

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 2 - Juliana Colombo

“Niña had leant forward and gently used her teeth to nip Simon’s neck. There was no misreading that, it told him she really did know what kind of creatures she was sharing a house with.”

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~ The road to Florence – 13th Century Italy ~

Egypt had vanished in a swirl of air tinged with gold. Laura knew where Huh had sent her, though the world looked like an old black and white film. She seemed to be the only part of the road through the forest, that looked real. There were Huh’s minions of course, lots of them. At least six of the women in lilac robes, who did his bidding. Normally invisible to those not granted the sight to see them, they were there to correct any fractures in time. Which meant Huh had sent them to fix anything she might break. Their quiet presence was actually reassuring.

“Oh Simon, you’re about to get the shock of your life.” She muttered.

As the coach came to a halt, the world around her solidified. The air smelt fresh, with a hint of pine cones. The sunlight hurt her eyes for a few seconds, until she was used to it. An early morning sun, it had to be just a few minutes after dawn. Not that sunlight would ever be her friend, but the worst effect was usually a sneezing fit. Laura had blamed allergies and that probably wasn’t a lie. Vampires were allergic to sunlight, but it didn’t kill them.

“You must be quick Laura; Simon will already be late.” Huh had said.

Only Simon could be aware of her presence, Huh had insisted on that. The carriage had stopped to rest the horses and allow the men following on horses, a quick break. Huh knew where and when they’d stop, of course he did. He was the God of time and eternity. Laura found a gap in the trees and when Simon left the carriage, she waved at him.

“Please don’t think I’m an hallucination.” She mumbled.

She was wearing clothing from the 21st Century, so she could understand him staring at her. Her blouse was an expensive all cotton one, but everything else was probably man-made fibres. Jeans made in China probably weren’t a big thing in 13th Century Italy. Laura waved at him a few more times and beckoned him over.

“Good old Simon.” She mumbled.

He might still think she was nothing but a figment of his imagination, but he was walking in her direction. Still waving and beckoning like a crazy person, she backed towards a spot hidden from the road by bushes twice her height. Simon never said a word, until she hugged him.

“I thought you were a sign I’d gone insane.” He said.

“I guessed you might.”

“They told me I’d see Clara a few times if I was lucky. No one mentioned you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s good to see you, Laura. Really good, I was worried about you.”

They hugged and for a moment she forgot how tight they were for time. Simon should have been delivered to Alberti by dawn and he was already late. From what Huh had told her, Alberti could be ruthless if he didn’t feel he was being given the respect he expected.

“Simon, Huh sent me.” Said Laura. “I have instructions for you and a set of new ground rules. You’re being given no less than fifty of his minions, tasked with fixing any chronology you might break. They’ll be invisible most of the time, but they will be there.”

“That is such good news, Laura. I’ve been terrified about creating a temporal apocalypse.”

“You can be less cautious now.....Listen, you need to remember the exact words to tell Brother Alberti.”

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~ Chelsea, London – About now ~

Like most vampires with a few centuries under their belt, she hadn’t always been called Mabina Gladitch. Names were incredibly local and often indicated a period of time. A name suitable for a Queen wasn’t appropriate for a nurse in modern day London. Yes, Mabina had been a Queen, ruling most of what is modern day Romania, with part of Bulgaria. No vampire had turned her to make her one of their own. Mabina had been a rare thing, a vampire born of vampires. Her bloodline went back thousands of years, yet she’d been the last of her family to rule that part of the world.

Rebellion had been the cause of her heading west to seek a new life. Why had she chosen to be a nurse? Like many people, her career had chosen her, rather than the other way around. Some medical skills were essential, wounded vampires can’t go to the nearest hospital for treatment. Working nights suited her for various reasons, mainly because bright sunlight gave her migraine sized headaches. Clever of course, that goes without saying. Clever, with a willingness to work the graveyard shift. She’d quickly risen to the top of her profession.

“Oh Brendan, you must stop ignoring things like this.” She said. “Your body can deal with most minor infections, but some can turn nasty. Not every medical condition will go away if you ignore it.”

“I keep telling him, Mabina.” Said Liz. “He’s working on the renovation of a Victorian house at the moment, up to his neck in over a hundred years of dust and muck. That can’t help.”

