a water cooler.”

“Rory wouldn't understand, not really. But he still laughed and smiled at her.”

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Laura tried to never assume anything about a country, or a city, until she'd been there and seen it for herself. Some places had surprised her for a good reason, though a few had been far worse than expected. She'd been to Sudan before, though she'd only passed through El-Obeid once. That had been on the way to Khartoum by road, so she'd barely glimpsed the city. As they came out of the airport and looked for a taxi, a huge sign for a shopping centre was in front of them.

“Shopping centres yell civilisation at me.” Said Tim. “Now, I'm sure we're going to have a good time.”

“The UN has a regional centre here.” Said Laura. “Lots of spoilt westerners, wanting their favourite junk food. I guarantee there’ll be burgers places and fried chicken joints.”

“Oh, now you’re talking my language.” Said Tim.

Laura showed the taxi driver the address of the hotel on their booking forms. He nodded and they set off on a journey that was probably just about walkable, though not with several bags of personal belongings. There was a row of hotels, just over a kilometre from the airport. David Huynh’s secretary had told her not to expect too much from the hotel, but that there would definitely be air conditioning. El-Obeid sweltered in the high thirties for most of the year and well into the forties at the height of summer.

“It’s greener here than I was expecting.” Said Tim.

The hotel wasn’t huge, just two floors. It reminded Laura of a guest house in Cliftonville that her parents booked year after year. The taxi driver parked in front of the main entrance and removed their bags from the back.

“Well.....It looks clean and well maintained.” Said Tim. “All I really need is food and a shower.”

“And really.....We’re here to work, not have a vacation.” She said.

Deep down, Laura knew she was disappointed. It was a work trip and she had been warned. It was just that it looked like that damned guest house her parents had loved. Once inside the air felt cooler and drier than outside. Plus, the lady who greeted them with a smile, spoke English. A meal was booked for later and there was a message for them. A sealed envelope, with her name written on it by someone with better handwriting than hers. By the time they were in their room, memories of Cliftonville were purged from her mind.

“I think I could get to like this place.” Said Tim, as he unpacked.

“That’s good, you never know with these things.” Said Laura. “I might find the Buddha of El-Obeid tomorrow and deal with the antiquity thieves the day after. Or we might still be here in a month.”

Tim had never asked what the Buddha was and she had never asked David. It was a name that sounded self-explanatory, but might not be. There’s be a picture in the file of course, when she got around to reading it. Laura was usually good at reading reports, but things had been a bit frantic in London.

“I’m starving, I hope the food here is good.” Said Tim.

“Expect something that keeps body and soul together. Then be happy if it’s better than that.”

The sealed envelope contained a short note from Hassan Bashir, the local Silver Dawn agent. Laura remembered his name from the file and that his wife was called Leila. They had several children, but she couldn’t remember any of their names or ages. Clara was good at that kind of thing; she’d even have noted birthdays. Laura just remembered the essentials.

“A car is being sent for us in the morning.” Said Laura. “Hassan Bashir is going to introduce us to his team and give us a tour of the dig site.”

“Ahh yes, the unofficial dig site.”

“The authorities know about it, but are paid not to know about it.” Said Laura. “We’re invited to his home in the evening for a meal with his family. His wife is called Leila, but I’ll need to look up the names of his kids.”

“What’s his house like ?” Asked Tim.

It was beginning to annoy her; the way Tim expected her to have gone through the file and know everything. In truth, she felt ashamed of her own lack of planning. It was just that Mabina had been pestering her about one of the Wanderers following her back to London. All that would have to wait though, work that actually paid a salary, had to come first.

"I'm not sure, it's in the file." Said Laura.

The file was underneath the clothes in her carry-on bag. Laura dug through it and found a picture of Mr and Mrs Bashir and their three small children. There was also a picture of their house, which she showed to Tim.

"Wow, he must be paid well." Said Tim.

"A qualified archaeologist who once worked for the Getty Institute. He's the Silver Dawn agent for the entire region. Including Ethiopia."

The house looked large, modern and very expensive. The picture had been taken from the front, just the other side of a wide driveway. Laura thought there was probably a pool at the back, where the Bashir kids splashed around and learned to swim. Tim seemed to read her mind.

