

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 1 – Brother Alberti

“Laura liked being a vampire, once the initial period of adjustment was over. Hollywood and Buffy may have given her the wrong idea about most things vampire, but what was true, she liked.”

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~ Nine months and twelve days ~

It had been a long day for Clara Copley. She'd left the hotel to work for Liz and after the Simon business....She'd wanted something new, a fresh start with no old memories associated with it. Liz knew someone in an agency who booked hospitality venues for corporate events. Take your entire dysfunctional office paint balling, or something like that. Phone work, which wasn't really her thing, but she'd aced the role-playing part of the interview. A little leaning on Anthony, Simon's old boss for a glowing fake reference. And Clara was now an office worker, doing a ridiculous number of hours. The Stewart Rex Agency paid her well and had willingly agreed to pay her on a self-employed basis. Others might moan about the gig economy, but to a vampire with iffy ID and paperwork, it was a real boon. Clara glanced at her watch, as she opened the door to the house in Hornsey.

“Oh, past eleven, again.” She muttered.

Laura was home for a while, even she talked about coming home as though she was a student returning home for a vacation. Laura would soon be back in France, but for a while, she was in her comfy bedroom on the second floor. Clara went into the kitchen and put her Indian takeaway onto the table. It would be a bit cold, but a few minutes being nuked in the microwave, would make it edible.

“Oh, my poor feet. I must stop wearing heels.”

Off came her shoes and Clara got down to the serious business of plating up her jalfrezi, rice and all the trimmings. Once on plates, it would all get nuked to destruction, which was how she liked it. Coffee too of course, despite the lateness of the hour. Vampires had a different relationship to sleep than humans. Clara could go days without sleep, though that didn't mean she didn't enjoy a lay-in at weekends, if she could fit one in. Her chemistry was different to humans at a cellular level, according to Daniel. Coffee tasted nice, but it didn't stop her sleeping, well, not that much.

“Fuck....The answering machine.” She muttered.

Simon had been gone for nine months and twelve days, but she still checked for messages as soon as she came home. Silly really, she knew where he was and unless BT now offered a cross timeline service....There never would be a message. They'd promised her she'd see him occasionally, even if only at a distance. What did the ancient deities view as occasionally ? Nine months and twelve days seemed a hell of a long time to her. There was one message, their energy supplier wanting to install a smart meter. Her meal had just the right appearance and temperatures, as she took the steaming plates out of the microwaves. She'd eaten most of her meal and drunk a cup of coffee, before noticing the two, no there were three, spots of blood on the cuff of her blouse.

“Crap.....This is one of my favourites.”

She missed Simon, she missed him a hell of a lot. Vampire emotions were complex though, more about needs and survival than human emotions. Sex was a need and when the time felt right, she'd

find a human lover to take care of that need. It didn't mean she didn't still love Simon; it was just taking care of an itch that needed scratching. Blood was another need and for vampires everything was about the blood. She was feeding more often, taking more risks than she ever had before. To her, feeding made everything feel fine again. The euphoria took away the pain of losing Simon, for a few hours. Clara fed on the way home from work, usually around the bars and clubs close to the river. She had no preferred gender for those she fed on. Women weren't as strong as men, which made them easier to subdue and handle. Men on the other hand, especially drunken men, would follow a pretty girl anywhere. Once her fangs had gone in though, it was all about the blood. Good blood, tainted blood, even diseased blood. To her it was all good, all wonderful once it was running down her throat. Oh, the taste of hot blood from a fresh kill.....

"It's all about the blood." She mumbled.

She'd fed on the way home, a young man near a public house by the river. No woman would have followed her down the stairs so easily, even if they were that way inclined. The young man though, still in his suit from work. He'd followed her, right into the darkness below the bridge. There had been a birthday party for someone called Richard, not twenty feet from where she'd drained the young man of blood. All those happy people, with no idea what was happening, so close to their popping party poppers and bottles of bubbly. After ripping out his throat to hide the marks of her fangs, she'd dropped his body into the river. Fifty-fifty it would never be seen again. She'd lived in Gravesend for a while during the second world war. All those she'd fed on had ended up in the Thames and judging by reports in the local paper, few were ever seen again. With better policing and proper river patrols....

"About fifty-fifty I reckon." She muttered.

