

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 19 - Jack

“Her nest egg from the Monkman business was largely untouched. Mainly because Patsy was paranoid about any conspicuous consumption, being noticed. Noticed by who ? That was the thing about paranoia, it didn't need to be precise about such things.”

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Leptis Magna had once been a huge city with a large population. Now it was mostly ruins, though not entirely devoid of people. Tribespeople had created a permanent settlement just south of the ruins. Only a hundred or so of them, though Galeoto wasn't sure if they'd be friendly.

“I normally move cargo along the coast, mainly food and wine coming from southern Italy and being dropped off at Livorno.” He'd told them. “You can't expect me to be an expert on everywhere in the Mediterranean. I've heard that these people can be fine, as long as they're left alone. Then again....I've heard they can be dangerous.”

Once there had been a port to serve the city, now there was just a beach to come ashore by boat. Simon respected tribespeople who wanted to be left alone. Far better than locals constantly being over friendly. On the other hand, local farmers with fresh produce to sell, would be useful. He'd gone ashore with just Giovanni, with the intention of finding out if the locals were friendly, or likely to be enemies.

“Whatever happens.....We can run faster than them.” Giovanni had said.

There were large towns further along the coast, ones where Italian gold coins, could be used to buy essential supplies. A local encampment with a hundred hostile tribespeople though....Simon wanted to avoid that situation. He was currently looking at several tidy looking yurts and quite a few, less tidy, tents.

“We really need to be friends with these people.” Said Simon. “No violence unless they attack us.”

“Fine, I'll be nice to them.” Muttered Giovanni.

Just a few goats and nothing that looked like stored crops. Simon hadn't been that optimistic about finding anything worth buying, even if they were willing to barter. A young girl had run away from them, returning with three tall men. An hour or so later and Simon and Giovanni, were now in possession of a sack full of vegetables.

“We gave them my dagger for this.....We don't even know what they are.” Said Giovanni.

“Worth a dagger to make them think of us as friends.” Said Simon. “We can now bring everyone ashore. We might be here for months, Giovanni. Who knows....You might learn to love the food in the sack.”

“Is there water in this accursed place ?”

“There will be a well.” Said Simon. “A city as large as this one used to be.....There will be several wells.”

One of the crew of the Mermaid recognised the vegetables and even knew how to cook them. By the middle of the day, everyone needed ashore, was sitting on their bags and trunks. Simon and Juliana, Giovanni and Niña. They were sat next to a huge stone arch, which seemed to dominate the ruins. The men good with picks and swords were there too, and Juliana's maids. A large group, all

waiting to be given their instructions. The plan had been changed and perfected during the voyage, with other options if the locals had proved hostile. Simon stood on top of a large fallen stone and surveyed the ruins. Yes, the original plan would work. No returning to the ship every night, they'd live in Leptis Magna. The first to do so for a very long time, or so Captain Galeoto had told them. It seemed the ruins had a certain reputation, which was why the tribespeople built their camps well away from the ruins of the ancient city. Simon had done a little reading himself and no one seemed to know why such a large and wealthy city, had been abandoned.

"I can see several ruined buildings that just need a roof." Said Simon. "We have canvas, wood and plenty of tools. We'll repair a few buildings to give us a temporary home. I'm told the weather here never gets that cold or wet at this time of year. I'm sure we can live here quite comfortably."

No one complained, they were all either volunteers, or being well paid to be there. Juliana had actually made sure her father financed the trip, just to ensure she wasn't left behind in Florence.

"We'll aim to get somewhere ready before nightfall." Said Simon.

"Good.....I don't fancy another boat from the beach to the ship." Said Juliana.

A few people muttered their support. The boat journey had been wet, uncomfortable and potentially dangerous. One of the ship's boats had been close to capsizing.

"Alright.....We get at least two buildings ready to sleep in tonight." Said Simon. "Eventually we'll build a thick fence around our encampment. Until then, we'll have to organise a watch. Can you deal with that, Rice?"

"Yes, no problem." Said Rice.

Rice was in charge of the men hired in Florence, the guards who'd double as diggers. Rice was a German, whose family had moved to Italy. His name was probably spelled as Reiss, but it sounded like Rice. So, as often happens, the head of their guards, became known as Rice.

"Do we have fresh water yet?" Asked Niña.