"A house like that, they have to have a pool." Said Tim. "Butter them up a bit and we might get an invite over for the weekend."

"We'll be friendly, but don't overdo it." Said Laura. "It's unlikely, they wouldn't be my first guess. But there is a chance that Hassan and Leila Bashir are our antiquity thieves."

"What will happen to them if they are?"

"You know what will happen, Tim."

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The dragon of unknown name and origin, had followed her in some way to the world above. Liz found it strange to hear his disembodied voice, though she was getting used to it. She could hear his footsteps too, sometimes, though not all the time. The loud thud of a huge dragon's clawed foot, as it hit the pavement. Apart from the voice and the footsteps, the dragon was invisible, unseen and mostly unheard. Judging by the lack of reaction, he was totally invisible to the people on the busy street. She'd had a few weird looks when appearing to mutter to herself but not as many as she'd expected. She was in London, or rather they were; Liz and the invisible presence of a dragon deity. Where else, she knew London was stolen antiquities central. One of those success stories that no one felt like boasting about. They'd entered the world above at the bottom end of Lemn Street in East London. There had been a row of railway arches, a rare place of privacy in a busy area. Up until then, she thought a very large and solid dragon might appear next to her. After being given directions for about an hour, she was completely lost.

"You need to go straight ahead, Liz."

"Where to? It's just a grubby area of grass with a fence on the other side."

"Look and think as the guardian, not as Liz. You'll see where to go."

The dragon had been getting a bit like that, talking like a guru of some kind. She kept waiting for it to start calling her grasshopper. He, or she, or maybe it. Liz had thought definitely a male dragon, but now she wasn't sure. Its Guru persona was annoying, especially when the damned thing was right. Liz let her human side zone out, just a little. Using her sight as the guardian, she saw the glowing handprint on a wooden panel at the centre of the fence. No good, she had to say it.

"Thank you, I can see the way, I think."

"You know what to do."

Not the best part of East London, there was a broken supermarket trolley to avoid and a bin bag full of junk. Liz put her right hand on the luminous shape of a hand. A whole section of the fence vanished, though actually it was still there. Like watching the Wanderers, the fence was still there, but in the background. In the foreground there was now a cobbled path, leading into what appeared to be a small park.

“Go on, but be careful.” Said the dragon. “You’re entering somewhere that might not always be safe.”

“Wonderful, just wonderful.”

Did dragon Gods do sarcasm ? Liz hoped so. All around the park, was still London. Several obvious landmarks and a few buildings she recognised. There was the foreground and background business going on though. It looked as though something strange and other worldly had been overlayed across a part of East London. She’d heard rumours of course, from the minions of various underworld deities. There were always rumours and the dead spread more fake news than the living. It seemed to be real though. At the centre of the park another cobbled pathway, crossed the one she was on.

“Alright, which way ?” She asked.

“Straight on until you reach the brick wall.”

The wall had no glowing hand, but Liz was beginning to understand the way things worked. The wall had a slight lack of clarity to it, as though it was a poor photocopy of a wall. She carried on walking and went straight through it.

“Trust no one here, you’re in the marketplace.” Said the dragon. “The Artisan will be recognisable, so you should be able to find him.”

“What is the marketplace ?” She asked.

“Oh, come on, you must know places like this. Anything you have to sell that has real power or arcane properties.....Bring it here. Of course, no one completely human could ever find the marketplace. Be careful Liz, I’d hate to lose you.”

The second warning about being careful, yet her new friend knew she was just about indestructible. Liz walked away from the wall that looked even less solid from that side. The marketplace really was just that, an entire road full of old-fashioned market stalls. Liz had been up to Essex Road in Islington a few times, to get to a few bargains at the Saturday morning market. It looked exactly like that, but the stalls looked far older.

“What are you looking for ?” Shouted a stall holder.

Liz smiled and allowed two of her fingers to become black, ooze covered tendrils. It was like giving out a calling card to let them know she wasn’t as harmless as she looked.

“Fine.....Fine, maybe later.”

Said the man with what appeared to be a stall full of packs of tarot cards. Being where she was and the reputation of the place, Liz was tempted to buy a set.

