

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 12 – Stormy Weather

“She knew Laura was in the kitchen by the sounds she was making. The order of doing things, the equipment taken from which drawer. It was all as unique as a fingerprint. Laura even spooned coffee into the machine, in her own personal way.”

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Akiva Yatsko had never been what most people thought of as a normal human. He was one of a truly small number of people, born with variations to the generally accepted norm. There was an inaccurate idea that a huge amount of human DNA was redundant, left-over garbage from millions of years of replication. There's a huge difference between redundant and dormant. When he was still only a few cells in his mother's womb, something had triggered a few of those dormant areas of his DNA. Potential skills and attributes became realised, as his cell structure was permanently altered. Not that even his mother had realised she'd given birth to anything other than a beautiful baby boy.

“I nearly died helping Laura Selway.” Said Akiva. “I'm not complaining, I was glad to help her. It's just that surely, I've done enough ? I thought that was it, whatever I owed the Ancient Gods was settled, paid in full.”

The uninvited creature in his Berlin apartment, didn't look happy, they never did. The minions of Horus had a proper name, though Akiva thought of them as Debt Collectors. The one sat in his kitchen kept scratching at himself, sometimes sending up little bits of dry skin. For all he knew, being in the world of mortal man, might cause the creature pain. The Debtor Collector wasn't naked, but they invariably arrived in just a loin cloth. Dark skinned and short and they never, ever looked happy. “He wouldn't like to hear such talk.” Said the creature. “You have been a faithful servant for many years, he knows that. You're good at what you do and.....Most consider serving him to be an honour.”

He was Horus of course, though the Debt Collectors never used his name. The sullen messenger of the Old Gods, scratched at his arm hard enough to remove an entire inch of dry, scabby skin. When Akiva looked, expecting to see blood, there was just another layer of dead skin underneath.

“Does being here cause you discomfort ?” Asked Akiva.

“Some, but serving him is an honour.”

Originally Akiva had assumed the minions had sinned in some way, to earn a penance that obviously caused them pain and misery. Far from being the case, the Silver Dawn theologians had told him the truth. The Debt Collectors had been the most faithful and reliable of the temple priests, while alive. Their reward was to serve Horus and a few of the other Gods, for eternity. It all made Horus seem like a sadistic sociopath, but Laura had once likened the God to an onion.

“He has layers, Akiva.” She'd told him. “Some are sweet, but others....You'll wish you could spit them out.”

Of course, even a conversation about Horus wasn't risk free. There was the whole omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent business. Luckily, it seemed Horus was quite bored with listening to his subjects and rarely bothered. According to Laura, who wasn't always right about such matters.

“So, I’m assuming he wants me to help Laura again ?” Asked Akiva. “Of course....I will be honoured to serve him....Again.”

There was no saying no of course, no one could say no to the Old Gods. Akiva had developed a kind of fatalism about it, accepting that he’d be called on again and again, probably continuing after his death. Akiva’s DNA had been his own, no prodding from a God had been required. From what several Silver Dawn scholars had told him, the activation of several dormant abilities had been by chance, a one in a billion piece of good luck. Good luck ? There were times when he thought of it as not a particularly good piece of luck. Not a curse though, or terrible luck. Deep down somewhere, he knew that thinking of it as a curse, would bring consequences, bad consequences. Not from Horus or the other Ancient Deities. Synchronicity, luck, blind chance.....Call it what you like, it existed and was far older than the Gods. Akiva was pretty sure it was sentient and he wasn’t taking any chances. So, his altered cell structure was a fucking blessing and he’d kill anyone who said otherwise.

“The feathered serpent is trying to return to this reality.” Said the creature. “With help from a few of the less active Gods, this time. He fears it may succeed. Q’uq’umatz is unlikely to end this world for many millennia, but.....There is the question of it devouring the vampire, Laura Selway.”

“It’s never easy favours for you guys, never something uncomplicated.” Said Akiva. “For once it’d be nice if Horus just wanted me to collect his dry cleaning on my way home....Something like that.”

The Debt Collectors really didn’t like him being named. It seemed to make them all very angst ridden. Akiva felt a little sorry for it, as the creature picked at its dry, scabby skin.

