

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 8 – The Artisan

“David was an American, it was rumoured he’d been poached from the Mafia in New York. Small and of oriental appearance, David Huynh was one of the most ruthless people Laura had ever met.”

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Things had changed and it was more than just sharing a bed a couple of afternoons a week. Intimacy mattered, it bonded people but there was more to it than that. Simon knew the old Juliana would have felt neglected, because he’d spent so much time looking after Niña. Feeling she was being taken for granted would have sown the seeds for far worse feelings. Instead, Juliana had offered to help look after the girl, even offering to find her a tutor.

“The girl needs to learn to read properly and write her thoughts.” Said Juliana. “You and Giovanni have done wonders in her education, but she needs a proper tutor. I believe I know the perfect choice.”

Although Simon hadn’t thought it would happen, Juliana seemed to have developed a real affection for their waif. A real friendship, which Niña appeared to also value. He’d given the new born vampire a few basic lessons that had included who could never be hurt. When he’d mentioned Juliana, Niña had looked shocked.

“I’m not a fool, or a monster, Simon.....I would never hurt Juliana, never.” She’d told him.

It was nice and of course, Juliana had been right about Niña needing a decent education. She was an immortal now and likely to live a very long life. The better she understood the world and could communicate with others, the better her chances of survival. Juliana had mentioned a man as a tutor, a citizen of Verona who now lived in the area. Expensive of course, but Simon was being paid well by the Medici and the Brotherhood.

Juliana was currently covered in sweat from their lovemaking, as was he. Simon used his tongue to remove the sweat from between her breasts. Juliana moaned a little, which grew in volume, as his fingers penetrated the hair between her legs. She was sore, so was he, just a little. They’d agreed to relax and simply lie on the bed, until it was time for her to leave. When her hand found his dick and began to move up and down, he knew she’d changed her mind.

“Are you sure ?” He asked.

“Yes, I want to make love to you over and over again.”

Soreness forgotten, Simon thrust into her as though they hadn’t seen one another for weeks, rather a few days. The sex was incredible, made better by knowing that he’d almost lost Juliana forever. He said it without thinking, something he rarely said to anyone.

“I love you.” He said.

Juliana gasped and put both her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

“I love you too, Simon.”

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Liz hadn't forgotten to visit the Artisan, but the text message from Patsy probably made her go that day. It was one day over the agreed time; he should have the gold snake safely inside a transparent container.

'Don't forget my snake.' From Patsy.

It was a nice object, which probably hadn't been made on Earth. Probably not made by an Old God, though likely to have been crafted by one of their minions. Liz had seen pyramids on other worlds. It still amazed her to think the snake had probably been made by non-human hands on a world far away.

'I'll go and see him today.' She sent back.

Liz didn't change her appearance before dropping out of her usual world and into Duat, The Underworld. The Last Artisan was used to seeing her in human form. Her appearance as the keeper of the last gateway, was almost certain to shock him. She'd developed a certain felling for the last living person in the City of Uundenvelt. Not so much friendship, as just not wanting him to die and leave the ancient city devoid of life. There were ghosts there of course, phantoms of those who'd once lived there. Duat was full of spirits though, whereas living creatures were rare, numbering just one. The Artisan was probably a demon, but he had blood in his veins and he was alive. That was so rare in the underworld, that Liz couldn't help feeling some affection for the demon artisan.

"I just hope he's finished with the snake." She muttered. "Or Patsy will never forgive me."

Liz had deliberately arrived in the large square, with two partially ruined temples along its side.

Temples with statues of Gods who'd looked like dragons. Remnants from another age, or maybe another world. Duat was a strange place, outside of the normal rules of reality.

"One day I'll examine Uundenvelt properly. I might even bring a camera."

She might look the place over, building by ruined building, but she'd never really bring a camera.

Duat had a strange effect on modern technology, almost as if the air was toxic to technology. Liz crossed the square, went down an alleyway and up two flights of stone steps. The light in his workshop was on, it was always on. Probably the only light for hundreds of miles and it burned oil of some kind, mixed with a moss only found in Uundenvelt.

"Are you there?" She shouted. "I've come for the golden snake."