“How much are they ?” She asked.

“Depends....Let me read you and I can recommend the right ones.”

There was a chair that looked if anything, older than the ancient wooden market stall. Liz sat down and let the man hold her hand, while he examined her palm. He then got her to cut a deck of tarot cards. Her fingers tingled as she touched the cards.

“Oh, I knew it.....You have the power and wisdom of many lifetimes.”

Probably a sales pitch he used on all who might buy a set of his cards. He pulled the first three cards from the deck, which seemed quite ordinary to her. The Ace of cups, Queen of coins and the Knight of batons. The stallholder seemed to become quite excited.

“It’s not what cards are turned; it’s how they were picked. I can give you a set of cards that will never lie to you, which is rare. A deck made in the Anatolian mountains, very rare. Beautiful artwork, the last set I have.”

Not the cards, but how they were picked. Did anyone fall for that nonsense ? Still, the deck did look beautiful and she could feel something, as though the tarot deck was calling to her.

“How much do you want for the cards ?” She asked.

“Would you be paying in money, or would you prefer to barter ?”

“Money, pounds sterling.”

“Good enough.....Two hundred pounds and the deck is yours.”

It was a lot of money, but she began to really want to own that particular set of tarot cards. Very little on her was worth bartering, but she did have a little over three hundred pounds. Rolled up in an inside pocket of her jacket and held by three elastic bands. Liz always carried serious amounts of cash. If life had taught her one thing about being friends with vampires, it was to always be prepared for unforeseen expenses. Tarot cards as an unforeseen expense.....It was such a ludicrous idea that she chuckled, out loud.

“Are you alright ?”

“I’m fine, I’ll take them.”

Two hundred pounds poorer, but she had the cards. Again, there was a slight tingle as she held them. There was a box for them, with artwork as beautiful as that on the cards. Liz put the deck in her pocket.

“Thank you, I’m here most afternoons.” Said the man.

Maybe the marketplace put its own spell on potential customers. It wasn’t until she was walking through the other stalls, that she remembered the Artisan. Even then it took her a while to shake the fog out of her mind.

“So, you can hear me again. I told you to be careful.” Said the dragon. “You got a good price on the tarot deck; I was quite impressed. He seemed to like you.”

“There must be a spell on this place.” She said.

“Of course there is.....Find the Artisan. Then you can begin finding my sacrifices.”

Away from the antique market stalls, there were buildings. Liz began her search properly, looking through the building nearest to where she’d walked through the wall. The buildings looked like Victorian terraced houses, most with three floors. Not that many of them, even a thorough search wouldn’t take that long.

“The private meetings are in the houses.” Said the dragon. “That’s where the Artisan is likely to be negotiating a price for the item of power.”

“How much is he likely to get for it ?”

“Depends on what he wants. Yes, he’ll need some money, but he might be looking for a new identity, or maybe a few adoring thralls to join him in his new life. The Last Artisan will have appetites that haven’t been sated in many millennia.....And you’d be surprised what can be bought in the marketplace.”

“Oh, I’ve seen some unpleasant places. Though I hope we find him before he sells the snake and vanishes forever.” Said Liz.

There were three men and two women in the ground floor of the building. They all looked human, though she was beginning to realise that didn’t mean they were totally human. One of the women picked up a gun as she walked a little too close. A gun, she really hadn’t expected guns in somewhere like the marketplace. Daggers maybe, or even large swords, but not guns.

“Just passing through.” Said Liz.

She was on her way up to the next floor when her new friend decided to be helpful.

“Not here, I sense a disturbance in the building nearer the wall.”

Liz ran, which obviously agitated the people on the ground floor, but no one fired at her. Out of the door and she ran again, even though it did cause a lot of people to stop whatever they were doing and watch her.

“I’d suggest keeping a lower profile.” Said the dragon.

“If he gets a good deal, I might never find him.”

Occasionally Liz let her arms become a mass of tentacles, which seemed to work as a deterrent. No one attacked her, though the dragon kept warning her to be careful.

“Some here are not what they seem, Liz.”

Worrying, though she was now obsessed with reaching the Artisan before he closed a deal. She had a good idea of the number of worlds and realities he might disappear into. Finding him then would be impossible.

