

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 22 – Cyril's Doctor

“Some Djinn were talkative, a few were downright garrulous, but Simon was up against one who just cackled. It did create a fireball in its right hand, as if telling him to keep back a little.”

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One distinct advantage of working for Cyril, was not having to explain why Ronnie needed to see a tame doctor. Plus Cyril would be picking up the bill. From the outside the building looked like a private clinic. Inside, there were nurses in uniforms. It was a vast improvement on the veterinarian who Tom had used to patch up his guys, for a while. Patsy had showered and gone to work. No telling her boss at Hayle's Motor Factors, that she needed time off and counselling, after killing a top enforcer in the Korean yakuza. Poor Patsy, Clara had never intended her to become that involved in the rough stuff. A nurse came out the room where they'd taken Ronnie.

“Will she be alright ?” Asked Clara.

“The doctor will talk to you in a minute.”

How much would Cyril be paying to have Ronnie patched up ? The nurse had an accent a minor royal would have been proud of. That alone probably added a grand to the bill. Clara shifted about on the chair and felt the jade figurine digging into her backside. The damned thing, she still found it impossible to leave it at home, in her knicker drawer. The doctor who'd taken Ronnie away an hour or so before, came out of the room and smiled at her. Clara had seen a lot of doctors over the years, in quite a few similar situations. A slightly sombre face was bad news, while a warm smile usually meant a good prognosis. There was no hard and fast rule though.

“Is Ronnie going to be alright, doctor ?” Asked Clara.

“Yes, though her injuries were many and varied.” Said the doctor. “A severe concussion, a broken tibia and several cracked ribs. Your friend looks to have sustained a severe beating. We've scanned her though and taken blood and urine samples. She'll need to be an inpatient for a few days, but she's young and healthy. Baring anything unforeseen, Ronnie will make a full recovery.”

Clara had a weird relationship with feelings of guilt and empathy. As far as she was aware, all vampires were the same. She could turn such annoying emotions on and off, like a tap. She'd been genuinely worried about Ronnie, but now she knew she'd recover, off went the tap. There was still a desire to see her though, to confirm her friend was alive.

“Can I see her ?” Asked Clara.

“Yes of course, though she is currently sedated.”

Clara knew a thing or two about concussion and injuries caused by violence in general. Vampires, with their unnaturally long lives, probably knew more on the subject than many doctors. Sedation was usually avoided and used only when the pros outweighed the cons. Ronnie must have been in a very bad way, even if she was alright now. Clara entered the room and wasn't worried about all the tubes stuck into her friend and all the machines she was hooked up to. She dragged a chair over to the bed and held Ronnie's hand.

“Sorry Ronnie, I should have waited for you at the stairs.” Said Clara. “Patsy got him.....She put three bullets into the bastard.”

Probably imagination, but Clara was sure Ronnie had gripped her hand. Ronnie had seemed fine....Actually not fine, but she was conscious in the van. After that, there had been a fairly rapid decline. It made sense really; no one could take a beating from the huge Korean, without suffering serious injuries.

“The doctor said you’ll be fine, Ronnie.”

No second gripping of her hand, it might have been her imagination. Clara leant over the bed and kissed Ronnie on the forehead. Clara had visited people in hospital before, invariably injured humans. She knew that someone could look at death’s door one moment and after a few days of nursing care, they’d be fine. Wounded vampires tended to be like feral cats. They found a quiet place and either healed, or they died.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” Said Clara.

Definitely another squeeze of her hand and for a fraction of a second, Ronnie’s eyelids had flicked open. Clara was happy, or at least happier than she had been, as she walked toward the hospital entrance. The toilets first though, before leaving. At one time she could have gone for days without having to pee. Now she was lucky to last three or four hours before needing a bathroom visit. It was that damn jade figurine again, ruining her bladder control, she was sure of it.

“Why do human women put up with this ?” She mumbled.

Past the nurses station and she was told the visiting hours, which were effectively when she wanted to turn up. Cyril had to be paying the private clinic, a hell of a lot of money. Into the ladies and she had the toilets to herself. A pee and Clara was washing her hands, when the whirring noise began. Part of the wall appeared to melt away and a creature was stood where the wall had once been. Not totally unlike a man, though no man had ever glowed bright yellow.

“Don’t be alarmed....I am not of this world.....I should not be here.” Said the being. “I can take you to the realm of dreams, if you wish it ?”

