

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 7 – The Silver Dawn

“Laura thought it should definitely be carved on a few tablets of stone, in prominent places. Rules of the universe number one; never tell a God they’re wrong, especially when they are.”

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Anyone who says a decent sex life wasn't essential, was obviously a fool. Just a few stolen moments with Felipe, yet Clara felt like a new woman. Actually, a vampire rather a human, but she was a hundred percent woman. A woman with needs, even if she had been trying to ignore those needs. At the moment, every kiss with Felipe felt like a betrayal of her life with Simon. That would pass though, vampires were good at ignoring such feelings. Besides, there was a high likelihood that Simon was enjoying himself with the lovely Juliana.

“She’s young enough to be his daughter.” She muttered.

Then Clara laughed at the sheer absurdity of the thought. Simon was over seven hundred years old; every human female was hugely age inappropriate. Similarly, Felipe had only been alive for twenty-five years, maybe twenty-six. She on the other hand was over five hundred years old. Five hundred and twenty-five to be precise. It made post coital conversations difficult, every word out of her mouth needed to be pre-audited. There could be no mention of going through two world wars, or once watching the Beatles live in Liverpool, though she'd forgotten the venue. It had been in nineteen sixty-three, she was certain of that.

“Oh, but it’s worth the hassle.” She mumbled. “What that man can do with his tongue...”

Clara was still halfway to Hornsey Station, her usual morning journey. Her phone ringing stopped her thoughts about sex with Felipe. A number with a name coming up next to it, though she hadn't spoken to him properly in a while. A quick call to say Simon was indefinitely indisposed, though that had been nearly a year ago.

“Hello Cyril, it’s been a while. I hope you’re well.”

“I can’t complain, though where’s the fun in that. I was wondering if you’re free one night this week? I have something to run by you, as they say over the pond.”

“Is this about Simon, Cyril ?” She asked. “I think you have to consider him as no longer being part of your organisation.”

“Actually, I have a proposal for you. Something that I hope you’ll find at least tempting.”

“Now you’ve got me curious. Actually, I’m free tonight.”

Clara was nearly always free; it was one of the reasons for reconnecting with the gorgeous and very energetic Felipe. She'd even stopped stalking drunken young office workers to feed on. It had crossed her mind that feeding with so little caution, showed that somewhere in her unconscious mind; was a desire to be caught. That could never be allowed to happen. Being jailed as a brutal serial killer was one thing, but one that never aged.....

“Tonight, is perfect, say around eight. I know you have my address.” Said Cyril.

“Eight is fine, I’ll see you then.”

Clara’s first thought was that Cyril wanted someone, or several someones, taken care of. Not taken care of as in a buying them fruit and listening to their personal angst; kind of way. She and Laura had

helped Simon clear out a warehouse full of gangsters for Cyril, drug dealers mainly. So many bodies that there had been a chance to feed, between the fighting.

"....And he paid well I seem to remember." She muttered.

Being paid for killing and feeding was a kind of anti-holy grail for vampires, something to boast to other vampires about. Clara was so bored; she'd have done it for nothing. Being paid was the wonderful, delicious, icing on the cake. A dark thought spoiled the moment, just as she reached the train station.

"Oh, I hope he's not going to try and make me his new PA."

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A Brotherhood carriage arriving with a note from Alberti wasn't uncommon. Usually, it was a summons to attend a meeting, a summons that couldn't be ignored. The note said to bring Niña, though the note referred to her simply as the girl child. That was uncommon, in fact, it had never happened before. Alberti was connected to his power nexus; it was probably the only thing keeping his ancient body alive. That nexus would be pulling in all kinds of fluctuations in the timelines, including the creation of a new vampire. A street girl, a waif who should have died at no more than fifteen years of age, had become an immortal. Cleaning up after that assault on temporal reality, had to be challenging, even for Huh. No wonder Alberti had sent a carriage for them.

"We've been sent for." He told Niña. "Brother Alberti, head of the Brotherhood, requests our presence."

"Why me, Simon?"

She was changing, everyone who was turned changed. More self-assurance, less anxiety. When you could snap the neck of anyone likely to threaten you, it tends to do wonders for someone's personal confidence. Did their waif really have no idea how important she was now? Simon doubted that.

"Brother Alberti is the real head of my order." Said Simon. "He's a sensitive of immense age and will have felt your creation. Many other sensitives will have felt it, right around the world. Some will put it down to phases of the moon, or a planetary conjunction. Alberti will know what it really signified."