"Giovanni and I are about to look for a well." Said Simon. "Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

A little east of the huge arch, they found a large hole in the ground, with a spiral stone staircase leading down. There was no need of Niña's skill as a seer. Simon could smell water down there, fresh water. Giovanni had brought a lamp for such a situation. The stairs wet down for a very long time.

"Everything looks perfect, as if the city has just been abandoned." Said Niña.

"It's said the Romans fled, abandoning the city in a matter of hours." Said Simon.

"Don't tell me.....No one knows what they were running away from." Said Giovanni.

Simon merely nodded at Giovanni. They found a deep pool of water at least two hundred feet below the surface. It looked clean and Simon even drank a mouthful.

"Clean, fresh water." He said. "Hard work to carry it up, but we now have a decent water supply."

"Good neighbours, weird vegetable and now water." Said Niña. "What more could we want?"

"Is the girl being sarcastic?" Asked Giovanni. "Sometimes I can't tell."

"The girl, so I'm the girl now!"

They were all laughing, when the sound came from somewhere. Like a whimpering at first, it reminded Simon of the sounds a small puppy makes.

"Wow, what was that?" Asked Giovanni.

The sound became a growling, coming up from somewhere below. Nothing attacked them or ever seemed likely to attack them. After a few seconds the growling stopped.

"I think.....We were just warned, though I'm not sure why." Said Niña.

"We'll tell the others that the wind makes weird noises down here.....We need the water." Said Simon.

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Patsy didn't consider herself to be over emotional. There had been tears when her dad had died, but scattering his ashes over the turf at the arsenal ground, had been a night to celebrate his life. Unofficially scattered of course, there were advantages to knowing vampires. No lock was ever strong enough to keep them out of anywhere. Like many kids, Patsy had learned about loss from losing pets. Strangely the death of a hamster had made her cry for days, while the death of the family dog had barely affected her. The hamster had been hers though, her buddy, hers to look after. She cried when really bad things happened, though never for the sake of crying. She'd loathed the girls at school, who wailed at every crisis, just to get attention. It had been Simon who'd started her flood of tears, but not her Simon, who was no longer hers.

"One of your new guys sold me a light for a model 80." Gary had said. "My car is a model 84a, everyone knows that."

"Only because they know you and your car, Gary." She'd replied

Gary was a regular, who seemed to have rebuilt a classic car, totally from spares bought at Hayle's. There had been quite a few regulars at the counter and when one became agitated, they all tended to become agitated.

"You need to train them properly." Someone had yelled.

"No, Simon is alright." Gary had said. "He just needs to ask if he doesn't know. I had an hour on the bus to get here."

Simon was a trainee, actually one of the brighter ones. Her boss had left her to decide on who to hire out of about a dozen hopefuls. She'd hired Molly, basically to get another female on the counter. Being the only female face could have its good days, especially at Christmas. She had enough smelly stuff and bath oils to take her right through to retirement. On a bad day though.....She'd had enough of being the lone female. Simon had almost been rejected, simply because of his name. He seemed good though, perfect for the job.

"Sorry, Gary." She'd said. "Everyone needs to learn, but we will try harder."

Maybe it was because, just for a moment, the regulars had been bullying Simon. The mixture of the name with all that emotion, it had to be it. Once she was sat in her office, the crying had begun. The tears became a flood, with her getting through an entire box of tissues. Her boss had looked in on her. Surprisingly he hadn't immediately left, or asked her what was wrong. She'd known him a while of course, that had to help. He squeezed her shoulder and patted the back of her hand.

"Take as long as you like." He'd said.

Maybe he thought the regulars had finally broken through her legendary thick skin, which in a way, they had. Patsy knew though, deep down inside. She was weeping for her Simon, who she'd probably never see again, or at least not for many years. It was a relief when her phone rang and the icon came up for Veronica Neophytou, Ronnie.

"Hi, Ronnie."

"Patsy.....I'm helping Clara organise something. Your name came up, right at the top of the list."

It was strange how the tears stopped. Partly it was talking to a friend and partly it was the promise of action. Something in her life that didn't involve her mum and motor spares. Dave helped keep her sane of course, but a little action with Clara and Ronnie.....Plus the cash would be handy.

"I'm interested, pencil me in." Said Patsy. "Can you hint at what we're doing?"

"Best if we come to your place." Said Ronnie. "Are you at home tonight?"