Immersion in river water did terrible things to bodies, any self-respecting vampire knew that. Bacteria in the water, bottom feeders nibbling at the soft tissues. Fairly quickly, human flesh began to soak up the river water and look horrifically bloated. Add on the chances of the body being hit by a propeller. No one was likely to look at a body that had been in the Thames for a few days and think....Vampire victim. Hell, no one would think that if she'd dropped the young guy's body on the town hall steps.

"No one believes in us anymore." She muttered. "No one believes in much of anything these days." Still, using the river as her dumping ground did involve more risk than was sensible. She needed another George Harper. Someone who worked in a local hospital, preferably managing the incinerator. Finding George had been a miracle and now he was dead. One thing was certain, she needed to find a better way of disposing of her kills. She drank her third cup of coffee. Vampire cell structure could only do so much to combat that much caffeine. She was likely to have a hard time getting to sleep. As only a vampire can, she removed all the worry and anxiety from her consciousness. Guilt too, could be wiped away, as easily as chalk from a blackboard. Not that Clara felt guilty about anything, at least not that often.

"Bed.....I'll do the dishes in the morning." She mumbled.

Clara had a moment when she walked past the open door to the lounge. The curtains were open, yet she was sure she'd closed them when she'd used the answering machine. There was no one in the lounge, she'd have felt their presence. Most vampires can sense a human heart beat within fifty feet or so. It was one of their key assets when hunting for someone to feed on. Of course, Clara knew the world didn't just contain humans.

"Hello.....Who's in here ?" She asked, quietly.

No answer, she hadn't really expected one. Part of her had wanted to ask if it was Simon, but her logical side had stopped her. The view beyond the window made her gasp. Gone was the small strip of garden, that led down to a side alley. The neighbour's house was gone, as was the yellow street lamp she could usually just about see. Instead, Clara was looking at a cobbled square of some kind, with one man fighting many. Strangely dressed men, using swords. There was something familiar about one of the men, the one who seemed to have more than his fair share of enemies.

"I know you.....Giovanni." She muttered. "You're Simon's friend, the assassin."

Giovanni was dead, he'd been dead for quite some time. Being a vampire tended not to mean being immortal. They had far too many dangers in their lives, especially other vampires. Her kind didn't play well with others and as far as she knew, Giovanni had died by the hand of another vampire.

Simon had always called Giovanni a fool, yet.....He had been the one to turn Simon into a vampire.

The view from the window was obviously a view of the past, which didn't surprise Clara. Such weird windows into the past were rare, but it wasn't her first.

"Careful Giovanni, that one almost skewered you." She mumbled.

Six or seven fighters against one. Things didn't look good for Giovanni, though he was fighting well.

He had faced eight or nine, but two were lying on the ground, surrounded by their own blood. Clara had no idea why she was being shown the fight. Giovanni was dead, as would be all the men fighting him. As a view of the past, it was interesting, but nothing more than that. Simon had always said Giovanni was a clumsy buffoon, though he had been an assassin for the Medici. He wasn't clumsy in the image though; another man fell to his blade.

"If this is some kind of message....I don't understand it." She said.

The oldest of all the old deities had made her a promise. Occasionally she would be granted a view of Simon, in his new life, in the past. There had been hints that their worlds might mingle for a while, though that couldn't happen too often. As her mind tried to make sense out of watching Giovanni fight, the door behind him opened. Out came another man holding a blade.

"Simon.....Now I think I understand." She muttered.

He looked different in the dress of that time, but she'd have known him anywhere. All these years sharing a bed, seeing that face on the pillow every morning. He had a beard and looked a little thinner, but there was no doubt, it was her Simon. He moved so well, getting between Giovanni and a lunge from an enemy that might have killed him. There was no sound, just images, high-definition images that were far clearer than anything on their expensive TV. Simon seemed to be shouting at someone and the view panned around, to show a man getting out of a horse drawn carriage.

"Careful Simon, he looks tough." She muttered.

Simon waved his sword around a little, but the fight seemed to be over. The men dragged off their fallen comrades, though she couldn't see where to. The tough looking man was better dressed than the others. He talked to Simon, who took Giovanni back into the building he'd had come out of. Was that where they lived? Was the girl inside, the one called Niña? Simon seemed to think she was the key to everything.

"No, not yet.....Show me inside the house." She said.