“All that dirt definitely doesn’t help.” Said Mabina.

“They usually heal up on their own.” Said Brendan.

Liz hit him, a thump on his chest that made Brendan wince. He’d been Mabina’s once, body and soul. Thrall really worked, though not for all of her kind. Mabina was particularly good at making humans her slaves and Brendan Roche had proved to be one of her most useful slaves. Liz Grant had been hers too, in a way. A well-educated escort with a voice that sounded straight out of an expensive finishing school. A long story with Brendan needing someone to help him on a trip to Jerusalem. Of course, the two of them had sex, bonded and fell in love. Annoying, but it was what humans tended to do.

Eventually Mabina had released Brendan from her services, though he still seemed to view her as his private doctor. The cut on his back wasn’t deep, it was his profession that was the problem and his bad back. Brendan renovated houses and minor cuts were an occupational hazard. The bad back meant he couldn’t reach some places to clean the minor wounds. Mostly that wasn’t a problem, the human body is wonderfully good at healing itself. Occasionally though, Brendan would turn up with a nasty infection for her to treat. Liz tended to turn up too, though she did have the decency to bring a decent bottle of wine.

“It needs draining, Brendan.” Said Mabina. “Be brave, just a little pain and then the antibiotics can get to work.”

“So, you’re back to being a full-time nurse.” Said Liz. “Didn’t they strike you off, or something?”

Brendan winced as she opened up the puss filled wound. He was tough though; she’d dealt with far worse wounds in his body.

"I asked around, I still know some senior people. It appears my problems were all with the local hospital. Administrators move around and rarely hold grudges. I had left without giving notices, but in my own defence, I had died. When I was brought back by the hungry ground, the local hospital took me back."

"Then you left again." Said Brendan.

"Yes, I left again. I think this wound might need a couple of stitches."

That would keep him quiet for a while, he didn't think highly of her ability when it came to stitching him up. Mabina had to admit it to herself though, she was pretty dreadful at putting in stitches.

"Anyway, to cut a very long story short." She said. "I made a few enquiries and my work was still rated as being excellent. Years of doing nights with no moaning, does pay off. My qualifications are good and I hadn't been struck off or anything. I managed to get a very good reference, so I'm now in private healthcare."

"Oh, I hadn't expected that." Said Liz. "Are you working at a private hospital?"

"No, I look after people in their own homes. Sometimes I can be with the same patient for a month. Then there are weeks when I see a dozen different people. Always varied and the hours can vary. They pay well though and if I need a little time off, I can fit that in."

"Sounds good." Said Brendan.

"Ah, Brendan." Said Mabina. "I think stitches might not be needed. Let's see if a large bandage will do. And you Liz, I haven't seen you for a while. Are you controlling the creature inside you a little better?"

"The keeper of the final gateway to the underworld." Said Liz. "Brendan hates me doing this, but it doesn't scare me now. I am the creature and the creature is me. A kind of useful symbiosis, but with me definitely in the driving seat."

Liz held up her right arm and it changed, quickly. The speed of change was new, Liz had obviously been practising. Her arm became black, with a shine that looked almost wet. Her fingers became at least a dozen wriggling tentacles. It was an arm of the creature of darkness, who'd been harnessed by the old Gods, as their keeper of the final gateway. Liz's arm went back to looking human, as quickly as it had changed the other way.

"You've been practising at doing that." Said Mabina.

"For hours some nights." Said Brendan. "I still worry that she'll change and remain that way, forever."

"It does beg the question, why aren't you healing Brendan?" Asked Mabina. "As the keeper of the underworld, you must have the power to do it."

"Ahh, I'm good at the big things." Said Liz. "If Brendan had lost a leg, or was bleeding to death, I could deal with it. I'm really good at those huge problems. An infected gash in his back and.....I'm not so good. Think of it as cracking a walnut with a sledge hammer."

"Hmmm...So you come to me with the little things." Said Mabina. "If I didn't know you both so well, I might be insulted. While you're both here, have you seen Clara recently? Is there any news about Simon?"

Mabina had heard the house in Hornsey wasn't a happy place. Patsy had called her a few times, crying by the end of every call. Even Laura seemed to be finding it hard to cope with losing the vampire who'd turned her. Then there was Clara, poor Clara.