Dave would be there, but it was time for him to meet her friends.

"I will be, though Dave will be there." She said. "I'd like you to meet him, Dave looks like being around for a while. We can leave him in the lounge and talk in the kitchen."

"So, a new guy in your life.....Is he the nosy type ?" Asked Ronnie.

"No, not at all."

"Alright, we'll see you tonight."

And Patsy wasn't instantly feeling better, but she was on the way there. She had told herself the Monkman Museum heist was a one off, but she really needed something to help her forget Simon. No....Not forget, she just needed something to stop her dwelling on the past.

"Not so much crime.....As therapy." She muttered to herself.

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Gwen Logan wasn't completely alone on the small holding. She'd lived near Pitmedden in the Parish of Udney for almost her entire life, so she knew the local community. With Daniel away she needed help and she didn't mind paying the going rate for casual farm work. Jack had been useful, he'd treated the livestock like pets, especially the pigs. Officially her son had died, there'd even been a funeral, of a sorts. In reality, Jack had become something else, other than a young man with learning difficulties. The seed had always been in him, but a trip away with Laura had caused him to become, whatever he now was. Gwen didn't know whether to thank Laura, or curse her. Jack had become the new Wiremi, a kind of king of the realm of dreams. She'd have thought it was all fantasy, if Jack didn't pop back occasionally. He talked to her and Daniel, though it was only a couple of times a year. Always asking about the pigs, he was still obsessed with their wellbeing.

"I'm sure I saw someone out past the pond." Said Duncan.

"There's only you and I here.....Seeing things is the first sign you know." Said Gwen.

Duncan was a rare thing, someone who believed in giving the job a hundred percent, even if the pay was only slightly over minimum wage. Duncan was the best out of the casuals she employed, though he could sometimes arrive with a hangover.

"I'm not going mad yet." Said Duncan. "It looked like.....No, maybe I am going crazy. I'll be here tomorrow, before the sun is even up."

Duncan left on his old motorbike, which looked like something out of a museum. Pitmedden was like that though, the entire place sometimes felt like a museum exhibit.

"I wonder.....He hasn't been here in a while." She muttered.

No locking doors, there had never been a burglary in the area. It was the one advantage about being up a long lane and in the middle of nowhere. Gwen walked past the hut where the pigs lived and across the field growing winter barley. In a corner of three fields, there was an area of stones, rough ground and two very ancient trees. It was easier to leave it to go wild, than all the effort to use the small piece of land. Between the trees was a pond, where Jack had come to get frogspawn and fish for newts. Gwen sighed and felt her cheeks get hot.....He was there.

"Jack.....You made Duncan think he was going crazy." She said.

"Yes mother, I let him get a glimpse of me." Said Jack. "I knew he'd say something. I worry about coming to the house, with so many strangers around."

"Duncan isn't a stranger."

"But he thinks I'm dead.....He came to my funeral."

Jack was clever now, his mind seemed to work properly after he'd become the new Wiremi. When he visited her, he usually looked the same as he had when he'd been alive. The eyes were different though, like looking into a kaleidoscope of colours. Still her son though and he always would be. Gwen hugged him and he hugged her back.

"How is Daniel ?" Asked Jack.

"Fine, he's in London. Someone needed help." Said Gwen. "Must have been serious, he went by plane to Heathrow. Thieftrow my dad always called it. He never did like anything about London."

"I'm involved with the same problem." Said Jack. "Not officially, Laura has moved onto other mentors, some far better than me. Her days of needing Wiremi are over, though the link isn't severed, not quite. I'm hoping you could pass on a message from me."

"Does that mean you're not staying ?" Asked Gwen.

"Of course I'm staying, for a few hours. I'm hoping you have some of your apple pie. So.....To this question for Laura. You'll need to phone her on the Hornsey number."

Gwen's heart sank, messages to friends of Daniel's were one of her pet hates. They were complicated and usual quite cryptic.

"I'll need to write this down." She said.

"No need, it's quite simple." Said Jack. "She needs to dream of the forest and come to the tree."

"Laura needs to dream of the forest.....Then come to the tree."

"Perfect mum, perfect."

"I'll still write it down when we get to the house." Said Gwen.

Jack put his arm round her as they walked towards the house and Gwen knew everything was going to be alright. She'd remember the message to Laura and Daniel would return to her. It was almost as if the sun had come out on a cloudy day.

