

The Presence

Chapter 10 – Djinn Or Demon ?

“Marsha was giving her the look. The one that said she now knew why journalists were only held in slightly better regard by the public, than politicians.”

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Marsha Miller had called the hotel the previous evening. Yes, Sovi Björlund had checked in late in the afternoon and had dined in the small but excellent hotel restaurant. Marsha knew she had a bit of mother hen in her and one day might be perfect mother material. Sovi had arrived and eaten before settling down for the night. Guest fed and watered, Marsha had felt the muscles in her neck relax. She was now going through her routine to open up the office, safely.

Before unlocking the shop Eric operated out of, Marsha carried out her visual sweep of the street. Good, no one looking agitated and ready to pounce. She unlocked the door and stepped inside. No Eric yet, he wasn't due in until about midday.

“At least I can talk to Sovi in peace.....For a while.” Marsha muttered.

A few lights at the front of the office, just enough to stop people falling over anything. The basic idea was for the shop to look harmless and innocuous. Once through the door into Eric's lair, all the lighting was turned on as soon as she arrived. The answering machine was showing the usual ninety nine incoming messages. That was the maximum the machine could handle and they had no idea how many people did call the office after business hours.

“Oh Eric.....What now ?” She mumbled.

He left her notes; the record was currently two dozen pieces of paper containing the thoughts and instructions of her boss, Eric Hardy. Everything from wanting better soap in the bathroom, to letting him know the month to date financials. Why did she keep coming back everyday ? Eric paid her well, very well. Then there were the trips to London, which she treated as an opportunity to run up a huge room service bill. Eric muttered at her, but so far, he'd never made any serious noises about it. The doorbell rang before she'd even opened up her own office, her personal den.

“That.....Must be Sovi.” Marsha muttered.

There were cameras now, which could be monitored on the office network. A militant feminist lady had barged her way through the front door, yelling something about Eric being a misogynist. That had given Eric an extra ten points on his public approval rating. People shouting at him usually made him more popular among a certain section of the public. Marsha opened the front door to a well-dressed woman, who looked to be in her early forties. There was a definite Nordic look about Ms Björlund.

“You must be Sovi.” Said Marsha.

“I am.”

“Come inside.....I'm about to put on the coffee machine.”

Her coffee machine in her part of the office. She'd set Eric's machine going once he arrived, but having her own coffee maker was essential to surviving Eric on a bad day. Eric wouldn't know about Sovi coming into the office, until he saw her. It gave him no time to brood and come up with a weird agenda. Eric Hardy could be either all over journalists, or hate them on sight. There was no halfway

with Eric, no centre ground. It was a bit like his podcasts, which actually made a serious amount of money.

Nothing made it onto an Eric podcast, unless it was insanely provocative and certain to offend a lot of people. His current raison d'être was likely appeal to some, but make him a lot more enemies. He was currently receiving about three death threats a day. Marsha knew, she had to listen to them all on the answering machine. Marsha took Sovi into her office and made her comfortable with coffee and half a packet of chocolate digestives.

"Eric will be in later, Sovi." Said Marsha. "He shouldn't bother us, but he can be a bit.....Strange with journalists. He's sure to ask your opinion on the return of national services. It's his current thing you see.....The Beeb are already hinting at getting him on a Radio 4 spot."

"National service.....Is he crazy?" Asked Sovi. "The hang em and flog em brigade will love it, but realistically. It's the worst idea since Coke changed their formula."

"I feel the same, but in the interest of having a friendly office.....Could you be more noncommittal in your answer? Don't agree with him.....Just be less adversarial. Could you do that?" Asked Marsha. When Sovi grinned, Marsha knew things would be alright. You didn't have to agree with Eric, just fudge the issue and answer a question he'd never actually asked. Marsha could have blurred facts and avoided issues at an Olympic level.

"I rarely cover politics anyway, these days there's too much of it on social media. I can give noncommittal answers and genuinely convince your Eric, that I'm firmly sat on the fence." Said Sovi. "Great.....Not my Eric by the way.....Definitely not my Eric."