"All that because of me, really?"

"Yes Niña, all because you're now an immortal, a vampire. Future reality has changed, though few will be aware of it."

There was still a look of innocence in her eyes, though that would quickly change. By telling her how important she was, he might well create an egotistical monster, but so be it. He needed their waif to be his ally and he needed it to happen very fast.

"Then we must go." Said Niña.

"There is time to change, put on one of your best dresses." He said. "Remember that Alberti is powerful and has lived an unnaturally long life. As a vampire you're immortal though, with the potential to be even greater than him. Go as an equal, meeting an equal. Strut a little.....Just don't overdo it."

"I won't.....I'm looking forward to this."

Niña was a vampire now and a key player in something that was probably greater than all of them, though he wasn't going to tell her that, not yet. Did she realise the fifteen year old she saw in the mirror was now permanent? Probably not and he wasn't looking forward to telling her. It took her about half an hour to change and be ready for her first meeting with Alberti.

"Will I do?" She asked, while twirling around.

An expensive dress made of a dark blue fabric. Giovanni had bought it for her, when they'd all been invited to the house of a neighbour. It had always looked too old for their waif, but now it looked about right.

"Perfect.....We've a long journey ahead of us, I can tell you about Alberti and what to expect."

"Do you think he'll like me?"

"I'm sure he will."

Brotherhood carriages invariably travelled with the windows covered, so Simon was used to travelling in semidarkness. No human could have seen it, but he saw the slight green glow in Niña's eyes. The green glow of a new born vampire. There was only one cure and that was not only simple, it was essential.

"You need to hunt and feed; I can show you how." Said Simon. "We can do it tonight, after we return from seeing Alberti. It's important as some changes won't take place until you've fed."

"What changes?"

"Your eyes will see far better and the green glow will stop. There are other small but numerous changes and anyway.....You need to begin feeding, at least three or four times a year."

There was a look in her eyes and it wasn't fear. It was an eagerness he hadn't expected. The look gave him the courage to go further.

"I need to tell you something." He said. "Normally someone your age is never turned. Your body won't grow now, or look any different. I did it to save your life, but you will always look as you are now."

That had upset her, it was those emotive eyes of hers. Upset and a little angry, though there really had been no alternative. The question she asked was a surprise, though after years with Clara, he knew the answer.

"Will I still bleed.....Every month I mean?"

"No, but you need to pretend you do. It's important, Niña. You need to do everything, or appear to do everything a human girl would do. I still attend mass every Sunday."

"Everything a normal girl does, apart from not ageing." Said Niña.

"We'll need to move at least once every three years. You will get used to it."

"I'm not complaining, Simon. I'm glad to be alive."

She moved closer and held his hand. It had to be scary for her and everything was now going to be different in her life. His own tuition from Giovanni had been sketchy at best and sometimes worse than useless. He was determined to teach her the right skills for survival. If she found some of it fun, then that was even better.

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Some people need to live in the same house for years, in the same neighbourhood. Unless they knew every shop in a two-mile radius of their home, they weren't happy. Tim Chance wasn't like that and never had been. He liked the house in Hornsey, but was equally at home in the apartment the Silver Dawn had given Laura. Hornsey was cosy, whereas the apartment in France had more space and a special room for Laura's ever-growing collection of antique weapons. A night in with a takeaway and a decent film on the TV and he'd have been happy anywhere. As long as Laura was there of course.

"I was once diverted to Ancient Thebes, with an Indian Takeaway." Said Laura. "That place we all like in Hornsey is so good, it's worth the risk of a small diversion."

"Don't they mind you using the Egg like that?" He asked. "The Gods I mean."

"Apparently not."

The Silver Dawn HQ was a few miles north of Plouharnel in Brittany. The occult organisation had bought an old family chateau in the area, knowing they could use the power deep below all the standing stones and dolmen of Carnac. A large building, which the Silver Dawn had enlarged with new wings. They'd also dug down to create vaults and underground areas. Tim had seen a few of the other apartments for key personnel and none of them was as good as theirs. For one thing their home was at ground level, so there was plenty of sunlight. Not that Laura was as keen on the morning sun as him.

"I still can't get used to Netflix being different in France." He said.

"Squid Game dubbed into French sounds pretty weird."