All over far too soon, the view from the window merged with the wall of the house next door and all too soon.....It was the familiar view of their part of Hornsey. Not that Clara was going to complain too much, she knew the old Gods could be easily offended.

"Thank you, whoever showed me that." She said. "It was much appreciated."

No answer, the ancient deities rarely responded to Laura and she was supposed to be particularly favoured. That was it, a few minutes watching Giovanni nearly die. It was better than nothing though and Simon really did look very handsome with a beard.

"Crap.....One thirty, I'll be useless tomorrow." She muttered.

On the way to her bedroom, which had been their bedroom, she sensed Laura was asleep in her room. A human asleep with her, Tim of course. Clara was pleased that despite having an apartment in Northern France, Laura still thought of the house in Hornsey as home.

"I have to tell her."

No knocking, Clara was beginning to get quite emotional. She'd seen him, after nine months and twelve days, she'd seen Simon. He was alive and well, though breaking up a fight seemed a little out of character. Usually, he'd have been more than happy to join in.

"Laura.....Wake up.....I saw Simon." She yelled.

Laura was awake in a fraction of a second, but poor Tim just looked sleepy and confused. No telling her to go away and come back at a reasonable hour, Laura understood.

"Where ? When did it happen ?" Asked Laura.

Laura did poised very well, Clara had noticed it before. For a girl woken up at one thirty, wearing just her knickers, she was poised enough to win prizes for it. Tim was still looking around, as if trying to decide if it was all a dream.

"Downstairs, just a few minutes ago." Said Clara. "The view of outside changed in the lounge window. I saw him and Giovanni."

"Oh yes, Patsy has mentioned the strange view in a window thing. What was he doing ?"

"I think he saved Giovanni's life, before breaking up a swordfight."

"Oh, that doesn't sound like Simon.....Breaking up a fight." Said Laura.

"That's what I thought." Said Clara.

"I suppose this means we're all going downstairs for coffee and bacon sandwiches ?" Asked Tim.

"Great idea, I can tell you about his beard." Said Clara.

"Oh wow, Simon has a beard ?" Asked Laura.

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~ Italy; at the time of the Medici ~

Simon Atherton was close to being seven hundred and fifty years old, despite being dropped into an earlier timeline. His given name, the one his human mother had christened him with, had been Piero Rossi. Luckily a gift from the old Gods had been to make him hear Simon when anyone used his name. Similarly, he found by trial and error, when he gave his name as Simon, people heard Piero. It was a weird trick, but incredibly useful. As for his language skills in Italian ? He still had all of Piero's memories, which meant he was fluent in the Italian of the time, with a little Spanish and French. He also knew Latin, which was probably another useful gift from whatever deities were watching over him. Simon definitely hadn't learned any Latin as Piero, he'd have remembered.

"Oh, if only the Medici had introduced ensuite bathrooms." He muttered.

His bladder had woken him, somewhere in the early hours of the morning. No watch of course, or bedside clock. Like all vampires, he had a strange kind of affinity with nature. He could guess the time and be correct, to within a few minutes. It was about one in the morning and he needed to pee. Not in the pot under the bed, those were for the old and infirm, or of course Giovanni. His friend who shared the house was a drinker of some fame. For him, it was a case of use a pot, or wet the bed. Not that the only toilet facilities in the house were brilliant, but he could live with them. There was the river of course, which he bathed in when the weather permitted. He looked around his

room for Niña, the girl often came into his room and slept on the floor. As he slept naked, he made sure she wasn't sleeping next to his bed, or on the sofa against the wall. A half moon coming through the window was the only light, but it was enough.

"I made sure she has a decent bed." He muttered.

Simon hadn't made much progress, again. He'd been sent around through time to have another try, because he'd made no progress the first time. There had been the whole chronoclasm thing too, he'd occupied the same timeline, as two different versions of himself. It had all been a colossal cluster fuck, so the ancient Gods had sent him back for another try. Strangely, he understood the meaning of *Festina Lente*, as soon as he became Piero. It was just about the only thing Piero had learned, but it sounded legit.

Festina Lente, make haste slowly. A ridiculous saying that turned up all over Italy during the renaissance and later. It meant to keep after the great secret, the huge enlightenment, but do it over a long period of time. No human lifetime was enough time, there was so much to learn. Changes too, physical changes that took decades. Only the unnaturally long lived could hope to gain the prize, or of course, a vampire. As he opened the bedroom door, he nearly fell over the girl.