Sovi dug a notebook out of her bag and Marsha thought the moment had arrived, the interview about weird goings on in Manchester. She was bound to ask about the wound in her arm. That still itched on rainy days.

"Sorry to spring this on you." Said Sovi. "I know Nick and the others are in Tripoli. Has anyone told you about the death of Stuart Goodford, Den's boss?"

"No.....Is it related to the Presence?"

"Oh yes, definitely." Said Sovi. "I discovered his body and that of his wife. Dreadful things had been done to them.....Terrible things."

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Florence had been sedated by someone, probably a concerned paramedic. One moment she was screaming and covered in Karl's blood. The next she woke up, washed by someone and in a hospital bed. They must have brought her out of the Islington flat on a trolley. Someone had asked her a lot of questions about herself and a nice nurse had brought her a cup of tea. She was still feeling groggy from the sedation and Betsy might have turned up within half an hour, or half a day. The world felt very confusing. She'd hung onto Betsy's hand for a few minutes, while just about noticing the huge fruit basket that had arrived with her boss. Florence had one thing which kept coming into her mind and it had nothing to do with Lilija, or poor dead Karl.

"I spent so much time worrying about her.....Is the cat alright?" Asked Florence.

"Suki will be fine." Said Betsy. "She can live with me until her owner returns."

"Someone stripped me off and washed me.....While I was unconscious." Said Florence. "That makes me want to start screaming again."

"Better than leaving you.....As you were."

"Covered in Karl's blood.....Poor Lilija, she must be going crazy. Is she coping? Silly question, of course she isn't.....Who could cope with that?"

Betsy was squeezing her hand and Florence could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She made a conscious effort to be calmer. There could be no reason for them to sedate her again. Whatever might happen next, Florence wanted to be conscious for it.

"Lilija will cope, she has two small children." Said Betsy. "Mums always cope, because they have to."

"They must have taken my clothes." Said Florence. "Even the knickers I'm wearing aren't mine."

Could you get someone to bring in some of my own clothes ? Underwear, Jeans and T shirt will do.....And trainers for my feet.....Can't go outside in bare feet, they'll think I really am crazy."

"No one thinks you're crazy." Said Betsy. "They do want you here for twenty four hours though. Just observation.....They're obviously concerned, after what you must have seen."

What had she seen ? Now some of it already felt like it had happened to someone else. Her mind was defending itself, almost hiding something too traumatic for her to handle. Then the hospital would arrange for a therapist to drag it all to the surface again.

"I'm not sure what I saw, not now." Said Florence. "It was all so fast, so violent.....What did it do to poor Karl ?"

"Probably not a good idea for you to know that." Said Betsy.

"It'll be on TV by tonight and the newspapers.....Better that I hear it from you."

"The police didn't tell me much." Said Betsy.

"Then tell me what you do know ? Please, Betsy.....I have to know."

"You promise not to get too upset ?" Asked Betsy.

For a lady with a reputation for being tougher than steel, Betsy was actually quite sweet. A definite pushover after giving her a few sad looks and a little pleading. Florence nodded at her and knew she was about to know everything Betsy knew.

"Everyone seemed to be at the flat." Said Betsy. "I was called by the police, so got past all the over eager young police officers and their scene of crime tape. There were paramedics and ambulance crews. Even a few fire brigade people, to deal with getting up into the ceiling. A fire brigade guy told me that some of Karl was in the hallway."

"Some of Karl.....What does that mean ?" Asked Florence.

"Just let me tell it my way." Said Betsy. "From what he said, there is no loft in any of the flats, so there is no loft hatch. Makes sense when you think about it. Anyway, most of Karl was up in the ceiling cavity, jammed in amongst the wiring up there. He said that they'll need to take the ceiling down to recover his body."

"Why, Betsy.....This thing, why is it doing this ?" Asked Florence.