No answer and a quick use of the abilities of the keeper and she knew the Artisan wasn't in the city. Expanding her sight showed him not to be anywhere in the Underworld. Strange, as he wasn't supposed to have any method of leaving, apart from death. Even dying would just send him deeper into her part of Duat. Impossible, yet he wasn't there. To go he'd have needed help, probably from one of the minions of the Gods. First the Wanderers behaving strangely and now this....

"I will find you, Artisan. None can hide from me....I will find you."

She needed more space and a focus for her abilities. Back to the square and into a temple to a particularly vicious looking dragon. A God probably, though one tasked with looking after other worlds. Who tasked the Gods? Liz was fairly sure that knowledge was well outside the things she was comfortable with knowing.

"Feel me, hear me....I sense power still remains in this ruin." She yelled.

She became the Keeper of the Last Gate. Her body became black, round and she glistened as though something dark and viscous, covered her entire body. A creature of huge strength, just one of her tentacles could rip the temple apart and she had over two dozen of them. As if to make a point, she ran two of her tentacles over the huge statue.

"None are left here....There is no help for you in this place."

The voice came from the dragon, she was sure of it. When one of its back legs moved slightly, she was definitely sure of it.

"You are here." She said.

Could dragons sigh ? It definitely sounded like a sigh.

"If it gains me a little peace.....What do you need, creature of Duat ?" Asked the dragon.

"A little of your power, perhaps. Definitely your help to contact those who roam the underworld. Preferably minions of the Gods, though I'll happily talk to the spirits who are trapped here. The one called the Last Artisan has gone from this place. It is important that I find him. Someone will have seen him leave."

The dragon stepped off its plinth and moved towards her, though she sensed no malice from....Whatever it was.

"I see everything in this city, I've seen you come and go a few times. The one you call the Artisan found something, an object of power, real and colossal power. It was then easy for him to find a protector and a way out of the underworld. Though....I think he may find his new protector might turn on him. Objects of power are rarely owned by the long lived.....If you take my meaning ?"

"I do, where is the Artisan now ?"

"I could tell you, there are even ways I can help you. There will be something expected in return, though nothing you're unlikely to find difficult."

Laura always likened the Old Gods and their minions to a bazaar. Nothing was ever for nothing, everything came with a price, or an expected favour.

"I don't even know your name." Said Liz.

"And it's unlikely you will, Liz. Names give those who know them, power over you.....Now, we were talking about a favour."

"Alright, what will you expect of me ?" Asked Liz.

"A few worshippers would be nice, though being honest, it's the sacrifices that matter. Blood you see, everything always comes down to the blood. I will require the sacrifice of seven living creature, here in my temple. What type of creature is unimportant, though their blood must be red. For someone with your abilities.....It should be easy."

There were billions of people in her world alone, many guilty of terrible deeds. No one would miss them; the world would actually be better off without them. It wasn't her job to deal with them, but if it served to gain her the help of the unnamed dragon God.....

"Alright, you have my word." Said Liz. "We find the Artisan first though. Then I'll bring you seven living beings to sacrifice."

"Intelligent creatures.....Try to bring me insects and molluscs and we'll stop being friends."

"You have my word.....Seven intelligent creatures, with red blood."

"Excellent." Said the dragon.

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Jim Weaver had bought and sold artefacts before. It wasn't as if it was his first time, yet the amount on the computer screen was staggering. It held him, as if the number had the power to mesmerise. In a way it did of course. An amount of cleared funds in several offshore accounts, that would change their lives. Very little chance of being caught. The agent was dealing with the collectors and all of them had more to lose than Jim. No one fancies the idea of being called a crook in the national press, before spending a decade or two in prison. The number wasn't exactly running over the edge of the screen, but it was.....

"Fucking huge." He muttered.