"Oh, Niña.....If only you'd pick a safer spot."

Simon picked her up and placed her on the sofa in his room. Niña mumbled at him in her sleep, as he used a blanket from his bed to cover her. The girl seemed to have weird dreams, judging by some of the things she mumbled about. A few of their neighbours in the square thought she was a little touched, but Simon considered her to be, interesting. Niña opened her eyes for a second.

"Giovanni needs you.....They'll kill him." She said.

The girl closed her eyes and was asleep again, as though nothing had happened. She was definitely touched, though being touched by the Gods wasn't necessarily a bad thing. No good waking her and expecting more details, he knew from experience that never worked. Simon heard Giovanni shouting, as soon as he opened his bedroom door.

"Who has he offended now?" He muttered.

Complaining bladder forgotten, Simon pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt. The same clothes he'd worn the previous day. He almost forgot his blade, which was leaning against a chair in the hallway. The same blue steel blade that a master smithy had made for him. The blade was almost a trusted friend in the 21st century, but now it was fairly new. Giovanni was causing a ruckus in the street; the noise went up several levels as Simon opened the heavy front door to their house.

"Simon, help me." Yelled Giovanni. "I caught these bastards trying to break into our home."

Giovanni was probably still drunk and although he must have noticed the carriage the men had arrived in, he probably didn't recognise the emblem on its door. Simon did, though he hadn't seen it for at least a year and a half. One of the men tried to stab Giovanni in the back, with a second blade held in his left hand. Simon managed to block the blow with his sword, while giving the man a wound on his upper arm, that would leave a nasty scar. Giovanni obviously thought they were now going to fight side by side, two vampires against half a dozen night bandits. Giovanni roared like an angry lion, before Simon grabbed his arm.

"No." Simon hissed at him. "Look at the carriage door, you're fighting the Brotherhood."

No one fought the Brotherhood, no one. They were probably the only people who could kill two assassins for the Medici, and suffer no consequences. Everyone feared the Medici, but it was said, the Medici feared the Brotherhood.

"I had no idea." Said Giovanni.

"Calm yourself, I'll talk to them." Said Simon.

Fighting and killing Giovanni was one thing, though they'd obviously been told not to hurt Simon. The men backed away as he swung his blade. Two of those who'd attacked Giovanni were dead, another looked badly injured. There had to be consequences, or people might think the Brotherhood could be attacked with impunity. Simon understood them, he still answered to their leader, Brother Alberti. In theory he was one of them, though he hadn't seen Alberti for well over a year.

"Who leads these men?" Shouted Simon. "Talk to me, tell me why you're here at such an hour?"

The leader opened the carriage door, as though he was arriving for a royal banquet. The man with the expensive clothes and regal attitude, was unknown to Simon. He tended to be escorted in and out of the building, only seeing Alberti and a very small circle of people.

"I was instructed to bring you to those I serve. Taking you while you slept seemed the best method. I hadn't considered you might have an assassin as a guard." Said the man.

"I am no guard; this is my home." Yelled Giovanni.

"Leave and look after your fallen." Said Simon. "I will have to explain why two, maybe three of you are dead. I can just as easily explain why none of you survived. Go and send someone for me in the morning."

No one failed Brother Alberti, not if they wanted a long and pain free life. Alberti wasn't even the official leader of the Brotherhood; his name wasn't on any documents. He had the real power though, the authority to deal with anyone who failed him. It didn't surprise Simon, when the man showed no intention of leaving.

"I have two dead; I can't go back without you. I can see your point, I really can. Never the less, I cannot leave here without you."

Simon had a medallion wound around the top of the scabbard for his blade. A scabbard dropped on the floor. He picked up the scabbard and unwound the medallion's chain. He had kept it in drawer, but the girl kept playing with it. Niña had told him the medallion was powerful, but she said a lot of things like that. It was one of the reasons the others living in the square thought she was a little touched.

Simon knew what the medallion signified. He probably outranked the man sent to collect him, he probably outranked most of those in the Brotherhood. No reasonably order could be refused, if it came from someone carrying the medallion. It put the man in an impossible situation, he realised that. That didn't stop Simon from dangling it in front of the man's face. A simple design, a large fish wrapped around an anchor. Hard to copy as the workmanship was superb. Few had been made and the master metal worker, had died in the last plague to infect Florence.