A God from another world, she had been warned someone awesome would eventually be coming for her. So soon though and the timing was far from convenient. Clara knew that was how life tended to be though, every damned thing arrived at the worst possible moment.

“Yes, take me there.” Said Clara.

It was alarming, as though the wall closed up, folding her and the God into it. There was a brief purple flash of light and Clara was dropping, down through a thick forest canopy. When she hit the forest floor, a few twigs and small branched landed with her. Not a bad landing, though ending up on her backside, was far from dignified. Someone she recognised was there to help her up.

“Clara, I’m so glad you came.” Said Laura. “We have a dragon and Simon is on his way, but I really don’t think we could do this, without you.”

Compliments were nice and it would be good to fight alongside Laura. Clara smiled and tried to act normal, but there was just one thing running through her mind, like a bull in a China shop. Simon was on his way.

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“Alright....Whoever or whatever you are..... Show yourself.” Simon shouted.

There was a laugh, that was more of a cackle than a natural laugh. The creature showed itself, though it didn’t seem keen on fighting him, at least not yet. Probably a Djinn, creatures Simon was beginning to hate. Creatures born of fire, you never knew if a Djinn wanted to be friends, or rip out your heart. It looked like a human male; quite a few Djinn looked surprisingly human. It walked backwards down the stairs, probably trying to lure Simon into a trap. Trap or not, Simon was determined to seek out the source of the darkness, which infested Leptis Magna.

"I recognise a Djinn when I see one." Shouted Simon. "Who do you serve?"

Some Djinn were talkative, a few were downright garrulous, but Simon was up against one who just cackled. It did create a fireball in its right hand, as if telling him to keep back a little. Down the stairs they went, with Simon always at least twenty feet behind the creature born of the smokeless flame. It cackled and waved the ball of fire around, but never once did it attempt to attack. Djinn were part of creation, if you believed in such things. To Simon, they always seemed like a waste of time and effort, by whoever had created the world.

"Talk to me.....Where are we going?" Shouted Simon.

At the bottom of the stairs, the ruins of the ancient Carthaginian city looked even more perfect, more impressive. A cobbled street went away into the distance, with almost complete buildings on either side. Simon couldn't sense the darkness as well as Niña, but he could feel it, like an invisible fog. The street wasn't right, it was too well preserved. One or two buildings had broken walls, but most looked fine. He could almost imagine children playing in the street. It wasn't right, what he was seeing didn't make sense. And all the time, the Djinn was leading him further along the cobbled street.

"You'll see them soon, Nosferatu." Yelled the Djinn.

"So, finally you can talk."

The voice had sounded female, yet the Djinn looked male. That wasn't unusual; Djinn were known to be tricksters. It cackled and speeded up the pace a little. Simon knew his senses were being tricked, when two citizens of Leptis Magna, crossed the road in front of him. It was either an impossible illusion, or he was going crazy. Neither of the phantoms reacted to his presence.

"I understand, those you serve are very clever, but why? What is the point?" Asked Simon.

"The point.....You demand a point. You need putting in your place, feeder on blood."

It sounded like an attack was about to happen, but the Djinn simply speeded up again. More strange illusions or some kind of magic from the darkest days of the city. A building that hadn't been there, suddenly appeared at the end of the street. Tall, perfect and made of a black rock that seemed to reflect his lamp one moment and absorb its light the next. A vast temple of darkness, probably home to unspeakable practises. The Djinn entered a long, dark corridor with no door. Simon hesitated to follow.

"You wanted answers, Nosferatu. You'll find them in here."

It was such an obvious trap, yet Simon had to follow the Djinn. Sometimes, even a bad direction to travel, was better than simply standing still. He entered the corridor and felt a darkness greater than he'd ever experienced before. If some thought of vampires as Satan's children, then the darkness in the ancient Carthaginian temple, had to be Lucifer himself.

"You hesitate.....Perhaps you don't want the answers to some questions." Yelled the Djinn.

The voice was now coming out of the darkness, as his lamp spluttered and went out. Vampires had an instinct for self-survival, but not as strong as a humans, or at least so it seemed. Simon only had observation to base the idea on, but it seemed to him that humans clung onto life, at the expense of others and their own dignity. He didn't want to die, or become a plaything of unimaginable dark forces, but he had no intention of going back the way he'd come.