"We invited Patsy for dinner last week." Said Brendan. "No news, but she looked a bit happier."

"All for show, it'll take her years to get over it, if she ever does." Said Liz. "Clara though, all those years they were together, sharing a bed, fighting side by side....Poor Clara."

“Yes, poor Clara.” Said Mabina.

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~ Florence, the Headquarters of The Brotherhood - 13th Century Italy ~

Simon had thought he might be manacled, they had killed some of the men who'd been sent to bring him. If they'd arrived at a civilised hour though and announced their presence. Everything could have ended in a far better way. No manacles, though they had taken away his sword and the other four blades hidden about his person. Usually, two guards escorted him and now there were six. He was still certain though, that he'd be leaving the meeting alive.

“Tell him everything as though it's your plan.” Laura had said. “There must be no mention of any of it coming from Huh.”

“Why ?” He'd asked.

“If Huh is coming up with the good ideas, why does he need you ?”

Laura hadn't meant to put him in his place, he was sure of that. It was all from Huh, a God who obviously wanted to keep him alive. Simon didn't really mind looking stupid, well not that much. He just wanted to be alive after the meeting with Alberti and have his blessing to continue with the great quest. All those fears about destroying time had crippled him, he realised that now. Not all his fault, Huh wasn't the kind of supernatural being you could summon with a Ouija board. They hadn't asked how things were going and Simon.....It was his nature to assume he'd muddle through. In a way, he'd been right. With help from Huh and Laura, he was going to muddle through, probably.

“Wait, wait !!”

His medallion, his badge of high office, had been attached to the scabbard of his sword. The guard actually bowed to him, as he handed it to him. Simon was now sure he was going to see another sunrise. No guard would bow to a man known to be marked for death. He was shown to the usual waiting room, though Alberti rarely kept him waiting long. The average wait was said to be about two hours, but Simon had always been seen almost immediately.

“Wait here.”

He waited and began to work out his own priorities once he was home again. The great work, the quest, had to come first. He'd made a huge mistake by neglecting the task. A long task taking several human lifetimes, didn't mean it could be ignored. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. Then there were the side benefits of not being that worried about altering his own past, or the past of others.

“There has to be time for Juliana Colombo.” He muttered to himself.

There had been a time when he thought they might be heading towards having an affair. Juliana was of noble birth, the sort unlikely to bother with those employed to do the dirty work of the Medici. They'd had a few conversations though, there had been a connection. He was sure there had been a look in her eyes, the look. Then she'd been rude about him to one of her friends and more than a little standoffish. She'd thought he wasn't interested in her, so she'd pretended not to be interested in him. It wasn't until years later that he'd learned that Juliana had been crazy about him. By then she was married to a diplomat, a thin faced man with the personality of a dead fish. Simon was determined to change all that.

“He will see you now.”

Ten minutes wait, definitely no more than fifteen. As Simon followed the servant, he knew he was still in favour, even if only by a whisker.

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~ Simon & Giovanni's House in Grizzana ~

Niña had sat with Giovanni for a while, until he'd calmed down enough to go to bed. His foot had been troubling him, as had a bruise on his side. Being Giovanni, he'd used large amounts of drink to deaden the pain. There had been a lot of bad language and promised reprisals against the Brotherhood. Giovanni was no coward and Simon was his best friend. But, no one in their right mind tries to fight the Brotherhood. Niña had barely stopped being a child, yet she knew that. Giovanni wasn't all bluster; he was a skilled fighter. She doubted if he'd ever be stupid enough to go after anyone from the Brotherhood, no matter how drunk he was. After Giovanni had stumbled into his bedroom, Niña thought about using her own bed.

"I bought you a new bed Niña. Why do you never use it?" Simon had asked her, often.

She liked her room, there was space to keep the pretty clothes they'd bought her. Sometimes she even had a vase with flowers in it, next to the chair where she finished off her drawings. At night though, her room felt too quiet, too lonely. Sometimes, when Giovanni had drunk himself unconscious, she'd get a blanket and sleep in a chair near him. Usually though, she chose to sleep close to Simon. Ideally on the sofa in his room, though she'd settle for the floor. Even on the floor, she could hear him breathe and snore. Yes, Simon snored and the noise was reassuring and allowed her to get a few hours sleep.