"I once had a long talk with Nick about that." Said Betsy. "This isn't the first piece of nastiness he's investigated for a book. Nick has a few ideas about why demons hurt people and none of them sound convincing. We have to accept that we may never know."

Florence had never believed the movies, with their idea of demons collecting souls for Satan. That had a very human ring to it, like collecting milk bottle tops for guide dogs.

"Please bring me some clothes, Betsy." Said Florence. "I need to get out of here....I need to be doing something. If I'm in this bed for an entire day, I really will go crazy."

"But the doctor said you need to be under observation. They might not let you leave."

"Then I'll get dressed quickly and sneak out.....Please, Betsy. Just get someone to bring me a few of my own clothes. I can't stay here." Pleaded Florence.

The idea of not being allowed to leave, hit Florence between the eyes. She had been found hysterical, covered in Karl's blood, with most of his body shoved into the ceiling space. No one else around and she would have been screaming about monsters in the non-existent loft. The police

were probably moving her to the top of their suspect list. They might even think she was some kind of psychopath, who'd also killed the window cleaner.

"Please....Help me, Betsy."

"Alright.....I'll get my driver to pack a few of your things." Said Betsy. "I'll also get the lawyers to look at the legal aspects of this.....Total chaos. I can see us seeing a lot more of Carl Wood from Holland Klein & Martin."

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To say that Libya had been through troubled times, was a huge understatement. The USA still didn't have an embassy in Tripoli, since removing its diplomats in 2014. A civil war had been brewing and America had removed its people with heavy military protection. The civil war had arrived and hadn't ended until 2020.

Tripoli would be fully rebuilt one day, but it still looked like it a city with many un-careful previous owners. Before the civil war, Muammar Gaddafi had inflicted his own horrors on the people of Libya. Life went on though, as did commerce. Nick had found it relatively easy to find a four wheel drive truck, that sounded perfect for their needs. Taking Marwa along with them had helped.....

"Ideally, I was hoping to find an old Humvee." Said James. "Dented maybe, but reliable. Something we could trust to get us out into the deep desert and.....Importantly, back again."

"My brothers buy trucks here." Said Marwa. "I'm not saying they've never complained, everyone complains. When I said you needed a truck, they said this is the best place in the city."

"Do you have a lot of brothers ?" Asked Drew.

"Yes, sometimes it seems like dozens of them." Said Marwa. "My mother calls it a blessing.....I'm not so sure about that."

Marwa had probably studied abroad. Her English was perfect and she had a slight accent that hinted at the USA, or maybe Canada. Nick thought they'd all get to know each other properly, once they were travelling across the desert.

"Anyone ever owned a UAZ before ?" Asked Travis.

"Russian, the Ulyanovsk Automobile Plant." Said Marwa. "There are lots of them in Libya, left over from the civil war. My brothers have bought them in the past."

"Did they have any complaints ?" Asked Aide.

"Fuel consumption isn't good, but not ridiculously bad." Said Marwa. "The suspension is a bit hard; you'll feel every bump in the road. On the plus side.....This UAZ will probably still be running on doomsday. They are reliable."

"I still think we should look for an old Humvee." Said James.

"That would be nice, James." Said Nick. "We need to buy a vehicle today though, so we can use it tomorrow. Not ideal, but I like the look of the old UAZ."

"Plenty of room, we'll all fit in there without feeling cramped." Said Aide.

"Ask him about the aircon, Marwa." Said Nick. "Tell him we need it to work really well."

The guy at the second hand truck place had a little English, but it was easier to let Marwa talk to him. The guy knew her dozens of brothers, which just might, get them a better deal. It seemed a little crazy, but Nick was going to rely on a recommendation from Marwa's small army of brothers and a sales guy who spoke about twenty words of English. There were better ways of buying a used truck, but there were probably worse ones too.

"He says the aircon is perfect.....Top notch." Said Marwa.

"We might find a Humvee at the next place." Said James.

Or they might find a really old UAZ, with crap aircon and an unexplained engine knock. For better or worse and a weird trust of Marwa's brothers, Nick had made a decision.