"You know what this means." Said Simon. "I'm not unreasonable, I just want a little time to change into clean clothes and tidy up a little. Wait in your carriage and I give you word...I will come with you, willingly."

There were his bodily functions too. Now the threat seemed to be over, his bladder was complaining again. The bladder had to be Piero's, his own had regularly gone all day without demanding to be emptied. Not that Simon had totally relaxed. There was still a slight chance that he and Giovanni might need to slaughter the men who'd come to take him.

"Fine.....I will wait in my carriage." Said the man. "Don't be too long. My orders are to bring you to my master before dawn."

Giovanni hadn't been cut, but he had twisted an ankle during the fight. Like every minor cut and bruise, everything suddenly felt worse once the adrenaline stopped flooding the bloodstream. Simon had to help his friend, as they walked towards the door. Niña opened the door, while glaring at the men sent by the Brotherhood. The girl had pluck, he had to give her that.

"I need clean clothes, anything will do." Said Simon.

Niña nodded and ran up the stairs and into the main area of the house. Simon looked back for some reason and felt frozen to the spot. He had no idea who or what it might be, but he was being watched.

"Are we fighting them after all, old friend?" Asked Giovanni.

"No, I just had a strange.....Never mind, let's get you inside."

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~ London, the Piccadilly Line. Recently ~

Laura Selway missed Simon, he had been the one who'd turned her from a quite depressed legal secretary, into a happy security consultant. By way of turning her into a vampire of course. Laura liked being a vampire, once the initial period of adjustment was over. Hollywood and Buffy may have given her the wrong idea about most things vampire, but what was true, she liked. There was almost a father daughter thing with Simon. She hadn't realised how many times she'd asked him about things, until he was no longer there to ask. Clara was helpful, but she just wasn't Simon. Laura had realised after he'd been gone for six months, that Simon was their rock, the person who glued them all together. Clara had bitten and abducted Patsy after Simon had gone.

"That wasn't just a coincidence." She muttered.

Not a serious bite and Clara had meant it all as a minor punishment, rather than anything potentially lethal. Patsy had slept with Simon in the bedroom he shared with Clara. A huge no-no for a human couple, but with vampires there was the whole territorial business to add on. Still, Patsy had still come to curry night the Friday after Clara had bitten her. Things weren't the same though. The really scary thing was that Simon wasn't likely to return, ever.

"At least the Piccadilly Line is running properly." She muttered.

There was an overground railway to get from Hornsey to Finsbury Park. From there she could use the Piccadilly line to get to the hotel. As she was travelling later than the rush hour crowd, the tube carriage wasn't that full. Grace was leaving the hotel to have a baby and get married. Yes, she really was going to do it in that order. Laura had received an invite to Grace's leaving do and Tim was coming as her plus one. He was going to meet her at the hotel later, after doing a few personal chores. Neither of them had known Grace that well, she'd worked on reception. Clara had been the one to know her well, but Clara wasn't in the mood for a girl's night out, or a girl's stay in and get drunk, or a girl's anything really. Clara was brooding again, sitting in darkened rooms and watching 'Dark' on Netflix, over and over again. Laura was hoping Clara didn't bite Patsy again.

A man who looked in his early twenties made eye contact with her and smiled. There was Tim in her life and to be honest, she wasn't in the mood for pointless flirting. She gave him her best granite eyed look, until he looked away.

Laura knew what was happening, when the golden hue began to coat everything, even the air around her. The old Gods had a thing about gold, though no one was certain why. There were scholars claiming it was because gold was pure, incorruptible. Laura wasn't convinced though. It was strange watching the other passengers carrying on doing whatever they'd been doing, seemingly oblivious to everything taking on a tinge of gold. It wasn't just that British thing while travelling, saying nothing and trying to keep out of everyone's personal space. They genuinely weren't reacting, even as the golden hue grew in intensity. One of the old Gods was in the process of dragging her into their world, or maybe to somewhere in hers, the reality we all accept as normal. A holy site usually if the destination was in our world, an old temple, sometimes little more than a ruin.

"Of all the days to pick." She muttered.