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Niña was tired and she quite liked the idea of sleeping in the ruins, as long as there was a canvas roof over her head. The guards were working a rota where two of them were always awake, so she felt reasonably safe. Simon had warned her about vampires not needing sleep the way humans did. This was her first experience of it though. Tired and ready to sleep, but no sign that she was going to get a wink of sleep that night.

"Giovanni and I were once awake for ten days." Simon had told her. "We were tracking an agent of the Pazzi family and wanted to make sure we didn't lose him."

It was a part of being a vampire it seemed, so she'd decided to use her time, productively. Simon was relying on her to find the right place, the correct place to wait in Leptis Magna. They had no idea who, or what would eventually arrive, but they had to be in the right location when it did. The ruins covered a huge area, though her night vision was good, better even than that of a wolf. Niña had been hoping there'd be a feeling, like a sign over the right place. So far though, the ruins were just ruins, with nothing feeling at all special. Even Donna hadn't shown herself.

"Where are you going ?" Asked Juliana.

They were too near where Juliana's two maids were sleeping. Niña held Juliana's hand and took her outside, well away from any curious ears.

"I can't sleep, so I'm going to walk through the ruins." Said Niña. "Straight lines, from one side to the other and then back again. With luck, I'll know the right place when I find it."

"Right place ?"

"The location Simon will need to wait for.....Whatever arrives." Said Niña. "Poor Simon, he could be sat there every day for months."

"Yes, I remember him mentioning that, or I saw it in his memories." Said Juliana. "I can't sleep....Can I come with you."

Simon would never forgive her if Juliana was harmed, but the ruins seemed quite safe. Niña quite liked Juliana and having someone to talk to, would make the task easier.

"Alright, but I can't guarantee it will be totally safe. There is a moon tonight, but if it goes behind any clouds....We'll be in total darkness."

"Wonderful.....Sounds fun." Said Juliana.

It wasn't of course and even having someone to talk to, didn't make it any less tedious. Juliana didn't have her night eyes, so there was always the worry that she might step into a hole and fall to her death. After a while, Niña actually looked forward to a close call, just to relieve the monotony. She'd remember all the gossip though. There were gems in amongst the chatter, which might be useful at a later date.

".....and how could Aurora have ever thought her brother was a vampire ?....."

Names, places, families and gossip that might be worth more than gold, one day. As they stopped and decided on the next line to take, back across the ruins; Niña saw something.

"There.....Did you see that ?" Asked Niña.

"Where ? It's all so dark."

No use, there could be no running with Juliana by her side. The ruin where she'd seen something move, looked like it had once been a Roman temple. Every other building looked like a temple, but this one looked different. Better preserved and most of the roof was intact.

"There's a temple.....We'll take it slowly. Follow me and be very careful where you tread."

"Fine.....Did you bring a lamp ?" Asked Juliana.

"No.....Just be careful. Simon will kill me if you get hurt."

The temple was huge and the roof blocked what little moonlight there was. There was a lot of rubble on the floor and Juliana ended up holding onto her shoulders. Niña could see movement, but it was further in, right at the centre of the temple.

"Are you alright ? I know it's dark." Said Niña. "We can leave if you like."

Juliana dug her fingernails into her shoulders, though if Niña was any judge of character, Juliana wouldn't want to run away.

"I'm alright.....Just move really slowly."

There had once been a statue to whichever deity had once been worshipped. That had been toppled over, the stone figure broken up into small pieces. Probably a deliberate act, as most of the interior was surprisingly well preserved. Niña realised the rubble making it so hard for Juliana to keep her feet, was the rubble from breaking up the statue.

"Now.....Do you see them ?" Asked Niña.

"Yes, they're beautiful."

In front of where the statue would have stood, was an area of clean floor. The floor was glowing and Niña knew for certain that they'd found the focus, the place where Simon needed to wait. They were dancing around the glowing floor, the ethereal creatures. The new tutor Simon had hired for her, had introduced her to many new words. Ethereal was one of her favourites. Extremely delicate and light in a way that seems not to be of this world.....The word suited the creatures perfectly. No clues as to gender, they didn't even look that human. Like drawings she'd seen of fae beings, the creature with wings of so many folklore tails.

"The way they dance.....Wonderful." Said Juliana.