"Tell him I've bought trucks in Libya before. I understand the paperwork." Said Nick. "I pay him the cash, and I drive the truck away. No coming back tomorrow.....We pay and drive it away. Make sure he understands."

A long conversation ensued in Arabic, with Nick hearing some of it and understanding a little of what he heard. The local Arabic wasn't the version taught in schools. It seemed the second hand truck dealer, had worries about cleared funds. He'd also been scammed in the past.

"Tell him I'll pay cash.....Right now, no messing about." Said Nick.

The price on the screen was crazy; they'd already been quoted a far better amount, if they paid in American dollars. Tempting to go for another sweetener for cash, but it was just another possible aggravation. There would be more than enough hassle to come, without adding to the pile.

"At the price we agreed?" Asked Marwa.

"Yes.....Do we have a deal?" Asked Nick.

When the man grinned at him, Nick knew he'd be driving away in an old, but reliable, UAZ truck. A light four wheel drive beast, perfect for the deep desert. The dark haired middle aged sales guy, held out his hand, as the universal sign for we have a deal. Nick shook the proffered hand.

"I'm guessing we just bought a second hand Russian truck." Said Travis.

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Betsy Nagle had gone for coffee, mainly as an excuse to phone Holland Klein & Martin, the solicitors she had on retainer for anything criminal law related. Carl Wood was busy with another client, so Betsy had been put through to one of the partners, Mr Jeff Holland Jnr. Her solicitors were well known and had been in business for several generations. The police hated them of course; the police hated all solicitors who weren't employed by the prosecution. On the whole, Holland Klein & Martin were highly respected. Yet, despite all that.....Betsy often thought that if she called them about disposing of a body, they'd know the right guy to call.....

"To your knowledge, has Florence been charged with anything?" Asked Jeff Holland.

"No.....She's just in hospital for observation." Said Betsy.

Carl Wood was a scribbler, always the sound of pen against paper during their telephone conversations. It seemed Jeff was the same.....A constant scribble after every question.

"I hate to ask, but your safety must come first. Do you think your PA might be dangerous?"

Betsy had wondered the same thing for a while, but Florence had come with wonderful references. She was also distantly related to someone she knew. It was probably a recorded call, so Betsy knew she had to give an emphatic answer.

"No, never.....Florence is a sweet girl who wouldn't harm a fly." Said Betsy.

"Did her doctor mention her being sectioned? Held under the mental health act of 1983?"

"No.....She was found at an horrific crime scene." Said Betsy. "My feeling is that the hospital are concerned about her. It'd be amazing if she wasn't suffering from mental trauma."

"Not sectioned, no police charges.....And a caring doctor." Said Jeff. "It begs the question.....Why do you want to smuggle her out of hospital?"

"Because Florence says being kept here will drive her crazy.....And I tend to agree with her."

More scratching at Jeff's end, accompanied by a quiet sigh.

"My personal recommendation would be to leave the girl where she is." Said Jeff. "On the other hand, you won't be breaking any laws by removing her from the hospital. Once you have her somewhere safe, let Carl know the address, or call me."

"I will do that.....Thank you." Said Betsy.

An expensive call to basically say that if she was daft enough.....Go for it.

Betsy's driver found her, on about her forth cup of coffee from a machine in the hospital waiting room. He handed her a large set of keys, attached to a fob with 'The Manor,' written on it. Her driver also had a case containing a good selection from Florence's wardrobe.

"Did you find her winter coat ?" Asked Betsy.

"Yes.....Hanging in the hall. Long and it has a hood."

"Perfect.....Wait in the car for us." Said Betsy. "Be ready.....We may be leaving in a hurry."

The case was heavy, but it had wheels. Back to Florence, who looked quite anxious. Betsy had been away for longer than the couple of minutes she'd said. Luckily the hospital had put her PA in her own room, probably out of concern for her mental stability. Betsy put the suitcase at the foot of the bed.

"You missed my doctor." Said Florence. "I told him that some of what happened now feels like a dream. For some reason that worried him."