“Here, this building. On the ground floor.” Said the dragon.

The disturbance, the fight, looked to be over. Two bodies on the ground and one of them was definitely the Artisan. He’d put on a bulky coat, but no coat can stop the bulge from two extra arms. He was surrounded by a pool of blood, red blood with streaks of green. As she moved closer, she could see him well enough to recognise his face. The other body was a woman, quite a small woman, dressed in expensive looking jeans and an ABBA T shirt. Her blood was pure red and most of it was still forming a pool on the floor. The Artisan had obviously carried out the work Liz had asked for; the golden snake was inside what looked like a solid clear crystal of some kind. There it was, on the floor between the two dead bodies.

“Careful.....Very Careful, Liz.”

She was beginning to respect the warnings from the dragon. Liz let her mind become a little more of the guardian, the creature of darkness. He was there, standing not far away, waiting for the right moment. Invisible to human eyes, yet now she could see him. Part man and part beast, there was fresh blood on its clawed hands. Liz had the memories of all the previous guardians of the underworld. The beast was unlikely to be unique, it’d be in her memories somewhere. Later though, she’d identify it later, when there was time to dig through all those almost numberless millennia of memories.

“Waiting for me ?” She yelled.

Strong and muscular, with the genitals of a human male. Naked, it wasn’t even wearing shoes, or carrying a weapon. Sharp claws on each huge hand though and its dagger like teeth were already coloured red with fresh blood. It was quick too, biting into her arm of tentacles, before she could react. Not that Liz needed to do anything after that. Some creatures could bite into the guardian and live, though most didn’t. Like a fast-acting toxin, her blood moved through the beast’s body, bringing pain and death. For a second she looked into its very human eyes, the eyes of a creature who knew death wasn’t far away. It crumbled away to almost nothing, leaving a small pile of fine dry dust.

“Impressive.” Said the dragon.

“I also managed to pull a few memories out of its head, before it died.”

The crystal containing the snake hadn’t been damaged, or even stained with the blood of the two bodies next to it. Liz picked it up, knowing she’d succeeded in doing what she’d intended to do. It had all been about finding the snake for Patsy. Liz talked, assuming the dragon deity was there, somewhere.

“I know our business is finished.” She said. “If you want me to, I’ll find you those sacrifices and then....We’ll be done. It’s just.....We work well together and I know where the creature came from, the one who took a bite out of me.”

Her arm was still bleeding, but she knew the wound would be gone in a few minutes. The guardian added many useful skills and attributes to her human side. One of the most useful was fast healing and regeneration of body tissues.

“Are you suggesting we continue with our alliance ?” Asked the dragon.

“Yes, I am. We could even come to an agreement for a few more sacrifices.”

Liz could hear a thudding sound and dust was rising up from the floor. It was tapping its invisible foot on the floorboards, as it thought about her offer. There was even the sound of it sighing, as if thinking it through.

“Very well, I will extend our partnership. I do have one condition.”

“What’s that ?” Asked Liz.

“Just us, we do what needs to be done. Really, I’m talking about vampires, I can smell them on you. Foul creatures, the dregs of creation. So, no vampires. Do you agree ?”

“Yes, fine. They’re all busy with other things anyway.”

The dragon became visible again and it filled most of the ground floor of the house. Strangely its now visible legs and part of its tail, appeared to go right through an internal wall. At least she was now sure the dragon was male, definitely male. Not that it mattered, but she could now think of it as being a him.

“HmMMM we can discuss the sacrifices later.” Said the dragon.

It nuzzled her for a moment and being nuzzled by a golden dragon wasn’t unpleasant. For a fraction of a second, she felt a dragon’s breath on her neck. Something had happened, she’d agreed some sort of lasting bond with the ancient deity.

“Do I get to know your name ?” She asked.

“Those who worshipped me knew me as Karkengara, which means Bringer of Fire.”

“Thank you.”

“So, Liz.....Where are we going now ?”