An account in Panama had the largest number, an amount in US Dollars. For some reason it seemed Macao was now the place to bank Euros you didn't want to explain. The total looked less impressive than the dollars, but it was still enough to give him a slight giddy feeling. Sterling was a relatively small amount, held in an Indonesian bank. It was all there on one treasury management screen. It wasn't even a final total, the really good items, the best of the best, had been kept. They'd all felt guilty at selling items looted from museums. Actually, that was a bit weird when he thought about it. They had burgled the British Museum and sold just about everything. It was having more than enough though; he was sure that was the reason. Have more money than you could spend in several lifetimes and hey presto....A few moral scruples turn up to haunt your unconscious. Anyway, Laura had the best items hidden away somewhere.

"Patsy first I think." He muttered. "Patsy has a need for sterling."

They'd all talked it through, where was the best place to hide their money. Too well hidden and it would be hard to get at. Not hidden well enough might mean a knock on the door by the police. Ronnie had been the unexpected star of those conversations. It seemed she was an old hand at shifting cleared funds around the globe. Jim brought up the three accounts Patsy wanted to use for her ill-gotten gains.

"Hmmm Singapore....A bit predictable Patsy, but safe."

Her ready money, enough to pay the bills and a deposit on a house, went into the bank in Singapore. Patsy had her own plans on bringing the money into the UK, which he had no need, or desire, to know. The bulk of Patsy's money went into banks in Tallinn and Budapest. Not countries the average guy in a UK street would use, but their banks were solid, trustworthy and best of all...Discreet and on the Swift system.

"Send my own off next....Why not." He mumbled.

For obvious reasons everyone had used names that weren't theirs. Mostly individuals who did exist, but had no idea they were millionaires in Macao, or Panama. For some reason Jim liked shell companies and dummy corporations. The bulk of his money went into an account in the name of Woven Aureum Luck 88 LLP, who banked in Indonesia.

"Ok, now Ronnie and Laura....Then I can make their day with a few texts."

When he'd finished the screen was still showing a balance in sterling. Nothing huge, it was the amount they'd agreed should go to Liz Grant, for saving their lives. Jim hadn't been able to get a recipient bank from Liz, but that was fine. The amount could sit there until she was ready. It was text time, something simple they'd agreed on.

'Aunt Jessica's cold has improved.'

Jim imagined the happy smiling faces, as they thought about how to repatriate the money into the UK, without sending up a dozen red flags on the banking system. It was a real problem, but....

"A nice one to have." He muttered.

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Being around for a few millennia, definitely made you cynical. Mabina knew she had an attitude and had always put it down to having seen a lot of history. The same avoidable mistakes, over and over again. It was bound to have an effect. Like grandma having sat through seventy plus Christmases, with her extended family.

"That's why old people get grumpy." She muttered. "They've seen it all before and know what comes next."

Actually, seeing a living God though and living to tell the tale. Horus had been polite and he'd asked for her help. It was impossible to be cynical about that, though she had tried.

Her two PM bed change and medication was a regular. Edith Gascoigne's husband had left Edith a healthy bank balance and a decent investment portfolio. Not the latest digital currency nonsense. Edith had over a million in good, old fashioned, stocks and shares. Not that Mabina had any curiosity about the wealth of others. It was Edith who liked to talk about it.

"Sorry Edith, there's an injection today." Said Mabina.

"Oh, I hate needles."

Despite being in her eighties, Edith was actually in pretty good health, or not too bad for her age and mileage, as Edith put it. She'd buried two husbands and outlived several men she'd had long term affairs with. Again, Mabina nodded to be polite, but Edith seemed to love talking about her life.

"There.....All done." Said Mabina.

"I never felt a thing."

Edith always fell asleep at about that time, a routine nap. It was ideal for Mabina, who then had the use of the entire house for a while. Mainly a large upstairs room with almost no furniture. It meant drawing the symbols with chalk every time, but she didn't mind that. It was all part of the favour for Horus. Mabina was beginning to understand why Laura had found it hard to say no to the Ancient God.

"Alright, let's do this." She muttered.

Move the armchair which lived in the centre of the room. Chalk then to draw a circle, with the same characters and symbols inside it, as last time. Mabina could draw the symbols from memory now, though she did check the finished circle with the drawing Liz had given her.

"Get it wrong and you could end up in another world." Liz had told her.

The symbols were just part of the ritual, the words and the style of intonation were the most important part. Mabina stood in the centre of the circle.