So tempting to move closer, but Juliana might fall over some of the rubble. The end of the dance came suddenly, with just one of the creatures left to stare at them. The others had simply vanished, as if they'd evaporated into the cool night air. The last one seemed to glide over the rubble, until it was close enough to touch.

"I have a message for you, drinker of blood, for all three of you."

The face was pleasing, like a cherub in a biblical painting. The creature's eyes though....There was so much darkness there.

"What is the message?" Asked Niña.

"Be here twenty-one nights from now.....My master wishes to test you. Don't be late, there will only be one such opportunity."

The voice sounded female, so rightly or wrongly, Niña decided to think of the creature as female.

She vanished and the glow on the floor died. Niña was left in almost total darkness, with a nervous Juliana; clinging to her back.

"Alright, no problem." Said Niña. "We'll just take this very, very slowly."

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Patsy could afford decent wine, but wasn't sure if buying the good stuff was sensible. She'd always gone for cheap prosecco and even cheaper Chilean chardonnay. Her nest egg from the Monkman business was largely untouched. Mainly because Patsy was paranoid about any conspicuous consumption, being noticed. Noticed by who? That was the thing about paranoia, it didn't need to be precise about such things. Clara liked a decent red though, so Patsy had splashed out on two expensive bottles of merlot. Ronnie was known to drink just about anything.

"Come in.....Get settled and I'll order pizza." Said Patsy.

Her home was comfortable, everyone said it had a nice, cosy feel. There was something missing though, which had taken her a while to put her finger on. It was a cat, there'd always been a cat in their house. A little bundle of fur, waiting to be fed when she got home from work. Not another Zeus, nothing with the ability to take on burglars. Patsy had already asked a few neighbours to let her know about any kittens in the area.

"Do we have to have pizza?" Asked Clara. "I had pizza for lunch."

"Same here....And for dinner last night." Said Ronnie.

They decided on Thai food. As they waited for it to arrive, the wine was opened. Despite it breaking the unwritten rule about business coming after the meal, Patsy had to ask.

"What is this job you've got me in mind for? I'm assuming it's not strictly legal."

"It's not evenly vaguely legal." Said Ronnie. "We just need you to drive the vehicle. No getting involved with the rough stuff; you'll just be the driver."

"We need someone who won't panic, if things get a bit wild." Added Clara.

"How rough is the rough stuff?" Asked Patsy.

There was a brief silence, as Clara appeared to be deciding how much to tell her.

"As rough as it gets, Cyril has asked me to deal with the Koreans." Said Clara.

"They tried to kill us.....If that helps?" Asked Ronnie.

It did help and the answer implied they wanted her with them. Patsy had been determined it would be one criminal enterprise, then she'd be a model, honest citizen. Already though, she was seeing the advantages of a larger nest egg. The food arrived, something guaranteed to stop conversation. They ate at her kitchen table.

"Like civilised people." As Simon used to say.

Assuming the job was hers if she wanted it and that it paid well, Patsy could only see one problem.

"I'll need a gun." She said. "If an angry Korean heads my way, I'll need more than a winning smile to defend myself."

"No problem, I can supply a gun." Said Ronnie.

"A night job, so it won't interfere with your day job." Added Clara.

"How much does it pay?" Asked Patsy.

Not as much as the Monkman Heist, but it was only a one-time driving job. It was still more than she'd earn at Hayle's for many months of hard work. No taxes to pay either.

"Alright, I'll do it." Said Patsy.

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The message from Jack had been unexpected and Gwen had no way of contacting him. Did she have to go alone, or was Tim welcome? In Laura's experience, suddenly called meetings with no explanation, were usual private meetings. If Jack needed to see Tim or Akiva, she could take them to the realm of dreams another night. Similarly, there'd be no summoning her Gudara to take her to see Jack. Her journey would be similar to her first experience of travelling while dreaming. The big difference this time was experience. Laura knew how to get there and how to make sure Jack noticed her.

"Ohhh.....It's been a while." She muttered.