Laura was more curious than angry; it had been months since she'd been taken anywhere by the Gods. Then it had been Horus, keeping his word to answer any questions she might want to ask. Strangely; when given the opportunity to ask anything about where we come from, why we're here and where do we go.....She'd found it hard to phrase proper questions. Then, when the answers had been given, it was all a little disappointing.

Her curiosity turned to being intrigued, when the swirling doorway appeared in the middle of the carriage. No reaction from her other passengers, none at all. One woman in a business suit, actually walked right through the purple vortex, with no effect. The doorway was new, that had never happened before. Not that she was worried, Laura still had the Egg of Astaroth nestled up against her ribs on the left side of her body. It had put itself there, after painfully burrowing underneath her skin. Not an egg at all, most of the names of ancient arcane objects were more poetic than usefully descriptive. The Egg was a metal disc, that granted access to the abyss. From the abyss it was possible to go anywhere, on any world and a few alternative realities. With the Egg, Laura was always able to get home.

"Horus never did this to me. I bet it's Huh, the God of time, eternity and a lot of other things." She mumbled.

Huh was a strange deity, who claimed to be even more ancient than the oldest of the old Gods. Horus had granted her many favours, but even the entire panoply of Gods, seemed a little wary of upsetting Huh. Laura decided to play the game, there didn't seem to be any other option. She walked up to the spinning purple vortex and stepped into it.

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~ London, Bethnal Green. Recently ~

Ronnie was still making faces, when she did anything that pulled on her right side. Veronica Neophytou was her full name, but everyone knew her as Ronnie. Dark hair and quite small for someone in her line of work, but when Tom had given her the promotion, he'd seemed certain she could do the job. Money was the thing of course, Tom Ives and his illegal activities paid her more in a month, than telesales had in a year, a lot more. Official she was on the payroll as a general admin person, on little above minimum wage. Ronnie even got help from the local council with her council tax. Strangely, she felt more guilt from ripping off the local council, than she did from drug dealing or the usually head breaking Tom's gang seemed to specialise in. It was her family really, her mum. Ronnie knew how her mum would view fiddling her council tax. Ronnie had seriously thought about leaving Tom's gang a few times. Maybe going to Cyprus for a while, the old home of her mum and dad, before all the troubles out there. It was the money that kept her in London and working for Tom, it was always the money.

"There he is, I knew he'd come home, eventually." Said Alex.

It was that time when the night life had ended and the morning people were still waiting for the coffee to kick in. Bethnal Green was quiet; they'd only seen two people walking along the street in the past half an hour. Tom had given Ronnie her choice on her main team, so she'd chosen Noah and Alex. She knew them, she was still dating Noah, which hadn't caused any problems, so far. Alex was really Andrea, though she had once punched a guy for calling her Andrea. He'd done it in a snotty kind of way and had it coming. No one now called her anything other than Alex. Dating Noah and Ronnie had dragged a wounded Alex out of a disused factory in Ealing. Nothing bonds people better than sex and saving their life. Picking them as her personal team had been a very quick decision.

"Don't kill him." Said Ronnie. "If you have shoot him, get him in the backside."

"I know Zoran, he's tougher than he looks." Said Noah.

"I do know that, Noah." Said Ronnie. "I've still got a size ten bruise from where he kicked me." Zoran had returned home, to the flat he shared with Sandra, mainly known as Sandy. It was a crappy flat for a couple who ran Tom's narcotic trade for three London boroughs. It suited their cover though, it made them look too low level to bother with. Sandy would be the real loss; she knew the single mums desperate for a little extra cash and the students looking for an easy way to make money. If she could, Ronnie would try to keep Sandy as one of Tom's people, his gang as he liked to call it. As for Zoran? He was going to be an example for anyone else thinking of betraying Tom. Betray Tom and you were betraying them all and that couldn't be tolerated.

"Ok, when we get in there, Noah stops Sandy from being a nuisance." Said Ronnie.

"Fine, no problem." Said Noah.

Alex gave her a bit of a look, a real stink eye. Alex tended to want to prove she was as tough as any guy in the team. She could probably dead lift more weight than Noah, but logic never did win over personal insecurities. Sometimes Alex could go too hard on women, just to prove she could. Noah on the other hand, tended to want to show he had a human side. Yes, her personal team were a bit emotionally fucked up, but Ronnie still wouldn't have replaced either of them.