“The tasks assigned are not my choice. I am merely his messenger.”

The number of times he’d heard that. Did it bug him to have the Debt Collectors giving him orders, while Laura seemed to have a drop by anytime invite from Horus himself ? Yes it did, of course it did. Akiva felt he had an ocean of bitterness and resentment inside him, all of it justified. Still having feelings for Laura didn’t help. His DNA was his and the Silver Dawn had given him several surgical enhancements. Those he’d paid for, with years of faithful service. What had Horus done for him ? What wonderful miracle now required him to serve the Old Gods forever ? At the time, it had seemed quite a small thing, involving a girl. A girl he’d been madly in love with. Thinking back on his life, a lot of the major decisions in his life, revolved around women and not always ones he loved.

“Alright..... Stop scratching.” Said Akiva. “I’ll do it, whatever it is he wants me to do. I’m assuming I need to find Laura and fight this feathered serpent ?”

“Not right away, I believe you know her friend, Liz Grant ?”

“Yes, I know Liz.”

“Liz has fallen in with bad company, though she may not realise that.” Said the Debt Collector. “Liz is likely to die without your help and she is important in keeping Laura alive. He would be very angry if anything were to happen to Miss Selway.”

Akiva grabbed the creature’s hand, just as it looked about to scratch off a particularly huge piece of skin from its elbow.

“Alright, relax.....I need to help Liz.” Said Akiva. “I get it, so tell me where and when ?”

“Now....I can send you to her. It has to be now.”

“I have a meeting with someone, I can’t go this instant.”

Too slow, the creature scratched off several large pieces of skin, before Akiva could grab its hand.

“It has to be now.....Otherwise her death is almost certain.”

“I get it.....Any particular weapons I might need ?” Asked Akiva. “I do have a good selection in the spare bedroom.”

“Use this.”

It appeared in the creature's hand from nowhere. Like a child's toy gun, made entirely out of what looked like transparent green plastic. Akiva felt a buzz in the palm of his hand, as he held the gun. "What does it do?" Asked Akiva.

"Point it and fire, you'll see. It will recharge from the suns where you're going."

"I'll need to dress, I'm still in just my boxer shorts."

"It's hot there, your current attire suits the environment." Said the creature. "You need to go now and remember....Liz Grant must not die."

"Fine.....I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Send me there."

"Close your eyes, Akiva. Open them when you feel the sun on your face."

There were several suns, though it took him a second or two to realise that. It was hot, very hot. The kind of temperature that would have the media screaming about the climate, if it had been his world. Akiva was in a square, in front of a pyramid larger and in far better condition than any on the Giza Plateau. Liz Grant was there, using black tentacles to rip apart a tall thin man, wearing what looked like clerical robes. Strangely Liz only had about a third of his attention. The main thing filling Akiva's mind and a large section of the square, was a dragon. It was busy biting the head off another tall thin man in clerical robes.

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Clara wasn't so much getting soft, as confident she could deal with anyone stupid enough to be waiting for her, in her own home. No sensing heartbeats, or feeling for fellow vampires. She'd always simply unlocked the door and walked in and had no intention of ever doing otherwise. She knew Laura was in the kitchen by the sounds she was making. The order of doing things, the equipment taken from which drawer. It was all as unique as a fingerprint. Laura even spooned coffee into the machine, in her own personal way.

"Did I arrive at just the right moment, or were you waiting for me to get home?" Asked Clara.

"A little of both." Said Laura. "I have a small gift for you, that seemed to scream out it was meant for Clara. Plus, I know you saw Simon, one of the minions told me."

"And you were curious." Said Clara. "I can understand that."

"Only if it's alright to be curious? Tell me to get lost if you want." Said Laura.

"Has anyone ever told you to get lost?"

"Actually.....quite a few. The gift first, I'm told it's quite rare. Not stolen, it doesn't have to be kept locked away from prying eyes."

Laura handed her the jade figure of a small child. Still warm from where it had been in a pocket of her jeans. Strangely, the object did seem familiar, as though she'd once owned it, but had lost it.

"I know this sounds crazy, Laura. I feel that it wanted to find me."

"Good, I just knew it was meant for you."

"Where did it come from?" Asked Clara.