"Do you still want to leave here ?" Asked Betsy.

"Yes.....I feel trapped."

"Dress.....Put on what you like, then the coat over the top."

"We're going right now ?" Asked Florence.

"Yes.....Dress quickly, my driver is waiting."

Florence dressed, while Betsy wondered what she'd do if the nurse arrived, or the doctor came back. Florence hadn't been sectioned, but that might change if she looked to be leaving without telling anyone.

"Done.....Will I do ?" Asked Florence.

Her choice of clothes seemed a little colourful, but the coat covered everything. Yes, the rainbow coloured trainers weren't ideal, but Florence would definitely do for a quick walk out of the hospital.

"Perfect.....Keep with me and if anyone calls out.....We run." Said Betsy.

Betsy went first, with Florence behind her, dragging the suitcase. It made a noise as the wheels rattled over the tiled floor. Then again, people dragging suitcases had to be a common sight in most hospitals. Lots of people around, all busy with their own reasons to be there, all ignoring Betsy and Florence. Not one single person in a uniform, with security written across their back. It had to come, but they were almost through the front door, before the shouting voice was heard.

"Hey.....Florence Glynn." Someone yelled. "Where are you going ?"

Outside and her driver had told her the car wasn't far from the door. To the right and according to him, she'd see her car. The car was there, but no sign of her driver. Then he was with them, taking the case from her PA.

"A few security guys at the door." Said her driver. "They're still at the confused stage, but we should hurry."

"Miss Glynn." Someone yelled. "You need to come inside."

Not far to the car, but it felt like miles with the ever present sound of shouting from hospital staff. If it had been a prison they'd have been stopped. Hospitals probably weren't used to people trying to escape.

Into Betsy's car; Betsy and Florence on the backseat. The suitcase went on the seat next to her driver. No asking for directions, the driver didn't even break the walking pace speed limit. There were now a good dozen hospital staff shouting at them, as the car turned onto the main road.

"I'm assuming we're going to the manor ?" Asked her driver.

"Yes."

“Am I going to be staying in the manor ?” Asked Florence.

“Yes, at least until we can talk over your long term plans.” Said Betsy. “Your own home would be ideal, but the police might take you into custody. The manor is the home of one of my screenplay clients. He’s written scripts for shows everyone’s heard of. I have the keys and he won’t mind us using the place. Lots of bedrooms and an indoor pool. You will love it.”

“Sounds like I might never want to leave.” Said Florence.

“Not quite sure how we’re going to keep you fed, but we’ll work it out.” Said Betsy.

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Everyone in the truck and by some kind of miracle, ready to leave without any major problems. They had two hand held SatNav devices, just in case one failed. Louise had also given them one of the university’s high tech navigation boxes, which Henrike referred to as contacting the Matrix. Their old Russian truck was running well and its aircon seemed to be as the sales guy described.....Top notch. Marwa had checked their food and supplies at least five times; it seemed to be her thing. Tripoli to the deep desert and the temple, was just over four hundred kilometres. Didn’t sound far, until you realised the kind of terrain to be driven over. It was a part of the world where Google maps threw its hands up and simply said there was no traffic information. In other words, you’re on your own guys and good luck.

“Can I actually drive off yet ?” Asked James.

“Be patient, I need to set our start point on the Matrix.” Said Drew.

Louise had given Drew a lot of notes on using the clever box of tricks. She’d been told the box was important; it just might save their lives. So, Drew was taking it seriously.

‘Start Point,’ she tapped into the machine, which beeped at her.

“That’s it.....We’re officially on our way.” Said Drew.

“Hooray.” Yelled Adie.

“Are we nearly there yet ?” Asked Nick.