Strange for a vampire to snore, or at least it seemed strange to her. Yes, she'd known what they were after just a few days in their house. Her drawings told her, in a way. She concentrated hard on her drawings and saw things most didn't see. One evening Simon was telling her about the need to be keep anything she might see, private.

"Giovanni and I work for the Medici. We sometimes get involved in things that shouldn't be talked about." He'd told her.

"It's alright Simon, I know what you both are." She'd said. "I'm sure neither of you will ever hurt me."

How had she been so sure of that? It seemed the right thing to do at the time, he had to know that she knew they were both vampires. Niña had leant forward and gently used her teeth to nip Simon's neck. There was no misreading that, it told him she really did know what kind of creatures she was sharing a house with. Simon had hugged her for a while, before kissing her cheek.

"You're safe here Niña. You have my word no one will in this house will ever hurt you."

She wandered into Simon's room and decided against the floor. She lay down on the sofa and covered herself in the blanket he must have put over her. Even if Simon wasn't there the room didn't feel lonely. His things were there and she could smell the leather of his boots and the new soap he'd begun to use.

"I know you're different Simon, but not that different." She mumbled.

Simon wasn't the old Simon; her drawings were telling her that. Nothing too drastic, he still had the same eyes. Those eyes had seen more than they should have though, for hundreds of years. She had no idea how she knew, but Simon had seen more winters than his age should have indicated. He even used words she didn't understand, words that had to be explained. He was now a scholar, or so it seemed, though old Simon had been much the same as Giovanni. Not that she intended to ask Simon why he'd changed. Some things were best left alone.

"Like how I came to be here." She muttered.

Niña hadn't usually been in the part of town where Giovanni had found her. She hadn't even been called Niña then, that had been Simon's doing. They'd taken in a waif that Giovanni had tripped over in the street, a street urchin who'd just reached puberty. Niña meant child, the baby and she'd become the child of the house. Why they'd taken her in? Why had her footsteps taken her to that

particular street ? None of it seemed accidental. Her life was being changed, pushed in a certain direction and she had no idea why.

"I have food to eat, a roof over my head and somewhere to sleep." She muttered. "Explanations would be nice, but I can live with what I have."

There had been one truly terrifying moment, which she'd tried to wipe from her mind. Simon had been asleep in his room; she'd seen him in there. A little the worse for drink, there was no chance of him getting out of his bed until the morning. Then out in the main room, she'd seen him, Simon. Another Simon in different clothes, but with no beard. For a moment or two there had been two Simon's, until the one in front of her had vanished. He'd climbed through the solid wall.

"Idiot child, explanations can wait." She muttered at herself.

After all, she was willing to accept he was a vampire. Being in two different places at the same time, was nothing compared to that. Niña closed her eyes and within seconds, she was fast asleep.

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~ Headquarters of The Brotherhood ~

Simon was shown to the door of the room. The regular guards never entered the circular room where he talked with Brother Alberti. Actually, the room wasn't round, it was a perfect seventeen-sided polygon. Once thought to be an impossibility, until a world-famous mathematician had worked out how to do it. The mathematician had been one of many who had tried to find the great prize and failed due to old age and death. There had been a few mathematicians and several scientists, though most had been theologians, religious types of various faiths. They'd all tried and failed. Most had been men, which wasn't surprising. Men had money and power, while women gave birth to children, lots of children. There had been one or two widows who'd added to the huge pile of knowledge, but they too, had failed and died. The seventeen-sided room was a power nexus, built from the theoretical work of the widow. It had all been like that, every generation leaving their wisdom to the next. Several had tried to live unnaturally long lives, but only Alberti had managed to live to a truly biblical age. The problem was that Alberti had reached the end of what was possible. In a hundred, maybe another two hundred years....Alberti would die.

"Come in Simon." Said Alberti.

Alberti always pointed at the chair for him to use, even though it was the only other chair in the room. The Nexus was centred on Alberti's desk and was probably the only thing keeping him alive. The long-lived head of the Brotherhood refused to give his age, but Simon thought it would probably make Methuselah look like a youngster. There were other supernatural forces in the room, which for some reason, made Simon's arm itch. Something to do with the serpent under his skin of course. It had been there for so long he tended to forget it was there. Clara had said it gave protection against fire, so he wasn't going to remove it. Alberti rarely smiled, but the expression on his face wasn't friendly. Simon stared back at Alberti, who blinked first.