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The dig site was a few kilometres out of the city. A driver had been sent for them, who muttered to Laura about somewhere called Umm Suqah and a shrine in the area. It was Tim’s first dig site, his first anything to do with archaeology. He had the impression that the Silver Dawn were expecting to find items too precious, or too powerful to end up in a local museum. Some might call it looting, but even Laura was becoming excited by the idea of seeing a working dig. The driver dopped them off at a camp site, with at least two dozen tents and quite a lot of heavy digging equipment.

“I thought it was all trowels and gently does it.” Said Tim.

“David gave me the impression they’re in a hurry to find something.” Said Laura.

It was hot, just a little over forty degrees. The woman in the hotel who’d served breakfast, had said the humidity was going to be low. Low or not, Tim was still sweating and the dig was unlikely to have air-conditioning. A man came to get them, one who spoke better English than the driver.

“You’ll be fine, once you get used to the heat.” He told them. “Walk slowly and nothing strenuous, at least not for a couple of days. Your bodies will adjust, just take it easy for a while.”

The dig site began as a tunnel in the side of a small hill, a tunnel with armed guards just inside the entrance. That tunnel gave access to another, which had an elevator at the end of it. Elevator was being kind to it, they were going to risk their lives in the sort of thing used to move bricks to the top of tall buildings. No proper door, or that much in the way of walls. Just a cable around a drum and a lever to go up or down. No chickening out though, where Laura went, he went.

“I bet it’s even hotter down there.” Said Tim.

“About forty five and the humidity is high.” Said the man. “They have a fan though, a very big fan.” He seemed to think the large fan was funny for some reason, he carried on laughing as the elevator took them down into a shaft that was as dark as night. Local workers were digging in the heat down there, removing rubble and going ever deeper. Tim was feeling his heart beating faster, just from walking from the car.

“How deep are we going ?” Asked Laura.

“Just over a thousand feet. This elevator will take us part of the way, then we use another one.”

After leaving the elevator, there was a walk along a narrow tunnel to the next. Tim saw the famous fan, which just seemed to be shifting hot air around, though the man told them people would die if it stopped turning. Tim slowed down his walk, when he started to breathe a little too hard.

“It’s not a race, we’ll stop for a few minutes.” Said Laura.

Not a trace of sweat on her. There were times when Tim envied her vampire toughness, though most of the time he preferred to be totally human. The second elevator looked worse than the first, it even rattled as they got into it.

“Don’t worry, these things are made to last.” Said the man.

He laughed at his own joke again and carried on laughing long after they’d begun the descent. It was the big descent, the one to take them down most of the thousand feet. The air at the bottom felt as hot as hell, if hell had ninety percent humidity. There was another fan, bigger than the last and spinning much faster.

“See.....We do care about health and safety.”

The man laughed at his own joke again, while they walked along the tunnel. Tim had decided he didn’t like the man and hoped they never saw him again. He knew Laura would be fine with the heat, the humidity and the dust. The dust was new, seemingly a trade-off between visibility and dying, if the fan wasn’t running flat out. The tunnel took them into a large chamber, where at least twenty local workers, were unearthing some kind of ancient ruins. A man was beckoning them over to a table, where he was doing something on a laptop computer.

“Hello, I’m Hassan Bashir. Sorry to bring you here on the first day, I usually let new arrival do a few tourist type things first. Nathalie told me you like to land on the ground running....So here we are.” There were introductions and a lot of smiling. Tim was distracted by an object on the screen of the laptop, mainly because he’d yet to see a decent picture of it.

“Ahh, I see you noticed the Buddha of El-Obeid.” Said Hassan. “Not the official name and it even has an official Silver Dawn ident now. That is a 3D recording, made just a few hours before it was stolen. We’re all hoping you can recover it while you’re here.”

“It’s beautiful.” Said Laura. “I will do my best to get it back.”

The image rotated slowly, while occasionally turning around. Not a Buddha, but probably covered in dirt when it was found; he could see why it had been called that. A frog really, or maybe a toad. An artefact made of gold, about six inches high. Tim had seen a few priceless gold antiquities; he’d seen a pile of them in Laura’s den. The workmanship on the frog, or toad was better than any of them.

“It is beautiful.” Said Tim.

“It does something.” Said Hassan. “It was stolen before we could examine it properly. It might be a harmless enchantment of some kind, though some are dangerous. Just be careful when you find it.”

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