Marwa threw a cushion at Nick’s head and Drew knew she’d been right about her; they were going to be good friends. The old UAZ was a little noisy; the engine sound seemed to rattle off the buildings in Tripoli. Nothing to be concerned about, it was probably noisy when it came off the assembly line. Initially they were heading roughly south east towards Ash Shwayrif. James was using a mixture of old fashioned maps and a modern SatNav, to keep them pointed in the right direction. As the crow flew they had about four hundred and twenty kilometres to cover. There were no crows in Libya, but there were ravens. Even they’d have trouble keeping to a straight line in the Nafusa Mountains. It was going to be a tough journey and they’d end up driving a lot more than four hundred kilometres. But, as Drew had pointed out back at the hotel.

“Those students.....Roger and Diane. They did this journey regularly.”

Considering how long it had taken the police to get to the temple, Drew wasn’t sure if her comment had been as motivational as she’d intended. They drove through Ain Zara on the way out of Tripoli and a large gang of young children waved at their truck, as they headed away from the city. Drew chose to see it as a good sign and hoped everyone they met on their journey, was similarly friendly. What happened if they stumbled upon a bandit camp, or a pack of the infamous wild dogs ? Marwa had proven useful again, she was fast becoming indispensable. One of her many brothers knew someone, who had a friend, who.....Nick had bought two Moroccan made AK47 knockoffs, with two spare clips for each. Not that much firepower, but Drew was grateful the assault rifles were there, in a metal box near where they’d be sleeping.

“You know what.....I can see me getting used to this kind of life.” Said James.

"It's alright for a while.....But I bet that after a month or two, we all want to go home." Said Nick.

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She was in his territory, so Sovi knew Eric would have to give her some attention. He was sarcastic, mixed with a smidgen of pomposity and a surprising dollop of charm. Eric had quickly lost interest when she'd given her view on freelance political journalism.

"I'll never be a Bernstein, Eric.....Or a Woodward." She'd told him. "Unless a political story has a weeping betrayed wife somewhere, I tend to leave it alone. I might look at a juicy fraud, but mainly.....Betrayed wives have financed my lifestyle."

Sort of the truth, though she had written investigative articles using a pen name. She'd even won an award once, which was hidden at the bottom of her knicker drawer. A respectable award for a serious piece of journalism.....It would ruin her sleazy image. Once Eric had wandered off to do whatever he did during business hours, Sovi had Marsha to herself.

"I love your statue." Said Sovi. "I'm no expert, but she looks like Gaia to me."

"Yes, the Earth mother." Said Marsha. "I saw that when I was on holiday.....The damn thing cost me more than the package holiday. She does look good though, among the crystals and herbs. Eric calls the table my altar."

"I can see why.....How do you think Eric will react if you're named in.....I'm thinking of calling it the drunken summoning, or don't call up something you can't get rid of. You could easily end up on a few chat shows, Marsha. Personal fame.....Will Eric like that?"

"I had considered that. Eric won't get jealous, or resentful. I know him well and he'll use it for all it's worth." Said Marsha. "He'll use my name and the story, to generate huge amounts of publicity for his podcasts."

"For an arsehole.....He doesn't sound like a bad guy." Said Sovi.

"He's not.....Eric found a way to make money, that suits.....What Nick calls his shouty man skills."

"All fun and games, until an angry feminist runs him through with her umbrella." Said Sovi.

"Please don't say that.....I have nightmares about that kind of thing."

"Shall I freshen the coffee machine?" Asked Sovi.

"Only if you do Eric's at the same time." Said Marsha. "If you don't.....You'll see his spoilt kid impression.....Not nice."

Not being her office didn't worry her, Sovi found bread and cheese in the office fridge. Most journalists she knew had an underdeveloped sense of shame. Sovi had no problem making cheese on toast for both of them, without asking. She didn't want to see Eric in full shouty mode, so she made him fresh coffee. There was even an old tray, to carry everything to Marsha's part of the building.

"I hope you're hungry.....I made us both something to nibble." Said Sovi.

"Thanks, I'm starving.....Denise finally answered her phone." Said Marsha.

"Sleeps with her boss.....Boss get his face cut.....Boss ends up dead. His wife is killed and jammed behind a radiator. Yes, I can see how she might not be answering her phone. Being honest, the story does tempt me."