The apartment was airconditioned and sound proofed to a fairly high level. It should have been a perfect night in with enough Indian food and decent TV, to make it a great night. Then there was the sound of a ringing phone. To make it worse, it was his phone.

"Oh, I'll ignore the damn thing." He said.

"See who it is first."

"It's Liz, she phoned me quite a bit last week. Always trying to find out where you were." He said.

"It might be important."

Given his own way, they'd be ignoring all calls after a certain hour. He answered the call and sure enough, Liz wanted to speak to Laura. It seemed Laura's phone was either turned off, or having problems working in France.

"I'll hand you across to her, Liz."

Sometimes hearing one side of a conversation can be irritating, but Tim already knew about the zoned-out Gods, who'd suddenly discovered a purpose, or something like that. Liz was a real bad arse herself, so if she needed help, things were getting....Complicated.

As he picked at his food and became reconciled to watching TV on his own, the night took a turn for the better.

"I won't be free for another four hours." Said Laura. "If you can contact Mabina, I'll pick you up first and then her."

Laura was smiling at him. Four hours meant eating their meal, watching TV for a while and there'd be time for sex afterwards.

"No Liz, he doesn't come to decisions then and there." Said Laura. "And we can't ask him a direct question.....Yes, I know, but he is the one setting the rules. Think of it as seeing the headmaster from your first primary school....On a bad day."

So, Laura was taking them to see the Old Gods. Tim no longer worried that Laura might be harmed, the chance of that happening was long gone. The worry now was that Horus would demand a favour from her, one that might turn their lives upside down.

"....I never speak in the language of the Gods, so he won't expect you to.....Just be yourself Liz, a very polite and humble version of yourself.....No, you can't do that....."

As Laura talked, the smile went from her face. After getting his phone back, he turned it off.

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for in four hours....You'll be going through hell." He said.

"I know, Tim." Said Laura, as she sipped her wine. "Liz is a creature of the Gods, at least partly. Yet, she still thinks of them as though they're sane and logical. It's going to be a nightmare taking them to see him, a fucking nightmare."

He remembered her once saying the Gods sometimes listened in and were offended by profanity. Tim decided it was the wrong time to remind her of that.

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"It's not your fault child." Alberti had said. "Simon has to take responsibility for making you.....As you now are. There are always other alternatives."

Niña had quickly relaxed, when it was obvious Brother Alberti thought of her as a wronged innocent, rather than someone deserving to be punished. Not that he'd said that much to her, poor Simon had caught the sharp end of the ancient cleric's tongue.

"Machiavelli told me not to listen to alternative ideas." Simon had said.

"Oh, that fool."

"You told me to see him."

"Yes, but in two hundred years' time, not now."

Some of it made sense to her and some didn't. There was a feeling about the two men, a vibe going on. No matter how much Alberti might rage at Simon, she knew there was not the slightest chance of Simon being hurt or imprisoned. They were like father and son, though their relationship was highly dysfunctional. Talk of walking through time as though it was nothing....That interested her.

"Did he give you the gift, the journal?" Alberti had asked. "He was always telling Huh's minions about that book. Nonsense most of it, though he was supposed to give it to you."

"He did and it's now in a safe place."

The safe place was on the table amongst her drawing paraphernalia. Simon was her mentor though and the vampire who'd turned her. Between them, Giovanni and Simon had fed her when she was hungry and nursed her when she was sick. She wasn't about to call Simon out on a lie.

"Good, I will want that. Bring it the next time and I'll put it in the Brotherhood vaults."

Niña had noticed an atmosphere in the multisided room, almost the pulse and heartbeat of something alive. The atmosphere had changed when Alberti had asked for the journal.

"I can't do that." Simon had said.

"Why, aren't I the head of your order? My word is to be obeyed."

"The journal was meant for me, my eyes only. Machiavelli was told that, by the Gods."

For a moment, Niña had been ready to fight with Simon, side by side as they tried to escape. Useless effort of course, the Brotherhood only employed the best guard, even she knew that. On the way into the building, she'd counted at least fifty serious looking, well-armed, guards.

"Oh my dear Simon, I think Huh was right to mark you out as someone special. I had to test you though. I had to know if you'd give way the first time, I pressed you."

Alberti had been smiling as though the whole thing had been an elaborate test. Niña wasn't sure though, the atmosphere in the room had changed, before switching back. There had been real power for a moment and a darkness about the place. Simon had stood up, as though they'd been dismissed. If Alberti had given them permission to go, she hadn't heard it. They were both in the carriage heading for home, before Simon spoke.