"I still seek those you serve, foul creature." Simon shouted.

Simon walked slowly forward into total darkness, with just the Djinn's footsteps to judge the distance. He'd become so used to the darkness, that the flames temporarily blinded him. Walls of flame behind and in front and they were slowly growing, advancing towards him. The Djinn cackled, knowing it was safe in the flames. Fire would strip away its illusions to reveal its true form, but the

creature wouldn't suffer any real harm. Simon though.....He knew there was no escape. Soon he'd be screaming, as the flames stripped the flesh from his blackened bones.

"Soon you'll be gone.....Then the girl child will follow, wondering where you are." Shouted the Djinn. The creature probably meant Niña, though Juliana was brave enough and crazy enough, to risk her life looking for him. Giovanni was certain to come down those damned stairs. His bravery was only slightly larger than his ego and hubris. Simon could imagine all his friends being wiped out and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Can we come to some sort of a deal?" Asked Simon.

"Deal.....You have nothing my masters require."

As the two walls of flame engulfed him, Simon was ready for the pain. He felt uncomfortably hot and his clothes were burning away, but him, his skin.....He felt heat, but no pain. It was as if he'd walked into a furnace, yet remained impervious to the red hot flames. He'd forgotten about the snake under the skin of his forearm, of course he had. For at least two years the tiny serpent had lived there, barely moving. Clara had told him the snake's one true gift, was protection from fire, yet her words were only just coming back to him. The snake's head had come out of his skin, to snarl at the flames that surrounded him.

"I knew it.....I knew the snake would be useful one day." Simon muttered.

Maybe it was self-preservation, if he was just a pile of ash, the snake probably died. Self-interest or not, the snake shrieked defiance at the fire in the corridor and Simon lived. As for the Djinn.....Their true form tended to resemble a glowing child's doll, a crude one made out of clay. Featureless, the Djinn wasn't harmed, but it yelled in frustration.

"You should be dead.....vampire. Those I serve will now show you the meaning of pain."

Simon had witnessed some bizarre events, during close to seven hundred and fifty years of life as a vampire. The flames vanished, to be replaced by a shimmering white light. The Djinn instantly became nothing but a cloud of grey dust, which fell to the ground. The corridor walls melted away and two beings were stood there. Simon instinctively knew they were on his side and were probably the Gods from another world.

"One moment." Said one of them.

Something was happening deep below Simon's feet, in the deepest parts of Leptis Magna. The ground shook, the air seemed to tingle with ancient raw power. There was no scream, no outward sign other than ground tremors. The old darkness had gone though; Simon had felt the moment when it had ceased to exist.

"We may go now." Said the alien God. "We can take you to the realm of dreams."

"Only if you wish to go." Said the other. "Laura Selway is there and Clara Copley."

"Yes, take me there." Said Simon.

They both touched him and the world around him vanished for a few seconds. For Simon it felt like waking from a dream, rather than the other way round. The forest felt like home and he was standing under the canopy of the largest tree he'd ever seen. It seemed to go up into the sky for at least a thousand feet.

"On a clear day, you can see it touch the clouds."

Simon turned and Jack was there, though the alien Gods had gone. Jack looked pretty much as he had before he'd become the new Wiremi, keeper of the realm of dreams. There were those eyes though, that seemed to change colour every few seconds. Blue, green and brown he was used to, but gold....sometimes silver eyes. It was all going to take some getting used to. Jack was looking him up and down in a meaningful way.

"I can find you some clothes, unless you wish to remain naked ?" Asked Jack.

The flames, those dreadful red hot flames, had burned away his clothes. Simon rubbed the brown ash residue off his chest, which didn't help. The snake he'd carried under his flesh had obviously decided its task had been fulfilled, or it was hoping to find a safer host. Simon saw the snake drop from his arm and vanish into the long grass beneath the tree.

"Yes please, Jack. Some clothes would be nice."

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Simon had to be stirring things up, it was the only explanation. Giovanni hadn't seen the phantoms watching the building where most of the men slept, but Rice had. The foreman Simon had hired in Florence was good at his job and alert.

"There, just on the edge of where the light from our fire reaches." Said Rice.

Of German origin, the man's real family name was Reiss, but everyone called him Rice. A large man with muscles built up from years of using a pick, shovel and occasionally, a sword. Giovanni had a growing respect for the man.

"I see them; there must be two dozen of them." Said Giovanni.