"A temple in Sudan, it's thousands of years old. From well before the Chinese started carving jade. I'm told it's very rare and.....Probably worth a fortune."

"Then, I will treasure it." Said Clara. "Are you staying for pizza night? There's a horror movie on Netflix that looks quite good."

"I have to stay; Tim is with me." Said Laura. "Didn't you feel him as soon as you came through the door? He's having a nap on my bed."

There was something about the jade figure. Clara could hear Laura, but at least half her mind was thinking about having it fitted into a brooch of some kind, or maybe having it hung on a chain around her neck. Clara did as Laura had done, shoving it into a pocket at the back of her jeans.

“Yesterday I threw out a huge guy who was causing trouble at the Luna Blue.” Said Clara. “Really huge, three times the size of Noah. I think if I can deal with that for a living, I can relax in my own home.”

“It’s not only humans you have to worry about.” Said Laura. “Not that I want to worry you, but we’ve all annoyed some fairly dangerous....What’s the word ? Entities, that will do. Nasty things that go bump in the night.”

“What can they do to me, that’s worse than losing Simon ? I saw him and it was wonderful, but he’ll now be sharing a bed with Juliana, again.”

“Aren’t you screwing Felipe ?” Asked Laura.

“Yes, but it’s not the same.” Yelled Clara.

Clara felt nothing, but knew she should feel bad for shouting at Laura. She leant forward and rested her forehead on Laura’s shoulder.

“Sorry....Seeing him might have been a bad idea.”

“That’s alright.” Said Laura.

“You order the pizza. I’ll walk to the inconvenience store and get some wine ? Is Tim alright with wine ?”

“Get him some special brew and he’ll love you forever.”

Clara took it slowly and spent a while in the corner shop, which everyone still called the off licence. Was there once an on-license type of shop ? Not that she was interested, not really. A long walk back, along two roads she barely knew, despite living in Hornsey for years. It was the great British tradition, the inalienable right to not know your neighbourhood, or your neighbours. The walk was grounding though, great therapy for her bad mood. By the time she back in the house and eating pizza, Clara could talk about seeing Simon, without it feeling as though her soul was being crushed.

“Oh, you got me some special brew.”

Tim said, before hugging her. No loving her forever, but the hug was grounding too.

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Their second night on the Mermaid and the storm had arrived with the darkness of night. Torrential rain, lit up by regular flashes of lightning. It felt like the ship was in a dance with the waves; a dance accompanied by the almost constant thunder. Niña was a little scared, but mainly the storm excited her. It was something new, a fresh experience to be enjoyed with her new vampire senses. The lightning flashes were so bright, the thunder so loud. Even the rain on her face felt different, exciting. After she’d refused to stay below decks; one of the crew had loaned her a waterproof cape that covered her from head to foot. It smelled of his body odour, but stopped her clothes from being soaked.

“You’re right, it is exciting.” Said Donna. “Be careful though, the deck is so slippery.”

Donna had been a last-minute addition to their number, when Simon had decided she couldn’t be the only female on the Mermaid. Juliana had probably pestered him about it. Captain Galeoto had a niece, who’d once enjoyed a short trip on the Mermaid. It had all happened the night before they’d sailed; all the conversations about giving her a female companion. Niña had resented having Donna imposed on her, but the girl was good natured. It was nice to have someone to talk to, now that Simon was in a constant silent mood. Something had happened to Simon, though he refused to tell her about it.

“Stay where you are, Donna.” Said Niña. “Keep a good tight hold on the rope. I’ll be fine, I’m stronger than I look.”

Donna was wedged in a doorway, with a safety rope almost wrapped around her. She too had been offered waterproofs, but had decided she'd rather get her clothes drenched.

"It was so smelly." Donna had said.

Sicily was a long way from Livorno, Simon had told her that. There was a map on their wall in the house, though Simon had said it favoured being artistic over accuracy. Getting to Syracuse meant a journey the whole length of Italy.

"...and the Mediterranean can be stormy at this time of year."

Oh, how accurate that warning had been. Niña loved storms in Florence, when lightning seemed to almost bounce off the rooftops. It was different at sea though, more exciting and perhaps a little terrifying too.