"Alright, he's had time to get a beer out of the fridge and relax." Said Ronnie.

A side door and they had the bottom flat. The whole house belonged to a developer who was really Cyril H Carter using yet another front company. Cyril was the big boss of bosses, the ultimate top dog of the whole criminal empire. The top flat was storage, for anything and everything, though mostly merchandise that was illegal in some way. Narcotics one week, Rolex knockoffs the next. Tom was versatile when it came to criminal activity. Luckily Cyril's property company had a spare set of keys to the house, provided Zoran hadn't changed the locks. He hadn't.

"Well, that was a piece of luck." Said Alex.

Ronnie let them go first, they knew what they were doing. No going up on tiptoes, they thundered up the wooden stairs. Zoran was on the sofa, watching an old Sony TV, that had to be over twenty years old. Sandy was stood in the kitchen doorway. Noah grabbed her, dragging her up against the wall. Noah was good, Sandy was no longer a problem. He'd have her mouth and wrists duct-taped, before she could do more than squawk a couple of times.

"Oh Zoran, you've been a very bad boy." Said Ronnie.

Alex went for Zoran, as soon as he'd begun to get up from the sofa. Giving someone like Zoran a mild beating was normal, part of the accepted way of dealing with people who needed a good talking to. Rough someone up and they became far easier to handle, and far less likely to give you any reasons to start hitting them again. Zoran obviously hadn't had the memo about how to accept a beating as part of his life as a criminal. He had a small blade in his hand, it must have been under one of the cushions on the sofa.

Ronnie wasn't going to let Zoran hurt Alex. It wasn't just that she liked Alex, it was because Zoran was fairly small in the grand scheme of things. Alive and talking he wouldn't have much to tell them. On the other hand, he'd be a lot less trouble if he was dead. Yes, his scarred and beaten body would be a good example to others, but so would his dead body with his dick cut off. Ronnie took her gun out a holster under her arm and aimed it at Zoran's head.

"Drop the knife Zoran." She said. "I was told to take you alive, but you could easily have been dead when we arrived. Drop the knife, or I will shoot you. I'm sure Alex will enjoy mutilating your body once you're dead."

"Yeah, I'll cut his balls off." Said Alex.

Zoran dropped the blade, he wasn't stupid. While Alex gave him the obligatory beating, Ronnie turned Sandy around, so that she could see her face. No removing the tape from her mouth, a nod for yes would do.

"You can either stand by Zoran and.....Well, you know what will happen. Or you can agree it was all his fault and be one of us again. Of course, betray Tom again and you'll end up in the river, down near Erith. Do you want to be one of us again, Sandy?"

A nod it was enough, they needed her contacts. Someone would be Sandy's shadow for a while though, watching her. They'd also make a note of all her contacts, just in case Sandy was destined to end up in the Thames.

"Bring her into the lounge, Noah." Said Ronnie. "She needs to see this."

Alex had Zoran gagged and bound. She'd draped him over the sofa, with his shirt torn open. There was going to be pain for Zoran and probably some time in hospital. It was better than dying though, a hell of a lot better. Alex was looking at her, waiting for permission to begin.

"Alright Alex, mainly his chest, with at least two ragged lines on his cheeks." Said Ronnie.

Alex was an artist at ragged wounds that would leave a dreadful looking scar. Nothing too deep, his chances of surviving were pretty good. The cuts across his chest would mean Zoran might never sunbathe in public again. Everyone he knew in the business would know why he'd been cut. Simon had been the ultimate enforcer for Tom, though he'd rarely sliced anyone up. Just the threat of Simon had usually been enough. Simon was gone though and discipline still needed to be maintained. Zoran passed out, as Alex turned her attention to his face.

"Not too deep." Said Ronnie.

When Ronnie had first been out with Noah and Alex, she'd been the new person, almost a trainee. Ronnie had done all the driving, while trying to get used to a dangerous, violent way of making a living. She'd watched them beat a competitor to a pulp and had nightmares about it later. For several weeks she'd sometimes woken up sweating, after picturing the cobble floor of the railway arch, soaked with fresh blood. Things had changed, she'd changed. Ronnie watched Zoran being scarred for life and felt nothing.