"Neh Afflen Hesit Abli.

Sedit.

Rahhn Afflen Hesit Nerin.

Sedit."

Get it wrong by even the slightest wrong tone and nothing happened. Mabina had been in a hurry once and although no one had been there to see her failure, it still embarrassed her. The room was gone and she was in the High Andes, watching the Wanderers, do their wandering.

"So, a new chant guys.....Do it a few times so I can learn it." She said.

It seemed she was too insignificant to swot, or chastise in other ways. She no longer tried to hide or remain quiet. They had to see and hear her, yet they ignored her. They were all chanting again, though this one was different. It felt more insistent, as though the Wanderers were becoming a little impatient.

"One more time and I'll have it word perfect." She muttered.

She'd sung one of their chants to Horus and now she was listening to remember it properly, the new chant did sound like a song. Certainly, more of a song than a simple chant. Almost involuntary, she joined in with the song. Now she had their attention, they weren't ignoring her anymore. Suddenly being the centre of attention for at least a dozen Gods, wasn't something she'd planned.

"Oh, so now you can see me."

One of them actually moved around her, as if trying to get a better look at the vampire who'd dared to join in with their song. Mabina carried on singing, actually raising her voice a little. It felt impossible to stop and she actually knew the words as the song changed. Mabina joined them, walking around a ruined temple that predated mankind by tens of thousands of years.

It happened suddenly and only for a fraction of a second. Something was at the centre of the temple, a huge living being of some kind. It shrieked like a bird and vanished as quickly as it had arrived. It was all too much for Mabina, she used the incantation to bring her home.

“Rahim Nessr Hesit Nerin.

Sedit.”

Mabina found herself home, or at least the home of Edith Gascoigne. The room was the same, with the chalk circle still on the floor. She wasn't alone though, one of the Wanderers had followed her back. That was impossible according to Liz, though nothing was probably impossible to a God.

Mabina asked the obvious question, which was probably the wrong thing to ask.

“Who are you ?”

The Wanderer had a bird like head on a human body. No obvious Gender could be seen through the thick robes it wore. A hand that was more like a talon, touched her arm. It felt.....Friendly, not even slightly threatening. The bird head became human, a female face. The face smiled, before vanishing completely. Mabina was left alone in Edith's upstairs room, with a chalk circle to wipe away.

“Wow....Wait until I tell Laura about that.” She muttered.

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Laura had only partly understood why the Silver Dawn had employed her as their head of security. True, having a vampire as head of security, definitely added a little something, a little panache. She also had the ear of the Old Gods, which had to be worth a lot. They certainly hadn't hired her to work her to death. Often, her role seemed to be mainly symbolic, or maybe an ultimate threat. The Psochics, yet another ancient order of occultists, were still officially at war with the Silver Dawn. Laura could see how employing her counted for a lot in that war. Still, it was nice when her boss, Nathalie Aurigny had asked to see her that morning and had smiled at her.

“Ahhh Laura, I worry I'm neglecting you.” Said Nathalie. “I have a problem for you to sort out. It involves our local agent in Sudan, the city of El Obeid to be exact. Dangerous, though knowing you, you'll take Tim and make a holiday out of it.”

“Tim does have a thing about pyramids in Sudan. There are more there than in the whole of Egypt. What's the problem in El Obeid ?” Asked Laura.

“Missing artefacts, but I'll leave David to give you the details. Mainly I want you to be seen out there, looking around and taking it all very seriously. Great if you can find the stolen items, but the first priority is to stop any further thefts.”

“Stomping about and terrifying the locals.....I just might take Tim with me. Is David in today ?” Asked Laura.

“He is Laura, though I thought he was smothering you a little over the business in Aman. He needed telling off, but I overdid it a bit. So please be nice to David. Butter him up a bit, convince the guy you love him really....You know the sort of thing.” Said Nathalie.

“I'll do my best, though no one has ever praised my people skills.” Said Laura.

“You'll do fine, just smile at him a lot. It's what I do to get him to do the jobs I hate doing.”