"You felt it too, I know you did." Simon said.

"The way the feeling in the room changed. Yes, I felt it too....As though a living thing suddenly became angry."

"Alberti sits at the centre of his nexus, but who knows what it might attract." Said Simon. "I fear that the head of my order may have been influenced by.....I don't know, but it felt like something from the ultimate darkness."

"I felt it too.....Deeply malevolent." She said.

"We shall have to keep a close watch on Alberti. He may be strong enough to shake this thing off on his own. Or it may be too strong for him. We need to be vigilant though."

They were still several miles from home, when Simon told the carriage driver, they had business to do in the area. The man and the guards looked shocked to be dismissed in the middle of farmland, but Simon was a senior officer in the Brotherhood.

"A good brisk walk will do us both good." He'd told her.

When they were alone, he reminded her of his promise to instruct her on how to feed. It seemed her first feed was important, especially now for some reason. Simon needed her to be strong, as strong as she could be.

"We need someone on their own." Said Simon. "A man in a barn, or a woman out at the well. Either will do, though no children. Vary your kills for age and gender, but never children."

"I understand, never children." She said.

"Don't use your eyes, feel for heartbeats. Find a heartbeat near no others. With experience you will be able to stalk, feed on and kill a human, in complete darkness."

"I feel ready.....But...."

"None of that, Niña. You're a vampire now, you feed or die. I saw the remains of a vampire who'd starved to death. It takes a long time and is far from painless."

Giovanni had talked to her about hunting and feeding. Simon might question some of Giovanni's tuition, but he was a large male vampire. He obviously knew how to feed and stay alive. She had the basics in her mind, but felt it was probably like sex, which she had no experience of either. Knowing the mechanics of what to do, was different from having to actually do it. Get her fangs in and the human would stop struggling. She had to respect her own strength, though that came before sinking her fangs into their neck. Crap, it all felt so complicated now she had to do it for real. She was walking while she thought and panicked. A strong male heartbeat was in a field, a long way from the nearest farmhouse.

"I have him Simon, my first meal." She muttered.

"Good, your instincts will take over when your fangs drop. Remember, no matter how big and strong he is, you're stronger."

Supposing her fangs didn't drop ? What if she bit him and her instincts didn't kick in ? What if the farmer had super human strength ? Her heart was beating fast for a vampire, as she looked at the man stacking something, probably turnips, in the dark. Who stacks turnips in the dark ? Probably a drunk or crazy farmer, but he'd soon be her first meal of blood. It was all about the blood to her kind. Just thinking about the wonderful, hot, crimson fluid; was making her fangs drop.

"Can you help me ?"

The farmer didn't look drunk, though she could see him a lot better than he could see her. A few stars in the sky and a tiny crescent moon, that gave almost no light at all. The farmer dropped a handful of turnips, or whatever they were. In her best formal dress, Niña knew she had to be a strange sight in a field at night.

"Oh, what can I help you with child ?"

She mumbled deliberately, so that he would lean closer.

"Sorry, I didn't hear that.....What's wrong girl ?"

He had no fear of her, there was no reason he should. A large muscular man who worked the ground to produce crops. The farmer still towered over her, even though he was crouching.

"Come closer, I need to whisper." She said.

"Are you lost girl ?"

He was close to her, but still not close enough. Niña lost patience and pulled the farmer down, close enough to get her fangs into his throat. The wrong spot, there would be a lot of wasted blood and

he'd probably choke on his own blood. She'd learn though and Giovanni had told her a few stories about his early kills. He'd once had to run home through the streets, covered from head to foot in blood.

"Pull him onto the ground, don't waste it all." Said Simon.

His hand was on her shoulder, in all the excitement, she'd almost forgotten he was there. Niña easily turned the farmer, to lay him on his back. Her mouth could now cover the jagged hole in his throat and the blood tasted wonderful. The hot blood gave her a feeling of euphoria, so strong that she was worried about fainting from pleasure. There had been a wonderful Christmas, when Simon had given her a proper glass mirror. He and Giovanni had made a fuss of her all day. That had been good, there had even been a happy tingle at the back of her neck. Compared to what the blood was doing to her, that brief Christmas euphoria had been nothing. Simon was touching her shoulder again.

"Slowly, Niña." He said. "Stay focused and stop drinking when his heart stops. Never drink the blood of the dead. It tastes bitter and burns the throat."