"I heard that fool Giovanni killed two of my guards."

"They tried to break into our house during the night." Said Simon.

"The idiots left that part out."

Alberti smiled and Simon relaxed. They couldn't go back to the old routine though, Simon was convinced about that, by what Laura had told him. The Brotherhood were used to everything happening at a glacial pace, right up until the moment Alberti lost his patience.

"If you accept the girl is a key part of what is to come ? I have a plan." Said Simon.

"No less than four of the ancient deities have told me your Niña is a crucial part of finding the great secret. That was why I was amazed you let her die during your previous existence." Said Alberti.

"I didn't let her die, the Flux infected and killed about one in five of those her age. I intend to move all of us out of the house in Grizzana. The town has a long history of being a breeding ground for various forms of the plague. I was thinking of a larger home nearer to Florence, perhaps in Prato. That town had the lowest number of deaths from the Flux. I will keep the girl locked in her room for a week before the plague begins, until a week after it finishes. I might convert the cellar into rooms for her. She won't like it of course, but it's for her own good."

It was Huh's plan, for the most part, though Simon had put it in his own words. Alberti looked shocked, probably at the sheer audacity of tinkering with time to such a massive degree.

"Moving and hiding Niña from the illness." Said Alberti. "Do I need to say you're almost describing the perfect conditions for a massive chronoclasm? You could cause a great many people to cease to exist, including yourself."

"When I started all this, Huh told me to be careful about causing too many changes in time. Then I had Horus telling me it was dangerous to change time at all. The effect of all that was to cause me to do nothing. Huh is the God of time and I have his minions with me, night and day. Invisible most of the time, but they exist solely to fix anything in time I might fuck up too badly to ignore. I intend to change a lot of things, but mainly....I'm not going to let Niña die, not again."

"Do you have a genuine affection for the girl?"

"Yes I do, but she's also very important in finding the great prize."

Alberti made a point of turning over a piece of parchment on his desk. Simon couldn't see whose name was on the order, but he recognised the shape and layout of the words. It was a death warrant, instructions to kill on behalf of the Brotherhood. Simon had seen a few of them, he'd even carried out such a warrant more times than he liked to think about. Was the name his? Alberti made a point of ripping it up, without letting him see any details.

"You can't fail again Simon, or you won't get the chance to make me look a fool again. You're my choice, my protégé.....There can be no more chances. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Brother Alberti....I understand you."

Simon was worth ten of Alberti's guards in a fight and Giovanni would always stand with him. The Brotherhood had more guards than there were blades of grass in a meadow and they were well trained. There was no way to escape from a death warrant, even if you were a vampire. Alberti looked at his desk for a minute or so, as if making a decision.

"Very well Simon, you will get your house in Prato. A nice house, bought and paid for by the Brotherhood. A home in the best part of town...A home fit for a newly promoted member of the inner nexus. I have noticed you thrive on being busy Simon, but seem to go to sleep if you've nothing to do."

"That has been commented on before." Said Simon.

"I am going to keep you very busy. No cellar for the girl, you will convert the upper floor as a very comfortable prison for when the Flux arrives in Florence. I will want my people to inspect the accommodation, so make sure that idiot Giovanni doesn't slaughter my guards, no matter what time of day they might arrive."

"Yes, I'll have a long conversation with him on the subject."

Alberti was promoting him and buying a home for him and his two friends. Despite the death warrant, Simon realised Alberti was still very much on his side. The threat had been genuine though, Simon couldn't neglect his duties again.

"I will want a proper weekly report from you, Simon. I will send a carriage to bring you here and there can be no excuses."

"I will work tirelessly for the Brotherhood." Said Simon.

"Very well, you may leave."

Simon stayed put, he had something to ask Alberti, a permission for a course of action. Pushing his luck really, but as Alberti had just promoted him and promised to buy him a home fit for the nobility; he didn't think he was pushing his luck that much.

"I have something to ask you, Brother Alberti."

"Alright, what is it?"

"I wish to pursue a relationship with Juliana Colombo. Unless of course that might cause problems for the Brotherhood?"

Brother Alberti laughing was a very rare thing, but he laughed for quite some time.