"Crap ! You never mentioned the radiator." Said Marsha.

"Didn't I ? Sorry.....Is Denise alright ?" Asked Sovi.

"Of course she isn't alright !" Yelled Masha.

Sovi hadn't read the room; she'd been flippant when a little sympathy had been required. Nick and his gang of chums had all gone to Libya, effectively leaving those still in England to their fate. Sovi

could understand; Nick's bank account was haemorrhaging cash. He needed something to generate cash and was hoping for a best-selling book out of it, with a movie deal to follow.

"Sorry, Marsha.....Alright, we're on our own now." Said Sovi. "What can we do to help Denise?"

"She still has a job, though no one is talking to her." Said Marsha. "Now there's another death where she lives. We need to get together now the others are in Libya. Eric owes me a few days....He owes me a lot more than a few days. I think we should go to London and support Denise."

"Full honesty.....That might be a problem for me." Said Sovi.

Marsha was giving her the look. The one that said she now knew why journalists were only held in slightly better regard by the public, than politicians.

"I did wonder.....You're on the run, aren't you?" Asked Marsha.

"Let's just say that what I saw in Stuart's house, might not be the story the authorities want the public to hear. Things will cool down, but at the moment.....I am avoiding contact with the police."

"Did you see the.....Thing that hurt me?" Asked Marsha.

"No, but it was there.....I felt it; in the room with me."

Marsha had insisted her arm was alright, but she rubbed her elbow, whenever there was talk about it, the Thing, what Nick called the Presence.

"Now I'm sure, we need to go to London." Said Marsha. "We can avoid the police and the chances of running into a detective looking for you.....It has to be a hundred to one. If we do.....They can hardly grab you off the street."

"I think you'd be amazed what the police can do, if they've a mind to do it." Said Sovi.

"Well.....I'm going to support Denise. Are you coming with me?" Asked Marsha.

It occurred to Sovi at that moment. The Presence was coming after everyone, every single one of them. The people with the expertise were in Libya and if the people left behind wanted to survive.....They'd have to work together.

"Sad, I really like the hotel you recommended." Said Sovi. "I see your point though. I'll go with you to North London, to the block of flats in Islington."

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"Actually, it'd be more dangerous to leave her outside, on her own." Said James.

"Louise made me promise not to take Marwa inside the temple." Said Nick. "She's likely to sack her if she finds out she entered the ruins."

"Who will tell her?" Asked Adie.

"She has a point.....I'm sure we can all keep a secret." Said Drew. "Marwa isn't a child.....As an adult, the decision has to be hers."

James Lerner was the oldest in the group by a long way. That made him try, not to act as though that made him their wise elder figure. He personally knew too many crazy old guys, to believe in that nonsense. There were times they did look in his direction. Nick's eyes were almost pleading for him to make the decision for him.

"Personally, I think that if Marwa wants to come with us....Then we should let her." Said James.

"I do want to come.....Please don't leave me in the truck." Said Marwa.

"Fine, you can come." Said Nick. "Stay near James though. If anyone walks out of this place in one piece, it'll be James."

"Wonderful.....Got any more motivational words for the troops?" Asked Travis.

Arriving an hour after first light would have been ideal, but they'd been delayed by a broken down bus on a narrow road. Not quite midday and there were still many hours of light left to have a quick look at the temple. Nick was right of course, James had been one of two survivors on an ill-fated

research trip to the Sudan. James had also dragged Nick and two others, out of a cave-in during a trip to another part of Libya. Some would call James lucky; others would call him a jinx. James was never sure which really applied to him.

"Alright.....Nick is right." Said James. "I've been in similar places, bought the T shirt and watched the video. If I shout that we're leaving the temple, you leave.....On the run."

"No arguments from me." Said Adie.

"Always follow the experienced guy.....Glad you're here, James." Said Drew.

"Do I get a lamp ?" Asked Marwa. "I seem to be the only one with no lamp."