Nathalie had a ground floor office that looked like it had been designed by an expensive interior designer. The sort of office Vogue would love to use in a photoshoot. Her assistant, David Huynh had an office in the first level basement and it looked like the den of a typical Bond villain. All his idea, according to Nathalie.

“The darker and more sinister the better for our David.” She'd once told her.

David was an American, it was rumoured he'd been poached from the Mafia in New York. Small and of oriental appearance, David Huynh was one of the most ruthless people Laura had ever met. In

many ways, he ran the day-to-day affairs of the Silver Dawn, far more than Nathalie. Laura found him, sitting at his desk.

"Hi David, it's been a while." She said. "Not my doing, though I believe I have to apologise for it. So.....Sorry."

"I knew it was Nathalie. Did you hear that I resigned, properly this time. A letter, all my stuff in a cardboard box. She talked me out of it, but next time dear Laura....Next time I'll be gone."

"I had heard and I think that would be a shame, David." Said Laura.

Nothing to do with Nathalie's instruction, but Laura smiled. Probably a longer smile than usual, though she really did think the Silver Dawn couldn't afford to lose David. As for liking him ? She hadn't made her mind up on that. To her, liking came after trusting and trust could take years to build.

"So, you've probably come about the Buddha of El-Obeid." Said David.

The irony of an assignment to catch artefact thieves, wasn't lost on Laura. Her secret den was full of priceless gold antiquities, mainly looted by the Monkman family from warzones in the middle east. Not looted by her, but few of them were likely to be handed back to their rightful owners. If anyone could be said to truly own relics that old.

"Just tell me the name of the best hotel in town." She said.

"You remind me of a war correspondent I knew at CNN." Said David. "El-Obeid is the capital of the state of North Kurdufan, in Sudan."

"Yeah....You can assume Nathalie told me all that."

"There's a regional airport that can land large jets." Said David. "I could give you a list of hotels, or I can get someone to book you and Tim into the best one in the area. I assume Tim will be going with you ?"

"Wow, one day you'll make someone the perfect wife." She said.

"And fuck you too, Laura Selway."

They grinned at each other before hugging. David could be an awkward bastard, but he was about ninety percent of the way to being thought of as a friend.

"Nathalie wants me there quickly." Said Laura. "Get a minion to do the airline tickets and book us into a decent hotel. Not our real names of course."

"Of course, I don't hire stupid minions."

David liked to give an impression of being a broad-brush strokes kind of the guy, the kingpin disinterested in the minutiae. In reality he loved the details, even the tedious ones. He handed her a file, which she knew would answer any question she was likely to have and many others she'd never even thought of. Laura had no worries about the assignment, but Tim might not like being dragged to Sudan at a moment's notice.

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Clara had to get to know Cyril's empire in detail, if she was going to keep it safe. A call to Tom had been misunderstood, he'd thought she wanted a little protection. Really, she'd been looking for someone who knew the clubs and pubs, where Cyril's criminal empire, rubbed up against the normal world. Intelligence had been the name of the game, but Tom had sent her Alex and Noah, in a powerful Mercedes. Not their usual transport. Clara could tell by the way Alex was caressing the steering wheel. They'd arrived to pick her up with an expectant look on their faces, like excited kids ready for some fun.

"Tom said you wanted a walk through of the business." Said Noah.

“Some of the clubs were mentioned.” Added Alex. “First stop should be the Luna Blue in Shoreditch. We have a regular team there, selling pills to the clientele. All deniable of course, but the place makes Tom a fortune.”

“Does Tom own the place ?” Asked Clara.

“No, everything has to be at arm’s length.” Said Noah. “Cyril owns the club, though through someone else. A company I think, there’s a notice behind the bar.”

“We’re not encouraged to ask for too many details.” Said Alex.

They were keen, Clara could almost smell their enthusiasm. Two of the best according to Tom, leg breakers of some fame. They were probably hoping there was a need to become violent with someone at the Luna Blue. Clara wondered if they’d continue to be excited, once she told them she wanted to visit clubs owned by their competition.

“Yes, the Luna Blue can be the second place we visit tonight.” Said Clara. “First though, I want to see a club or bar used by our opponents. The Russians, or maybe a Romanian gang. Is there anywhere you can recommend ?”