On her own in the Hornsey house, Clara seemed to be working most evenings. Dark outside, the whole process worked best after sunset. Laura got comfortable on the rug at the foot of her bed and looked at the yellow flowers in her hand. The first time she'd stolen someone's flowers from a wedding at the hotel. The ones in her hand had been purchased in Paris that morning. Laura knew she'd come a long way. She was no longer that hesitant new vampire, worried about getting everything wrong. Of course, she had messed up and Simon had been her rock. Clara had threatened to throw her out of the house on more than one occasion. Not that Laura ever thought the threats were real. Simon was the nice guy and Clara was the tough love. Between them, they'd been like parents, showing her how to survive as a new vampire. They'd put up with everything, even her killing a Van Helsing, their name for the police.

"Here I come, Jack.....Ready or not." She mumbled.

Not feeling sleepy, but that no longer worried her. Laura thought of the great forest, with the ancient tree at its centre. She closed her eyes and within a few seconds she was there, in the night sky. Not so much flying as being hurtled through the sky above the forest. There were stars there, which gave her just enough light to know she was above the forest. On her first time, the journey had taken hours, but she'd learned to focus on where she wanted to go. Laura could already see the light from the fire near the tree, the fire that never went out.

"I miss this so much." Laura muttered.

There was no time in the realm of dreams. A year could pass there and she'd still wake up in her room, at the same time as when she'd gone to sleep. At one time she'd had a thing about controlling her speed and direction. Now she was happy to enjoy the journey. The air was so clean and had the wonderful aroma of whatever plants were in flower below her. It wasn't a Garden of Eden though, there were dangerous creatures in the forest. Never near the tree though, or the village. The village was always safe.

"Do I call him Jack, or Wiremi?" She muttered.

Eventually she was taken down, to travel barely a foot above the treetops. There had to be glorious hues of green, though everything was the uniform grey of night. She knew about the clothing change, which had surprised and embarrassed her the first time. As her foot touched the ground, Laura's bedtime attire, vanished. Just panties and a gown, but now she was stood near the fire, completely naked. No panic, she knew that picturing herself fully dressed.....Add on a little concentration and focus. Laura was now dressed in trainers, jeans and a plain green T shirt.

"Like riding a bicycle." She said.

The people of the village kept to their huts at night, only the wise men around the tree were ever out at night. The huge ancient tree dominated the village and the forest. The first tree according to Wiremi, though he could often be poetic, rather than accurate. The number in the circle varied and sometimes there were wise women among their number. Right around the fire they went and around the base of the ancient tree. Easily a hundred of them, though Laura had never counted them. Not human, no one would ever think they were human. Short and squat, with large heads and long thin arms. Most were asleep, though one nodded at her. Jack was there in the circle and he was awake. The yellow flowers placed in his hands, would have brought his consciousness to her. There was no need for the flowers, but she placed them in his lap.

“Sit, Laura.....Sit.” Said Jack. “So close that our knees touch.....Sit.”

The first few times with Wiremi, she’d been sat naked on the forest floor. Not a pleasant experience, especially after it had been raining. Laura sat cross legged on the ground, before shuffling closer to Jack.

“Do I call you Wiremi, or Jack ?” She asked.

“You knew me as Jack, so call me Jack.”

In the real world, back in London, the realm of dreams would feel unreal. While she was there, it felt far more real than anything else in her life. Comfort mattered and sitting on the leaf mould, even in jeans, wasn’t comfortable. Laura concentrated and there was a mat between her bottom and the ground.

“Excellent.....You remembered how to do that.” Said Jack.

“Wiremi always said that comfort is important.” Said Laura.

Jack laughed and held her hand. Night became day, probably morning, not long after dawn. Some of the wise men and women had gone and the village was coming to life. There were even children playing among the huts and tents. It was nice to see the colours of the forest. There was also a kind of birdsong, though the flying creatures in the forest, looked nothing like birds.

“I am Wiremi.....A different kind of Wiremi.” Said Jack. “You were advanced enough to move onto being mentored by others, the Old Gods. The bond was never completely broken though and by bringing you here, you’re now part of this realm....Once again. The Wiremi who first brought you here would disapprove of my actions, but.....I am a very different kind of Wiremi.”

“I don’t understand.” Said Laura.

“I rarely talk to the deities, but I do notice their minions.” Said Jack. “I was told about Huh’s plan for dealing with the feathered serpent. One of his minions gave me the details, which means Huh wanted me to know. Sometimes the Gods seem to delight in complicating matters. Anyway.....Time doesn’t exist here, in the ancient forest. Everyone could be brought here to fight Q’uq’umatz, no matter what time line they’re currently living in. It would bring problems, especially now Clara has the jade figurine. No problem is worse than the end of the world.....So I propose that Q’uq’umatz is brought here and defeated.....Here.”