"Don't leave the rope....Stay on the rope, Niña." Shouted Donna. "My uncle has told me about people going overboard in storms. They're never seen again.....Stay on the rope."

The rope was too restricting and she wanted to get closer to the ocean. Niña let go of the safety rope and took the four steps needed to reach the guard rail. She held it so tightly, that she felt the wood bend slightly. Would she die from going overboard ? It was unlikely, vampires were almost indestructible. She might be bobbing about in the water for months though, before being washed up in a strange land. That thought scared her and excited her, in about equal measure.

"Maybe I'd be swallowed by a whale, like Jonah." She muttered.

Donna was yelling something, though the words were lost in the storm. Niña looked back and saw her imposed companion, trying to free herself of the rope. Imposed or not, she quite liked Donna and didn't want her to go overboard.

"Stay there.....I'm coming back." Shouted Niña.

She waited for the Mermaid to lean over to that side, pushing her against the rail. As it moved back the other way, Niña took the four steps back to the rope. For those four steps, she felt so scared, so alive, so thrilled. Nothing between her and being thrown into the sea, apart from her feet being on a slippery deck.

"Oh Simon, what have you turned me into ?" She mumbled.

Rope in her hands she found Donna back in the recess for the doorway. It would have been so easy and the desire was strong. Niña could have drained the captain's niece of blood, before giving her mortal remains to the storm. No one would know what she'd done. Just another victim of the Mediterranean's infamous storms. No one would even be surprised.

"Donna, what have you done ?" Asked Niña. "It looks like you're wrapped yourself in that rope....And put a few knots in it."

The girl was a little older than her and with a little luck, she'd see her next birthday. Niña wasn't going to kill her and it had nothing to do with Simon and Giovanni's lessons on who could and couldn't be fed on. Imposed on her maybe, but she liked Donna. Niña had made her own judgement on such things and had come up with her own rule; she wouldn't kill people she liked.

"Oh, they put some kind of oil on the ropes." Said Donna.

"And you're drenched. If it's still stormy tomorrow, you're wearing waterproofs. Smelly is better than catching a fever in the rain." Said Niña.

"Alright.....I still can't believe you walked right up to the rail."

"Can that be our secret ?"

"Fine....I need to get dry; I'm freezing."

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Daniel woke up on the rear seat of Mabina's Lexus, with no idea how he'd got there. There were bits of memories in his mind, of a creature in among the Coldrum Stones. Confused memories are often more annoying than no memories at all. There had been a conversation between Mabina and the glowing creature. That was it, they'd talked in a language he hadn't understood. As for being in the car..... He had no idea how he'd got there, none at all. No sign of Mabina, though someone had put his discarded clothes into a neat pile.

"I'm not wearing these damn robes a moment longer." He muttered.

The clothes from the day before, if it was just a day? For all he knew, he'd been unconscious for days. As he dressed, he noticed that he had an urgent need to pee. Out of the car and Daniel was relieving himself behind a bush, before he realised why the road looked different.

"This isn't where the car was." He muttered.

He was now fully awake and a look at the car showed Mabina's clothes were on the front passenger seat. Wherever she was, she'd gone there in robes and slipper sandals. The keys were in the ignition and starting the car brought up the SatNav. It seemed the car was about ten miles south of Coldrum Stones. He was in a country lane near somewhere called Five Oak Green. At least one thing was good news, the SatNav was giving the date as the day after their trip to Kent. At least he hadn't been asleep in the car for days.

"Well, Mrs Gladitch.....Life is never boring with you around." He muttered.

Going home seemed the sensible thing to do, as he had a working car and all his belongings. There was the old fashioned and totally unreconstructed side of his personality though. Actually, more learned behaviour than personality, he couldn't abandon a woman wandering the countryside, dressed only in robes. If someone had offered him a million pounds, he couldn't have simply driven home, leaving Mabina to her fate.

"She is a very old and powerful vampire." He muttered.

No good, he couldn't even persuade himself to drive home. He used his phone and managed to get hold of Brendan. Daniel felt better after alerting someone to the fact that Mabina had vanished. Brendan promised to make a few calls and try to arrange for things to happen. Interestingly, those things didn't include any mention of the police. Missing vampires and the police were like chalk and cheese, or oil and water. They definitely didn't mix.