"An hour ago there were only two." Said Rice. "Most of them have arrived since Simon and the girl went off to explore the tunnels beneath our feet."

It was an obvious conclusion, which Giovanni thought was probably right. Not that he was going to voice an agreement with Rice's theory.

"We need to arm everyone, including the two maids Juliana Colombo brought with her." Said Giovanni.

"Do you think these phantoms will attack us ?" Asked Rice.

"We need to arm everyone and get them prepared." Said Giovanni. "Have everyone build another fire, larger than the one we have. Keep them busy and.....Don't mention anything about being attacked."

"Yes sir." Said Rice.

Giovanni didn't want any of the workers killed by the creatures lurking in the darkness, nor Juliana's maids. Realistically though, they were humans and if he'd been hungry and come across any of them in a quiet alley; he'd have fed on them. They were needed, that was all. But Giovanni knew Juliana was different, Simon was in love with her, which made her special. As Simon had left with Niña, he'd made a point of telling him to keep Juliana safe.

"I'm trusting you with the most precious thing in my life, old friend."

Giovanni could find anyone, no matter how dark the night. Juliana was the heartbeat a long way from the light of their fire, too far away. He found her leaning on a pillar, in almost complete darkness. It was those dreadful scars of course and her need to hide them from sight. He deliberately let his foot hit some loose rocks, so that she'd hear him approaching.

"You shouldn't be out here alone." Said Giovanni. "They're building a larger fire in our camp; these phantoms seem worried by fire and light."

"I'm fine where I am."

Even Simon couldn't order her about and be certain she'd do as he asked. There was the option of throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her to safety, but she'd probably never forgive him.

Juliana had a pretty face before arriving at Leptis Magna and now she didn't. Giovanni didn't blame her for being angry and in a foul mood for most of the day.

"We might be attacked and.....I believe you can help if we are." He said.

"Me ! How could I possibly help ?"

“Whatever has left its presence in the temple, obviously cares whether you live or die. It saved you Juliana; it healed you when you seemed certain to die. I have no idea how, but I think it will protect you if these phantoms attack the camp. Whatever comes to protect you, will end up helping to protect us all.....But only if you’re in the camp.”

He started off using any trick to get Juliana near the fire in their camp. As he’d said the words, he realised there was sense in the words. Juliana might be so important to someone, that they’d send something powerful to protect her.

“Are you being sincere, Giovanni ? I hope this isn’t a trick.”

“Whatever comes to help you, might save us all.....I honestly believe that, Juliana.”

“Very well, I’ll return to the camp.”

Giovanni held her hand and led her through the rubble and darkness; towards the firelight in their camp.

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Niña ran along the passage, as fast as her legs would carry her. There was a slight risk of colliding with a rock in the dark, or a fallen pillar. Her night vision was good though and her lamp was behaving itself. If Simon was worried about whatever lurked on those stairs, then she was worried too. So intent on running at top speed, that she almost didn’t see the three phantoms near the entrance to the tunnels. No dropping her precious lamp, even she couldn’t see in complete stygian darkness. Niña placed her lamp on the ground and ran at the phantoms, with their vicious claws.

“Get out of my way, I haven’t time for this.” She yelled.

If the creatures were waiting for her, they were probably attacking the camp. Niña could imagine them hurting Juliana again and the others. As a relatively new born vampire, she hadn’t yet developed an ability to completely turn off her empathy and feelings of guilt. It was instinctive, letting her fangs drop and using them on the phantoms. Probably not alive in any real meaning of the word, or likely to be affected by the neurotoxin. She ignored its claws, as they dug into her upper arms. Niña opened her jaws wide and bit into what looked like the phantom’s throat. Deep went her fangs and there was some resistance. Not a living human body, but her fangs found something to penetrate. Niña bit hard and pulled back, bringing most of its throat with her fangs.

“So, I can kill you.” She muttered.

On the floor wasn’t the pile of rotting flesh she’d been expecting. It seemed her bite, or the toxin in her fangs, turned the phantoms to dust. It was there, some of it covering her shoes. A large pile of dry, grey dust.

“You’re next.” She yelled at the next phantom.

It clawed at her, ripping pieces out of her arms and shoulders. Nasty wounds that would hurt for hours and sting for days. Not debilitating though and the wounds would soon heal. She ignored the pain and bit into the creature’s throat. It became another pile of dust on the ground. Niña looked at the last phantom.