Clara always thought vampires could smell fear through pheromones. She still sensed eagerness from Alex and Noah. Their eagerness for action had a definite smell to her and there wasn’t a trace of fear. They weren’t mindless though; they were naturally cautious.

“There is Crazy Oleg’s.” Said Noah. “We’re not carrying though, so it might be risky.”

“Not the proper name for the club, Clara.” Said Alex. “A Romanian mobster called Oleg bought the place and refurbished it. He kept the old name, it’s still officially the Swan’s Nest. Noah is right though, going there as a small unarmed group, might be dangerous.”

“Will Crazy Oleg’s be busy tonight ?” Asked Clara.

“Yes, it’ll be packed.....It’s always busy.” Said Noah.

“So, we go and behave ourselves.” Said Clara. “Buy a drink, keep to the busy areas. I just want a feel for the place, so we’ll behave like model customers.”

Alex was still keen, actually moving the Mercedes into drive, while keeping her foot on the brake.

Alex nodded at Noah, who nodded back at her.

“Well, if it’s really what you want ?” Asked Alex.

“It is, get us there, Alex.” Said Clara.

Cyril was successful, but didn’t seem the kind of guy he once was. No impulsive decisions to visit the enemy on their home turf, not anymore. Tom too, had made a reputation for himself, though that too, had been decades ago. Clara needed to be seen everywhere to build her own reputation, even in enemy territory.

“Where is Crazy Oleg’s ?” She asked.

“Notting Hill.” Said Alex.

Not an area of London famous for East European connections, but areas change. Groups move in and other groups move out. For all Clara new, it might now be the Little Bucharest of London. Yet another pile of information she needed to learn. It wasn’t that far, but far enough for her to get comfortable and enjoy the journey across London.

“If they start something, we might need to retaliate.” Said Noah.

“He means we might have to crack a few skulls, if things turn nasty.” Said Alex. “Are you alright with that ?”

“Sure, put a few of them in hospital if you have to.” Said Clara.

That visibly cheered them both up. Clara could tell she was going to get on with Noah and Alex. Alex parked in a side street that could have been anywhere in London, though Alex told her they were a

short walk from Crazy Oleg's. The car was on loan from Tom and not getting it damaged, seemed to worry them more than a building full of angry Romanians.

"Oh, I'm actually looking forward to this." Said Noah.

"No thumping anyone unless they start something." Said Clara.

"Yeah, no problem, boss." Said Alex.

It was the first time either of them had called her boss and it made her ridiculously happy. The front of The Swan's Nest looked like an up-market restaurant in a decent area. Two tough looking guys on the door spoiled it a little, but they were smartly dressed. The two men in smart suits didn't recognise Alex or Noah, or they wouldn't have been so relaxed. Their heartbeats didn't increase at all.

"Are you members?"

"We were hoping to join tonight." Said Clara.

They were looked up and down, probably to make sure their clothing fitted Crazy Oleg's door policy. No jeans or trainers seemed to be universally a no-go for clubs and bars with delusions of grandeur. One of the men opened the door and nodded them through, so they'd obviously passed the test.

"Thank you." Said Clara.

Down about six steps, through a set of double doors and they were into a room with a long bar down one side. There was a steady base beat of music that seemed obligatory for such places. There were even two women in fancy lingerie, dancing on a small stage. It was seedy and to Clara at least, it was wonderful. The bar was busy, a lot of hot sweaty bodies crammed into an area with little ventilation. To a vampire it was like being in front of all the meat at a company barbecue. Not that she could feed. Clara could use a little of her strength and speed if she had to, but her fangs had to stay hidden away.

"Do you fancy a drink?" Asked Noah.

"Yes, my usual." Said Alex.

"I'll have.....A bottled beer, anything will do." Said Clara.

They were there of course, the young people selling pills to other young people. It would all look like one student selling to another, nothing to do with the management of the club. In reality every person selling was employed by Crazy Oleg and his gang. If you had a club that was busy seven nights a week, there was big money in selling pills to kids. Especially if the pills were the latest designer drugs coming out of Asia. Noah returned with the drinks and her bottle of Becks was actually properly chilled.