There was a second or so of feeling a little melancholy when the farmer's heart stopped. Afraid that she might really faint, Niña lay on the ground and looked up. The stars were so bright, the moon was so bright. Everything seemed so much brighter than before.

"Simon.....Oh, Simon, why didn't you tell me how wonderful I'd feel ?" She asked.

"Enjoy it, the next time won't be quite as sweet. You'll always hope for that wonderful euphoric feel again, but.....Feeding will always be wonderful, but you'll never recapture how you feel right now."

"It reminds me of how I felt when I had two glasses of wine on my birthday, but better, much better."

Niña looked at the night sky and looked at the dead farmer, trying to fix the wonderful memory in her mind. Looking at herself, made her cry.

"Why are you crying ?" Asked Simon. "Are you crying for the farmer ?"

"No, I've got blood all over my best dress. It's ruined, Simon.....Ruined."

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Laura had pictured Horus, in all his golden splendour. It was what she'd always done when wanting to speak to him. Picture him very clearly in her mind, before pressing the Egg that was more a disc than an Egg. It always worked always, like expecting a dial tone when you pick the phone up. She felt groggy, as though she'd been in a drugged sleep for a while. There was the golden aura around her, so she was definitely in the realm of the Old Gods. He did wait until she was stood up, before talking. "Who have you brought into my world, Laura ?" Asked Horus. "One is a vampire, an uninvited vampire who has served other deities in her past. The other is.....A creature of the darkness who isn't welcome here. Why have you done this thing, Laura ?"

It had crossed her mind that uninvited guests was going to be a huge thing with him. Horus had a lot of rules of etiquette, none of them written down or possible to find out about. Laura had winged it; she was still winging it. An angry Horus though, that was now mercifully rare. He was quite capable of killing Mabina and Liz, to punish her.

"Please forgive my lack of understanding." Said Laura. "The keeper of the last gate to Duat the Underworld is your servant. She is sworn to serve you for eternity, maybe even longer."

Her two friends looked paralysed or frozen. They were hovering in a small cloud of green vapour, as though they were specimens in a laboratory. Laura had seen others held in a similar way and one of those hadn't lived to see another morning.

“The one you call Liz was expected to keep to the world of humans and Duat. But I will forgive her presence here, but only this time. Bring her before me again and I will look for a new guardian to protect the Underworld. What of the vampire ? I feel less forgiving of heretics.”

Laura had no idea who Mabina might have once worshiped. After meeting a few deities and servants of chaos, she'd become a little cynical of anything even vaguely gnostic. All the Old Gods and even older wielders of Godlike powers, seemed so selfish and spiteful. Mabina had been brought back from the true death, by the hungry ground in her basement. That seemed to be more to do with Gaia, than any ancient deity.

“The Wanderers are behaving strangely.” Said Laura. “Liz and Mabina witnesses this behaviour. I brought them here as reliable witnesses. Their word can be trusted on matters of this kind. Mabina was once a queen, her word was law for tens of thousands of her subjects.”

Horus knew about Liz and he knew about Mabina, Laura was sure of it. He was an omniscient and omnipotent God after all. Only he wasn't, not all the time. He'd once needed her help to go to places he couldn't, to accomplish goals a God was loathe to be associated with. She suspected many of his ill tempers were just a game he enjoyed playing. He was now looking at her with a human face, rather than the more usual bird's head. He was smiling, quite a rare thing.

“You should have told me that, Laura.” Said Horus. “Of course, they're welcome here. If only you'd told me the details sooner. No permanent harm done; I'll release them.”

There had been no opportunity to tell him, he was being unreasonable, of course he was. Not that she could ever tell him that. Laura thought it should definitely be carved on a few tablets of stone, in prominent places. Rules of the universe number one; never tell a God they're wrong, especially when they are.

“I will remember to be more erudite, next time.” She said.

A twitch of his head and a smile, before she was looking at the head of a bird again. There was no reading that face, no gauging whether the Old God was playing with her, out of sheer boredom. Liz and Mabina fell to the ground, but were quickly up on their feet. As discussed before arriving in the realm of the Gods, they bowed to Horus and kept their eyes on the ground.

“Tell me what you've seen, but one at a time.” Said Horus. “Liz first, tell me about what the Wanderers are doing ?”

“They're showing unified group behaviour.” Said Liz. “Moving around old ruined temples. They move together, as though the pattern matters. There's chanting too, though I think Mabina understands that better.”