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~ Giza Plateau, Egypt. About 2,000 BC ~

Laura had been to the Middle East quite a few times and had spent days looking around the ancient sites. Yes, she'd done the whole tourist thing, as well as delving into secret chambers beneath some of the ruined temples. Egypt wasn't exactly a home from home, but she did know where she was. A starlit night and she was stood near the base of the Great Pyramid. Huh had brought her back in time, there was no glow in the sky from the lights of Cairo.

"No lights at all." She muttered.

She checked her phone and wasn't surprised to find it wasn't finding a connection. Giza Plateau on a starlit night was beautiful, made even better by the absence of manmade lighting. The sort of place that might stir romantic feelings, if you were that way inclined. Laura was on her own and in a hurry to be somewhere else. The Gods were like that though, always assuming she had nothing better to do.

"Alright, I'm here." She yelled.

She almost added who wants a favour this time, before remembering that not all the old Gods were friendly. She was favoured by Horus, which went a long way towards keeping her safe. The Gods were always bickering though, allegiances were always changing. A few of the ancient deities had become like ghosts, drifting around in their own world, seemingly oblivious to their surroundings.

Laura had seen a few of them, the Wanderers as Horus called them. It seemed that even Gods could find the idea of existing for eternity, a little hard to cope with.

“What can be done for them, has been done.” Horus had told her.

It was the usual way he tended to speak, really telling her nothing at all.

“Laura.....Over here.” Someone shouted.

She had been alone, but now a living creature was quite close. A male human, judging by the voice. Not enough light to see him, even with her vampire sight. Laura walked towards the voice and found Huh. At one time the Gods could hide from her, but she now knew enough to see through their deceptions. Most of them appeared as mythical creatures, or marvellous beasts. Huh alone always appeared to her as a human. He looked like a street urchin, complete with clothing little better than rags.

“I’m so glad you’re here.....Sit, sit.....This is important.” Said Huh.

He sat cross legged on the ground, so she did the same. Close enough to see and hear him, but far enough away to show respect. Despite only understanding half the things he said, Laura quite liked Huh. The other ancient deities waffled and talked in abstract idea. Huh, on the other hand was a doer, he got things done. No asking him direct questions, that was considered impolite. Laura sat quietly, hoping to get to the hotel in time for Grace’s party.

“The problem is Simon; he hasn’t been doing as well as was hoped.” Said Huh. “My fault really, I tend to overstate chronology issues. If I didn’t, they’d all be bending time and moving people about. Chaos Laura, the result would be chaos. Simon had the full dangers of chronoclasm talk from Brother Alberti and he’s now too scared to do anything. My fault, all my fault.”

“Why is it your fault ?” Asked Laura.

“I gave Brother Alberti several long warnings on that very subject. He took it all literally, which I suppose should have been expected. Time isn’t anywhere near as fragile as I’ve told them. So, it’s my fault and Simon might die today. Or be banished, which will mean he’ll fail, again.”

By they and them, Huh meant his fellow Gods. Siblings really, they were all related in some weird way she’d never understand. Her experience with them wasn’t huge, but they did seem to treat each other the way most humans treated their siblings. A lot of envy, resentment and general malice. All lined with genuine love of course. All that linked to almost limitless power, was terrifying.

“Can I help Simon ?” She asked.

Fuck, she’d done it again. Never offer, they always said yes and she’d spend the next year or two, trying to put right a virtually insoluble mess. She’d been there, done that and bought the T shirt.

“Yes Laura, you might be the only person who can help.” Said Huh. “Simon is still on his way to see Alberti in his time line. No matter what you might think, events on his time line will be fixed forever by whatever happens with Alberti. If Simon arrives and things go badly, there is no way to change it. Rule one Laura, you can’t go back in time and fix something you got wrong. Actually, there are rare.....Forget that, you need to tell Simon what I tell you and he needs to say something to Alberti.”

“Alright, tell me what I need to say.” Said Laura.

“We’re lucky, in your time period, Alberti would probably have a private helicopter. Simon is being taken to him in a horse drawn carriage. Plus, they have two bodies to be dealt with in some way. We have three hours for you to get the words right and then teach them to Simon.”

“I’m told I pick things up quickly.”

“I’m sure you do Laura, I’m sure you do. Now, this is what you need to tell Simon.....”

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