"Hmmm...that tastes good." Said Clara.

"We're getting eyeballed." Said Alex. "I think we've been recognised."

It all happened in a hurry after that. The crowd parted as about half a dozen of Oleg's gang formed around them. A nudge in the ribs with something that felt the business end of a squat nose revolver.

"No fuss.....The boss just wants a word."

It all took a few seconds, before they were in a room at the back somewhere with Alex and Noah being tied to chairs. Clara had to give it to the Romania gang, they were experienced and professional. No being cable tied to a chair and gagged for her, Clara was pushed into a chair next to a large desk. It felt like being a guest on a chat show. Especially when Oleg arrived, to be given a cheer by his gang.

"Ahhh... Let's see who we have here." Said Oleg.

He sat at the desk, as the likeness to a hostile version of Letterman, continued. They were underestimating her. Clara always liked it when people did that. Just one of the gang in the room

had a gun in his hand and he wasn't aiming it anywhere in particular. They were underestimating her to the point where it was downright insulting.

"I know you, of course I know you." Said Oleg. "We've all heard of the new enforcer Cyril brought in to get things in order. You're the famous Clara. I even have pictures of you leaving his house."

All it took was a young guy on a pedal bike, with a cheap camera phone. There was nothing clever or high tech about the pictures Oleg was placing on his desk. Anyone can be photographed in the street, anyone. No wonder celebrities were showing nude pics on Instagram. It was the only way to compete with an entire generation of kids, all armed with cameras.

Oleg wasn't that impressive personally. Receding hair and a bit of a tummy trying to escape the top of his trousers. He was enjoying the moment, which was a pity. Clara had every intention of spoiling that for him.

"Untie my guys." She said. "I came here to talk about averting a war, not start one."

"What war?" Asked Oleg. "I'm not going to kill any of you. My people will just bruise you a little, enough to send Cyril a message. A few cracked ribs maybe, but nothing fatal."

"Coming in here was taking the piss." Said the man holding a gun.

It had to be him, no one else was holding a gun. Clara had speed and strength, plus the experience of how to make a blow kill, or incapacitate. Killing the man didn't worry her, though it seemed likely that it might upset Crazy Oleg. Anyone with crazy in their name seemed like someone who might react badly if upset.

"Untie my guys, Oleg." She said. "Then you can give me a tour of your place and we can have a drink."

"No, not going to happen."

Daniel had explained it to her, the ability to move and react at least fifteen times faster than a human. Nothing was examined by her conscious mind. No pondering, no mulling over anything for morality issues. Clara moved fast and hit the man across the throat, pulling the gun out of his hand as she did so. With luck he'd make choking sounds for a while, but survive. To be honest though, she didn't care that much about it either way. She was behind Crazy Oleg, aiming the gun at the side of his head, before anyone could react. He tried to move, so she used her left arm to pin him to the chair. The strange thing was how long it took his gang to react. By the time they were aiming guns at her, she was whispering in Oleg's ear.

"It doesn't have to go like this." She said. "Untie my guys and we can still have that talk and a drink.....And I'd still like that tour of the place. I'm new Crazy Oleg, with a lot to learn. But I'm the one who'll definitely be walking out of here. As for you.....Untie my people."

Clara rarely used a gun, but she liked the weight and feel of the snub nose thirty-eight. She rubbed the end of the barrel hard against Oleg's forehead. Hard enough to make his skin bleed.

She wasn't a languages person, though she'd picked up a lot of market French and German over the last five hundred years. Oleg shouted at his gang in a language she didn't know. They put their guns away, before untying Alex and Noah.

"So, Crazy Oleg.....I'm glad you're not that crazy after all." Said Clara.

"Oh, how I hate that name." Said Oleg. "My father is a watch repairer, the best in Braşov. My mother was a ballerina when she was young. You can imagine how proud they are to have a son known as Crazy Oleg."

"We all have our cross to bear Oleg." Said Clara. "I could tell you stories about my family, that would make your hair curl. Do I get that tour?"

"A drink first, then I'll show you everything."

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