“Yes, tell me about the chanting, Mabina ?” Asked Horus.

“From other chanting I know, they were calling on something or someone. Not summoning, just a very respectful request for that person to join them. It was almost as if they were nervous of whoever they're calling to.”

“The Gods being nervous, that is.....Interesting.” Said Horus. “Do you remember any of the chanting ?”

“I think so, though I might get it wrong in places.” Said Mabina.

Mabina sang it and the song made Laura a little nervous. It wasn't a song of nice places on sunny afternoons. It was a song full of darkness and something else, something deeply sinister.”

“Enough.....Enough.” Said Horus. “You were right to bring this to my attention. I will arrange a meeting with others who will have their own ideas about this matter. It may take a while to arrange, but it will happen. In the meantime, I'd like you to continue watching the Wanderers. Will you do that for me ?”

“Yes, of course.” Said Liz.

“Is there anything specific we should watch for ?” Asked Mabina.

Never ask a direct question, Laura had told her. The logic was that if Horus wanted her to look for something specific, he would have mentioned it. Did the annoying etiquette mean Horus was sometimes ill-informed ? Probably. He was glaring at Mabina, who almost certainly had no idea she’d offended a living God.

“Just watch them and report to Laura.” Said Horus. “Be careful, the one I believe they’re calling, is unlikely to tolerate snoopers.”

Laura prayed that Mabina didn’t ask Horus who he had in mind. He liked to play games and hint at understanding more than those around him. Luckily Mabina seemed to remember the bit about direct questions.

“I will do as you command.” Said Mabina.

Her friends were back in the green cloud again, floating about while paralysed or frozen in some way. Horus stood up, which he’d never done before. The human face again, quite a young and handsome face. The kind of features that would have made him a heartthrob on TV shows aimed at young adults. Those handsome features were right in front of her face, as he looked at her. Bright blue eyes this time, though they were sometimes dark brown. Green once, though that was rare. Those eyes seemed to see deep into her soul.

“Have a care Laura, the great serpent has already tasted your bloodline.” Said Horus. “It is he they call to, the feathered serpent who created your world. He can just as easily destroy it. Be careful and tell no one what I’ve told you.”

“For some reason, none of this surprises me.” She said. “It feels as though my destiny is to destroy the one who tried to destroy all of my ancestors.”

No hugs, Gods didn’t hug, as far as she knew. Horus ran a finger across her cheek and she was in Hornsey, wondering where her friends were. They were on the rug in front of the TV, blinking and trying to wake up.

“Oh, Crap.....Is it always like that ?” Asked Mabina. “I have a two bottles of red wine hangover, headache.”

“Me too.” Added Liz.

“It’s not normally like that.” Said Laura. “Though if it helps.....I’m sure be likes you both.”

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Clara wasn’t surprised Cyril had asked her to come to his home for dinner. Privacy in restaurants was always an issue. All those eager hovering waiters, always seemed to be at your elbow at the wrong moment. Plus, she’d been there before, though Simon had been with her then. On that occasion the food had been superb. Cyril H Carter liked his food, hardly surprising for a CEO in the food industry. Cyril had hired several good cooks over the years and the current lady was said to be almost a Michelin star quality chef.

“Would you like me come back later ?” Asked Felipe.

Felipe had a car, though it wasn’t exactly in the first flush of youth. He thought of the elderly Citroen as a classic, so she wasn’t about to disagree. A lift to Cyril’s meant she could leave her car at home and have a few glasses of wine. The lift home again meant there’d be sex to look forward to later. The only potential fly in the ornament was why Cyril wanted to see her.

“That would be nice, Felipe.” She said. “Can we say.....Come back at about eleven ?”

“Yeah, I’ll park in the area. Text me when you’re ready to go home.”

So polite, which was definitely part of the reason she'd decided to see him again. No screeching obscenities when she'd dumped him the last time, no causing scenes in public places. Mabina said she'd developed a love of politeness and Clara could see why. Felipe was looking up at the mansion Cyril had in one of the better parts of London.

"Must be worth a few Brazilian real." He said. "What is this guy into?"

"Fake meat, it's the in thing at the moment."

She kissed him goodbye and even waved as he'd driven away. She'd dumped him because of everything seeming too safe, too routine, too domesticated. They'd become a bit too much like the average couple and that couldn't happen again. Felipe was an attractive young man with some surprising sexual skills for his age. He was also clean and smelled nice. That was it, that was all she required from him. Laura might have fallen in love with a human, but that wasn't for her.