"Oh, dear Simon, you are definitely one of a kind. Everything I said and your first question is about trying to bed the daughter of one of my most trusted allies. Why not though? You can't work all the time and from what I remember, she is rather attractive. A bit young for you, I'd have thought."

"Every human woman is a little young for me." Said Simon.

"Very well, you have my blessing. Her family mustn't be harmed though, under any circumstances. If her father tells you to leave Juliana alone, you leave her alone."

"Yes, of course."

"Anything else?"

"No, Brother Alberti."

"Then you may go. Don't forget I will send for you in a few days time. I expect to hear about some progress. Actually, before you go; have you ever met Niccolò Machiavelli? Please don't pretend you've never heard him."

"I've heard of him, of course I have." Said Simon. "Though I think he won't be born for another two hundred years."

"A prominent Florentine local who we both know will do well. Meet him, I'll leave you to arrange how. The easiest way would be to put a note in your journal and let natural time take you to him. Fourteen ninety would be a good year to seek him out. Become useful to him, it's important. Don't pull that face Simon, I said I'd keep you busy."

Simon didn't have a journal; he had a bible full of loose notes. As if being a vampire wasn't enough to damn him forever, he'd even scribbled notes on a few pages, actually quite a few. Bibles were good places to hide things, had been one of the few useful things Giovanni had taught him. If anyone burgles your home, they never steal a bible.

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~ The house In Hornsey – About now ~

The women in Lilac robes, the minions of time, had dropped her right into the hallway of the house in Hornsey. No asking her where she wanted to go of course. Huh would know the right place, he was the God of time and several other things besides. Laura saw the answerphone's red light, blinking at her. Six messages, all of them not listened to.

"Clara must be having another bad day." She muttered.

Laura played the messages and four sounded like the usual scam calls. One was the almost daily message about having a smart meter fitted by their energy provider. There had been a house discussion once, about paying for a landline that seemed to deliver nothing but scam calls. Apathy had won the day over common sense. The number was known to all their friends and vast list of acquaintances. And besides;

"Well.....The telephone is part of the house." Clara had said.

So, they still paid the standing charge and deleted ninety percent of the messages. It was a good day, one of the messages was from someone Laura wanted to keep in touch with. Jim Weaver, hacker extraordinaire had something to tell her, but it had to be in person. Jim was old school crazy, a genuine ten on the paranoia scale. Was he the target of a whole team of MI5 snoopers ? Laura doubted it, but Jim lived his life as if every electronic device contained a hidden bug.

Jim had his uses though; he really was the best computer geek she'd ever met. He was also into Thai food in a big way and loved the same beer as her. In a different spin of the dice and if he hadn't been quite so crazy, she might have fancied Jim. He wasn't exactly a lock in, but she knew he'd probably be at home and answer her call.

"Jim, I was wondering how you were doing."

"Not on the phone Laura. This is like the last piece of business. Can you come and see me ?"

Jim lived in Cleckheaton, which had a certain charm in summer, but tried to freeze you to death in the winter. He lived in a council house that had needed a lot of renovation after their last escapade. Most of the damage had been caused by Laura, trying to get into the place. Jim's paranoia went to an absurd high, when it came to protection from unwanted visitors. Luckily, he no longer considered her to be an intruder.

"I'd love to Jim. Can I bring two of my female friends ? They're both Thai food fans, though I'm not sure if they're into Cobra beer."

Mentioning they were female would definitely help. Like all paranoid guys who still had a pulse, Jim still believed a gorgeous woman was going to arrive one day, to sweep him off his feet.

"Can I trust them, Laura ?"

"Yes, completely."

"Great, can you come over tonight ?" Asked Jim.

"I've no idea what time it is here, Jim. Am I right in thinking it's Wednesday morning ?"

"It's Thursday, just coming up to lunchtime."

"Fuck, I've lost a day again. That's happened before and I never get the day back."

"Are you alright, Laura ?"

"Yes, yes.....I'll need to arrange things with my friends, are you free on Friday evening, say at about eight ? I'll even order all the food and drink on my card."

"There's a new food place opened up; it does Jordanian food. Personally, Laura; I don't think you can beat Thai takeaway. Are your friends in your type of business ?" Asked Jim.