“I gave Clara the jade figure. How dangerous is it ?” Asked Laura.

“Depends on how you define danger.” Said Jack. “Really, you should persuade her to dispose of it. Whatever happens to the jade.....The main problem has to be the feathered serpent. You’re the key to defeating Q’uq’umatz.”

“Is Clara in danger of being killed ?”

“Listen, Laura.....The jade figurine is inconsequential. You must bring Q’uq’umatz here, to my realm. It won’t be easy and only you can do it. I want you to be bait, Laura. There is a chance you might die.”

Serpent bait didn't sound nice, but at least Jack had a plan. Huh had talked a lot, but everyone had agreed afterwards; it had all been waffle. Nothing seemed likely to work, because the key players were in different timelines. At least Jack had solved that problem.

"Sorry Jack, I will remain focused on the main problem." Said Laura. "How do I bring Q'uq'umatz to your world?"

"Oh, that will be easy....Show yourself and the deity will follow you anywhere." Said Jack. "Surviving being bait.....That will be the tricky part. Before I tell you my plan, there is something else I need to mention. Not pleasant to say, but I don't think you should trust Karkengara. Immensely powerful and extremely useful in a battle, but.....Not necessarily on your side."

Laura had to chuckle.

"No one trusts the dragon." Said Laura. "Not even Liz and she'd been travelling with him for a while. He has some kind of personal agenda, though no one can work out what it is. I will say though.....His myrmidons could be useful in a fight."

"Just be careful of him, Laura." Said Jack.

"I will.....Now, Jack. Tell me your plan....How do I survive being dragon bait?"

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Mabina really didn't have much to complain about, but her life looked likely to be a lonely one again. Daniel had received a long call from Gwen. As a result, he'd booked an airline ticket for the following morning. Not only was Daniel travelling by air, he'd splashed out on a business class ticket. Something serious had to be going on in Pitmedden in the Parish of Udney. Not that he'd told her much, just that there was a minor family emergency.

"Gwen needs me and anyway.....You can deal with anything the Gods of another world might need."

Daniel was feeling guilty about sleeping with her, after hundreds of years and thousands of lovers, she knew the signs. He hadn't even kissed her on the cheek, since that phone call. There was one task that needed to be finished before he left, one needing his expertise.

"Do we know which piece Liz claimed?" She asked.

It was time to go through the enchanted items of power, the ones obtained from the late Howard Mariette, famed archaeologist and secret occultist. They'd picked up his longhand notes before torching his house, but Howard had been a scribbler and more than a little cryptic.

"I went through Howard's notes when you were working." Said Daniel. "The missing item is the 'Steady hand of Flavia,' so I'm assuming Liz took that."

When you were working was a huge improvement. He used to call her home care visits, seeing one of her old ladies. Daniel was from a past age though, like a neanderthal dropped into modern London; so she'd forgiven him.

"Is it dangerous?" She asked.

"No, not at all." Said Daniel. "It helps concentration and focus. Howard refers to it as something the kids today, would call a life hack. Half the items are like that. The other half are.....Surprise, surprise....Enchanted artefacts to aid those seeking immortality."

"So....Basically a pile of ancient junk." She said.

"Hmmm, yes. Though the pieces are crafted out of gold and crafted well. Add on the fact that most of them are truly ancient and they will have a high monetary value. At the right kind of auction.....You could buy half of Chelsea with the proceeds, some of Fulham too."

"And you Daniel.....What would you buy with your half?"

"Easy....A new truck for Gwen. The one she has keeps letting her down."

There was something about his face, he looked so sad. Once, when she'd been a princess and not yet a queen, she'd seen a bear cry. She had no idea why, but the poor brute had been locked up in a small cage. Daniel's expression, reminded her of that huge, sad bear. Mabina held his hand.

"It's alright.....I know you have to go home." She said. "We both knew we'd only have a little while together. It's been a wonderful, beautiful, mistake."

"I'm sorry, Mabina. Gwen saw Jack, which is quite rare. What he said could affect the problem with Laura and the serpent deity. When I know more, I'll call you."

"Make sure you do.....Now, exactly how valuable are Howard's pieces of junk ?" She asked.

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