"I have a few phone numbers." Brendan had said. "Tough types, from the days when I organised Mabina's security. I'll get a few of them down to Five Oak Green. Don't move the car, I'll give them the location."

"I have no intention of going anywhere. Get them to pick up a burger and fries on the way, I'm starving."

Daniel found two tins of coke in the glove compartment, along with a huge bag of salt and vinegar crisps. He wasn't going to starve and with luck, food and help were on the way. Two hours later, he was fast asleep in the passenger seat of the Lexus. Someone was prodding him.

"Is she alright? I don't like to interfere.....The wife always tells me not to get involved, but we are as we are. Did you have an argument?"

A farmer, judging by the tractor left with its engine throbbing. Behind the tractor was a trailer carrying piles of sacks, full of something. Daniel cursed himself for nodding off to sleep, it hadn't been intentional.

"Sorry.....Who did I argue with?" Asked Daniel.

"You might not have, but my wife wanders off when we fight." Said the farmer. "It just doesn't seem right, her being sat there like that."

Mabina, of course it was, had to be. Unless there were several women wandering around lost in Five Oak Green, it had to be her. Daniel was sure enough to risk a small lie on it.

“Yes, she does take our arguments to heart.” Said Daniel. “Where is she.....Exactly ?”

“Back where I came from.....About a quarter of a mile.” Said the farmer. “You can’t miss her, sat on the mound. To the right of the lane, if you’re going in that direction. As I said, you can’t miss her.”

“A good-looking lady in white robes.” Said Daniel.

“That’s her.....I hope you get over the argument.”

The mound was easy to find. Probably another ancient burial mound for a local chieftain, that part of Kent was full of them. Mabina was sat on the top of the mound, staring at the sky. She hadn’t zoned out or anything like that. She even smiled at him as he sat next to her.

“Brendan is sending a search party.” Said Daniel. “People you know, they’re bringing food. The bad news is that we may have to share a burger.”

“I knew you wouldn’t take the car and leave me here, not you. Laura told me you can’t even feed on women, so I knew you’d never abandon me.”

The annoying thing was her being right. She didn’t know him that well, but she had well and truly worked him out.

“So, Mabina.....Why here, on this mound ?”

“They’re Gods from another world, Daniel.” Said Mabina. “Imagine that, Gods from another world have come here, to this planet. They’re scared of something happening here. Actually, they’re terrified.”

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Liz Grant realised the dragon was more than an ancient deity, with no worshippers, when the army began to appear behind them. Human shaped, but not quite human. Their arms were a little too long, as were their necks. Huge feet, attached to muscular legs. They had to be strong, judging by the heavy axes most of them carried. Armour too, serious looking armour with an image of a dragon etched onto their breast plates. Karkengara of course, the bringer of fire. Realistically, who else would it be ?

“I was hoping to talk to the people who live here.” Said Liz. “Your army will be provocative, as though we’ve come as part of an invasion.”

“Army you say, these are my Myrmidons.” Said Karkengara. “Yes, I know something of your world’s history. I could fill this desert with millions of them, but I will call upon just enough to deter any.....Unwarranted aggression. All of them have been dead for too many years to calculate. Still wonderful fighters and what is already dead, can’t be killed. You may see what I mean, if we’re attacked.”

“So, they’re just here to protect us ?” Asked Liz.

“Yes.....I give you, my word. My Myrmidons will only fight those who attack us first.”

More of the fighters appeared, some armed with long bows. All their weapons seemed so ancient, for a battle in a world with flying machines. Karkengara was no fool though, Liz trusted him to know what he was doing. One of the Myrmidons looked her way and she’d have sworn that it smiled at her, before looking away. Its eyes though.....They’d been the bluest eyes she’d ever seen.

“The pyramids look interesting.” Said Karkengara. “Your choice of course....I just think it would be a pity to simply pass them by. But....I follow where you lead.”

“Be honest with me, do you want to see the pyramids ?” Liz asked.

“Only if you wish to. I have to mention it.....Three of the creatures we’re looking for, are inside the pyramid. I can sense them, deep within the largest pyramid.”