He'd like Patsy, everyone liked Patsy. She tended to be underestimated, which she used to her advantage. Patsy had shot and killed a high-level practitioner of the occult, without hesitating. Ronnie was just as tough, though Laura agreed with Simon; she was an acquired taste. Simon had always segregated the parts of his life. Drug dealers and mayhem in one part, with vampires and strange creatures in another. Everyone else had ended up in a general pile, which included his old business contacts. After Simon had vanished, Ronnie had turned up at the house a few times. After a few well intended get losts, she'd still come back. In the end it was easier to turn Ronnie into a new pizza and beer buddy. There'd be that moment of course, when Ronnie would need a few things explaining to her. There was travelling instantly from London to Cleckheaton for a start. Ronnie wasn't stupid though and she'd worked with Simon for years. She'd have had her suspicions, even if they'd never been spoken about.

"Trust me, both of my friend are ideal for anything similar to last time." Said Laura.

"Eight on Friday it is then. Call me from the bus stop." Said Jim.

"Do they need coats ? Is it winter or summer up there ?" She asked.

“Jeez Laura, you worry me sometimes. It’s late spring up here. So yes, they will need coats and gloves. Maybe warm footwear too.”

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~ Near the Basilica di San Lorenzo – 13th Century Italy ~

Part of Simon’s employment by the Medici, was escorting the great and good through the streets of Florence. Not something he enjoyed, but a little bodyguarding duty was why Giovanni and he were paid well, very well. The areas he tended to frequent while working, overlapped the streets Juliana Colombo used on a daily basis. No need to stalk her, or accidentally on purpose be in the same public park as her. He saw her often enough to know her daily routine and that of her father, Dominicho Colombo. A local nobleman of some importance and a close ally of the Brotherhood, there could be no disrespect of Dom Colombo. Simon had to woo the fair Juliana, without becoming an irritant to her father. From past experience, Simon knew that wasn’t going to be an easy task.

“So Giovanni, are you clear on what I want you to do ?” Asked Simon.

“I keep Juliana’s servant busy, while you make off with her. But the servant is so plain, Simon. Why do I always end up with their plain friend ?”

“I remember plenty of times when I helped you in a similar way.” Said Simon. “And I’ve no intention of making off with anyone. A few private moments will do.”

“Alright, I’ll make the ultimate sacrifice if I have to. I’ll kiss her servant if I have to.”

“Thank you, I will owe you a favour.”

“Oh, I know you will, Simon. I know you will.”

It was like watching everything in slow motion, Juliana walked so slowly. She came through the park and down the side of the old church on the other side of the square. Her personal maid didn’t look particularly unattractive, but she had to be a good ten years older than Giovanni’s apparent age. That was one of the good things about being a vampire, Giovanni had been born several centuries ago.

“Go, now old friend.....Kiss her if it’ll get me another minute alone with Juliana.” Said Simon.

He knew he was acting like a teenager and he was certain Clara wouldn’t approve. Simon needed to create a life for himself in Florence though, he might never see Clara again. Now he knew she was interested; it would be nice to make Juliana Colombo part of that new life. Giovanni had his faults, but he also had a lot of natural charm. Two words to the maid and she was blushing and laughing about something. Time for his part in the performance he’d so carefully arranged. As Simon approached Juliana, he saw her eyes harden. He leant towards her and she moved back.

“I know there has been a misunderstanding between us.” He said. “I’m just asking you to listen to me for a few minutes.”

“Alright.”

Her eyes sparkled a little, his information had been correct. His vampire senses picked up the rise in her body temperature, the increased heartbeat. She liked him, perhaps her feeling were a little more than just liking. He took her just inside the doors of the old church. Not too far inside, she might consider that to be improper. Simon even risked holding her hand, which she didn’t pull away.

“Oh Juliana.....I like you; I have since you moved to Florence. I should have told you last year, but my duties kept me busy. No excuses, I can understand why you’re upset. Can we start again ? I’d like a chance to get to know you.”

He touched her cheek and it was hot. It was irresistible, the need to brush a loose hair away from her wonderful dark eyes.

“I like you too Simon. Yes, I’d like that.....For us to get to know one another.”

He kissed her and was still kissing her when there was a polite cough behind them. The maid, giving her mistress a friendly smile. Giovanni was there, his arm around the maid, who he'd obviously decided wasn't that plain after all.

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