"Yes of course.....We have spare lamps." Said Nick.

It took a while to find everyone's kit and check that anything that needed to work....Would actually work when turned on. They'd never be a black-ops team, but for a couple of authors and their better halves, James thought they were ready to go.

"The outside first and yet more pictures on, even better cameras." Said James. "We only go inside if it looks safe and only after sending a message on Louise's matrix box."

"Do I get a camera ?" Asked Marwa.

"No." Said Nick. "They were expensive; we only have two of them."

James didn't want a camera; he'd look at the pictures later, when they all retired to their truck for the evening. He had his eyes, a notebook and a couple of pencils. Marwa seemed hell-bent on obeying Nick's instructions. She seemed determined to keep close to him, as though there was an invisible string tying her to James.

"I hadn't realised this symbol was on the outside of the temple, in places." Said James.

He drew the symbol in his book, the same symbol Drew had drawn after her dream of being inside the temple. Not that complicated a symbol, though its implication.....Those were huge.

"I don't recognise the style.....Is it very old ?" Asked Marwa.

"Very, very old, Marwa.....Incredibly old." Said James. "Written history tends to start with the Sumerians. That doesn't mean there weren't carved symbols before then and hints at whole words. It was just that not enough has survived for us to understand the language. Even the best computer AI, needs something to work with."

"Louise once told me this temple is unique in the entire world." Said Marwa. "She believes it may have been built sixty thousand years ago."

"I respect Louise, but she's wrong." Said James. "I'll tell you my version of who built this temple and why. I can't guarantee I'm right, but it was definitely built over two hundred thousand years ago.

There were people here then, though they might not have looked like us. They had something they worshipped, an entity they considered to be a God of their people. A deity they could see, an entity that was involved in their daily lives. It may not have been quite as nebulous then, but it was still the Presence. A demon of course, a powerful one.

Don't let anyone tell you demons didn't exist before the Old Testament, or the Quran. Demons have been around since there was intelligent life on Earth. Their motivation is still a mystery, but they were here. Those people who then inhabited this part of the world. They built a temple to honour the demon, whose name must never be spoken."

"Probably because I'm a Muslim." Said Marwa. "My first thought was that you'd managed to annoy a powerful Djinn."

That made sense and James had needed to consult a few ancient scrolls, to be certain she was wrong. It was luck really, that Aiwass had used the language of the Gods, to warn Drew about the demon.

“To be honest, I wasn’t sure, but I am now.” Said James. “Another entity, a good one who I can still not name. They used a very specific language to warn Nick and Drew about the demon. The age of that language and who used it.....I’m not certain of much, but I’m sure our enemy is a demon and not a Djinn. That knowledge is very important.”

“So that you can kill it ?” Asked Marwa.

“Kill it.....That is beyond our ability.” Said James. “I believe we may be able to bind it though, to stop it hurting Nick and those he cares for. Everything you see, started with Nick doing something very silly.”

“Louise said Nick had been stupid.” Said Marwa. “What did he do ?”

If Nick wanted to tell her, fine.....He wasn’t about to give her details of a sort of half summoning, carried out while very drunk. Nothing about that night showed Nick Rees in a good light.

“Nick is an old friend, Marwa. If you really need to know, ask him.”

Travis was making a noise, a kind of yell mixed with a shriek. He was also waving at them.

“I think they’re ready to go inside.” Said James. “Stay close.....I think we’ll be alright during the day, but you never know. It will know when we enter its temple.”

“Like an omnipresent God.” Said Marwa. “Everywhere at once, all seeing, all hearing.”

“Probably he, or her, or it.....Can sense when its lair has been entered.” Said James. “It isn’t a God of course, only a very powerful demon. All the ancient texts indicate it can only be in one place at a time.”

Travis was making the sound again, which was beginning to get annoying.

“Come on, or he might make that horrible noise again.” Said James. “One piece of good news, the Presence has never hurt Nick. It may need him to complete a ritual. Not much of an edge, but as we’re with Nick.....It may help us stay safe.”

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