First an army and now some kind of super sense. It didn't surprise Liz that much; her companion was a deity after all. All that firepower and yet he was willing to follow her because he was bored. Liz knew she was being played, though she had no idea why.

"Alright, we'll visit the pyramids." Said Liz.

They talked, or rather the Myrmidons muttered at one another as they marched across the sands. It made them more real to Liz, like walking beside a normal army, with normal human soldiers. She even understood a few simple words, in a language she didn't recall learning. Again, that didn't surprise her. After a few years being the guardian of the final gateway to the underworld, little surprised her. Something in the sky did grab her attention.

"Look.....They're heading this way." She shouted, pointing.

"Yes, Liz....I see them." Said the dragon. "Flying machines, they have aircraft. Coming our way too."

As the aircraft came closer, they looked too small to hold a pilot. Drones probably and quite a few of them. No weapons, the first few simply crashed among the ranks of Karkengara's Myrmidons. They had to contain explosives and the destruction was dreadful. Whole sections of their army were wiped out, blown to pieces. There was blood and bodily tissue, which covered huge areas of the sands. A piece of shrapnel had buried itself in Liz's leg. She turned a finger into two tentacles, which she used to remove the piece of drone. Her wound healed almost instantly.

"Very impressive Liz, but watch my Myrmidons....Watch the sand." Shouted the dragon. "You can't kill that which is already dead."

The sand absorbed everything, every drop of blood and piece of flesh. Quickly the dead Myrmidons rose up out of the sand, whole and alive again. Those with bows used them against the drones. Liz watched their arrows reach impossible heights, to bring down dozens of drones. It was a strange battle, with arrows used against modern flying machines, but eventually the Myrmidons won. Liz looked in the sky and there were no more drones.

"Now.....We should be able to look at the pyramids.....Without any interruptions." Said Karkengara.

Liz headed towards the largest pyramid, which filled her view to the east. Easily four or five times larger than the Great Pyramid of Giza. So high that the top few feet penetrated a tiny, fluffy cloud. It was beautiful, with a white stone covering, which shone in the light from several suns. It really felt like the inhabitants of that planet, had built something to rival natural mountains.

"It's so.....Beautiful." Said Liz.

"I have seen so much.....But yes, Liz. Even I am impressed."

Were they going inside ? There was a large entrance on the other side of a square, but they could hardly take several hundred Myrmidons with them. Liz was winging it, with no real plan, other than making quick decisions when one was required. With her leading, Karkengara and his army, walked across the square.

"Slow down, Liz." Said the dragon. "Keep close to me, I sense intense anger. I also sense rage and confusion. Some fear too and scared people are the most dangerous."

The ranks of people in priestly robes didn't look threatening, as they hurtled out of the entrance to the pyramid. Several hundred tall, thin creatures, who didn't look quite human. Then again, there was reason why they should. People with no easily identifiable gender, wearing the same beige coloured robes. When one or two began firing energy weapons, there was no longer any doubt about their intent.

"I'm sorry Liz, but the time has come." Said the dragon. "This situation requires more of my forces. I'm bringing in the old guard, the famous immortals."

More of his Myrmidons, at least another thousand of them. These ones had red stripes across their armour. Some held drums and began a steady threatening beat. A few were shrieking a challenge of some kind, aimed at the people in robes. Liz had come in the hope of getting to know those who'd created the pyramids. There was a hope they'd been the ones who'd taught the Egyptians how to design and build such huge structures. Now, she looked to be causing their destruction.

"Don't kill them all." She yelled.

"This is a large planet. I doubt if we'll make a significant dent in their numbers. Plus, you have to remember, they attacked us."

It became a battle with a pre-determined result, though the local priests had no way on knowing that. Their hand-held energy weapons were truly horrific, cutting through the Myrmidons, like a knife through butter. The axes and swords of Karkengara's army were good, but they were a one against one type of weapon. The priests should have won, but when they were killed, they didn't return from the dead. The Myrmidons did, time after time.

"You can't fault their heroism." Liz said to the dragon.

"Yes, they're fools.....But brave fools."