"No more kisses goodbye." She muttered.

No getting someone to do it, Cyril answered his own door. He'd probably seen her arrive on a CCTV screen, but it was still a nice touch. There was even a quick kiss on the cheek, that stopped about a quarter of an inch from her face. That was new, Cyril was obviously brushing up on his people skills.

"Clara, thank you so much for coming." He said.

"Of course I came, I've heard all about your new cook."

"She does spoil me. The smells coming out of the kitchen.....I think we're in for a real treat tonight."

It was difficult to see Cyril as a hard man, but he'd once been a London hoodlum of some fame. His usual weapon had been a large ball peen hammer, or sometimes a meat axe. He'd once told her he liked up close and personal fighting, because he was useless with a gun.

When the late great William Jarrold had run the gang, Cyril had been his second in command, his brutal right arm. William had taken a dozen men onto the turf of a rival gang and into a pub they treated as a base of operations. William and Cyril had been among the tiny number to leave the pub alive. It had been a disaster, but that is sometimes how reputations are created in the criminal world. Cyril had walked out of that pub at dawn, with a bloody hammer in his hand. William Jarrold claimed to have killed the rival gang boss, but others said it had been Cyril.

"Are you a fan of single malt, Clara?" Asked Cyril. "I have a bottle or two of the really good stuff, for special occasions."

"Yes, great.....I'm not driving tonight."

Clara liked Cyril, Simon did too. The middle-aged businessman might now be a typical corporate type who had a criminal empire as a kind of side hustle. When he was younger though, he'd often walked into a situation where it was just him against many. For two vampire who'd fought with hand-to-hand weapons in a now bygone age, there was much to like and even respect, about Cyril H Carter.

"Oh, this is a wonderful drop of scotch." She said. "So, do we talk business before or after dinner?"

"Before does mean we can relax and enjoy the food."

"Alright, Cyril.....Let's do it."

No paperwork of course, no file handed over for her to peruse. Cyril's fake meat business probably had a warehouse full of archive boxes, most companies did. Not the criminal world though, it was a genuine paper free sector. Tom Ives had once said crime deserved to win an award of some kind, for being such a green and sustainable business. Knowing Tom, he probably wasn't joking.

"Simon was known to many, his reputation preceded him. All those rival drug dealers he left dead.....It all speaks for itself. Just having him around almost guaranteed peace with others, especially the newly arrived gangs from the east. Someone likened Simon to a nuclear deterrent, my

nuclear option in case of trouble. Now he's gone I need a new deterrent and I'd like it to be you. Aided by your own team of course, I'd be hiring your entire organisation."

Her organisation indeed. Laura was working for the Silver Dawn now and Ronnie was working for Tom anyway. That left Patsy and her cat. True, Zeus was pretty formidable when riled, but that was the extent of her organisation. Cyril was likely to pay well though and it had to be better than fifty to sixty sales calls a day and the water cooler gossip. Another off the books job with no national insurance or tax. No problem, Clara had done a few of those over the years. Vampires weren't the sort to need sickness benefit or pensions and definitely not maternity benefit.

"I'm interested, though I don't think I've the same reputation Simon enjoyed." She said.

"Oh yes you have, Clara. I keep my ear to the ground and you've made quite an impression."

"I know you looked after Simon pretty well; I saw the envelopes full of cash." She said. "So, how well does being a deterrent pay these days?"

Part of Clara would have been happy to do the job for free, though like everyone, she had bills to pay. There were offshore accounts and two pieces of property. Those were the rainy-day fund though, for when they might have to pack one bag each and run. For day to day living, there had to be a regular and reliable income.

"I tend to work in units of prime minister's pay." Said Cyril. "Everyone tends to know what the guy or gal in number ten earns and it does keep pace with inflation. The number of jobs I need doing can vary, but I can see you earning two PMs in the first year. Tax free of course. Simon was on three PMs and I can see you earning that in the second year."

It was more than she'd thought, a lot more. No wonder Simon was so relaxed about unexpected expenses. She'd never talked to him about money, not really. As long as there was a roof over their head and food in the fridge, she'd considered they were doing alright. Clara extended her hand towards Cyril, hoping he didn't do the bumping elbows nonsense. He didn't.

"I accept, Cyril." She said. "You've just hired a new nuke."