Liz used the powers of the guardian, though she felt a little redundant. Slowly but surely, the priests numbers dropped, while the Myrmidons kept coming back from the world of the dead. She used her tentacles to rip apart the occasional priest who dared to fire at her. As for Karkengara.....She'd seen him take many hits from energy weapons, but none appeared to have any effect. He simply stood there, biting lumps out of any enemy stupid enough to come close enough to bite.

"Something new.....I sense it, they're changing tactics." Yelled the dragon.

The flash of light was blinding and out of it stepped just one person. Energy blaster in hand, the newcomer surprised her by attacking the enemy priests. Liz recognised him, as he used an unusual mix of short sword and blaster, to destroy many of their enemies.

"I know him, he's a friend." Yelled Liz. "He's Akiva Yatsko."

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Tim Chance had decided, being zapped around the world by the Egg, was far better than all the delays and checks associated with air travel. For one thing, there were weapons in the weekend bag he carried and airlines definitely frowned on those. Laura had brought them to the side of the hotel in El Obeid, in Sudan. He was blinking in the sunlight, while his body frantically tried to adjust to forty-degree heat with high humidity. They were in the alley where the hotel had its dumpsters, so the air had a tang of rotting food. Despite a lot of rest and care from Laura, he still ached from the beating. Tim was doing his best to look fine, as he didn't want to be kept away from the dig site.

"We shouldn't have any problems with the hotel." Said Laura. "They'll just assume we've been working."

Tim winced a little as he moved. Laura smiled at him, rather than asking him if he was alright. She wasn't one of life's fussers, which was one of the reasons he loved her. Of course, being a vampire might have had something to do with that.

"Let's get out of this sun, or I'll be sneezing for a week." Said Laura.

It was a man at the reception desk, one Tim didn't remember seeing before. Three envelopes for Laura and a phone message, to say Hassan Bashir needed a call, urgently. No curious looks though, no asking where they'd been. Their room had been cleaned of course; the bed sheets changed.

"I could get used to hotel living." Said Tim. "Coming home to everything looking nice, without having to pick up a duster."

“Yeah, I can remember your room at the hotel where we worked.” Said Laura. “I think you had some new species of bacteria in the laundry basket.”

“Hey, I once found a dust covered slice of pizza under your bed, Miss Selway.”

Laura opened the envelopes and after reading them and chuckling, she handed them to him. Two were fairly irate, talking about Laura dumping a problem on them. The last note, the most recent, talked about receiving a call from Nathalie Aurigny and everything was cool again.

“His people found the body of the man who shot at us.” Said Laura. “Then Nathalie obviously told Hassan to calm down.”

“Lovely lady, I won’t hear a word against her.” Added Tim. “So, are you calling Hassan, or are we simply going to turn up at the site?”

“We turn up.....I need to make the point that I’m here to help, but I don’t report to him.”

Every trip to the dig was a learning experience. They’d brought better lights from the Silver Dawn base in France, ones that clipped on to their clothing. Better masks too, to keep the dust out of their lungs, but still leave them able to breathe. In the bag he’d carried were two combat vests. Thin ones, the sort worn by special ops soldiers. They’d be hot to wear, but would stop a rifle bullet. Yes, get hit and you were likely to be in agony from a cracked rib, but you’d live.

“To think, I used to hate guns.” Said Tim.

Two small nine-millimetre automatics, with clips that held twelve shots. Plenty of spare clips to go with the guns, just in case. Being shot at had pushed them through a steep learning curve. If anyone shot at them again, they could shoot back. Ignoring all the experts, they both tucked the guns down the back of their jeans. There really was no better place and a loose T shirt hid them pretty well.

“I’ll call a local taxi company.” Said Laura. “We need to be as independent of Hassan and his team, as we can be.”

“What is our mission for today?” Asked Tim. “Lots more exploring and being seen?”

“Yes, but Nathalie really wants that golden buddha, the one that’s really a toad.”

The taxi driver pretended not to know where the dig site was, until a few American dollars had joined the conversation. He suddenly spoke passable English, too. Forty minutes after leaving the hotel, they were out in the heat, looking at the uninspiring hole in the hillside. The one that gave access to the dig site.

“When we leave Sudan, I won’t miss this place.” Said Tim.

“Find the buddha and Nathalie has promised us a good bonus.”

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