“Out of my way, or this will be really painful....I guarantee it.”

Really alive or undead, the phantom obviously feared her and feared death at her hands. It turned and vanished through the passage wall. After picking up her lamp, Niña was soon out in the open air. It was dark, though the fire in their camp wasn’t that far away. There was fighting going on and not just with the phantoms. Other creatures were there, including some that she couldn’t name. The sky was wrong too, parts of the sky to the north, looked to be on fire.

“Oh Simon, what have you unleashed ?” She muttered.

It looked like a mixture of the wild hunt and paintings she'd seen of how the artist pictured the various levels of hell. Rice was in front of the men with swords, though one of them looked to be dead. Rice was using a spade as though it was a battle axe and he was using it to good effect. There were several dead creatures on the ground in front of Rice and some reminded her of drawings of demon's, in Brother Alberti's secret library.

"No, Giovanni.....No swords, no fists.....Bite them." She shouted.

It was a battle, people wouldn't remember every detail. Anyone realising the girl Niña was a vampire, could be bribed to keep quiet. If they did talk, there wasn't much chance of them being believed. Florence was awash with rumours of this or that person being a vampire and as far as Niña knew, none of them really were feeders on blood. At least three of Juliana's cousins had been accused at one time or another. Her whole family now considered it all to be a joke, but one in very poor taste.

"Like this !" She said to Giovanni.

One of the creatures with two legs and four arms, with a head that had two small horns. A demon, at least according to several paintings she'd seen in Alberti's chambers. Her fangs went in deep and the demon screamed. It took longer to die than a phantom and didn't become a pile of ash, but the creature lying on the ground was dead, she was sure of it.

"Wonderful.....There's more to you than meets the eye." Said Giovanni.

Rice was busy with his spade and Giovanni was now using his fangs of the creatures. Where was Juliana though ? So beloved by the temple, she had to be alright. Once known, vampires rarely forget the heartbeat of a human who matters to them. Niña found Juliana and her maids in a small building where they could defend the only entrance. One of the maids was bleeding, but they were still hacking at the phantoms with borrowed blades.

"Juliana." Shouted Niña.

Niña was about to use her fangs on a phantom, when the world around her changed. The red sky that looked full of fire, became blue once again. The phantoms vanished, as did the other strange creatures of darkness and chaos. The ground under her feet shook, as though an earthquake was taking place. Juliana looked terrified and then the flash of bright light occurred. It had gone, the feeling of dread and darkness that almost defined the ruined city of Leptis Magna. As a creature of the dark, the change in the city was unsettling for Niña, though not totally unwelcome. The creatures and phantoms had gone.

"I think Simon must have won." Said Niña. "We should be alright now."

Only Juliana was frozen to the spot and unable to answer. Her maids were paralyzed too, or held in time by something Niña didn't understand. She looked up and realised everything was frozen in time, including the clouds and birds in flight.

"Niña, don't be scared." Called out Giovanni. "They've come to take us to Simon."

He could move, as could the two creatures with him. Glowing and with roughly the shape of a human, though she knew they weren't humans. They had an aura of goodness, which was so strong; it seemed to irritate her skin. The idea of Gods from another world, fell unbidden into her mind.

"We can't be here, we don't belong here." One of them said. "Simon is already on his way."

"You can go with him, if you wish." Said the other.

"Where to ?" Asked Niña.

"The realm of dreams, they'll take us to Simon." Said Giovanni.

He said it as though it was the most normal and everyday thing in the world. At that moment, most of her thoughts were about Juliana and leaving her in danger.

“Can we take everyone ?” Asked Niña.

“Your friends will be safe now.” Said one of glowing creatures.

It was madness of course, though just saying it excited her.

“Alright.....Take us to Simon.” She said.

Giovanni walked towards her and the ground beneath them became a view of a forest, seemingly far below. They dropped into that piece of sky, though Niña wasn't scared. The alien Gods weren't likely to have put so much effort into simply killing them. They fell towards the forest below.

“I remember a nursery rhyme.” Said Giovanni. “Not all of it, but part.....Below, below, where you'll find the first forest.....I think this is the first, the great forest.”

“Beautiful, though I hope we slow down before hitting the trees.” She replied.

They did, though even going through the tree branches slowly, wasn't pleasant. A few scratches and covered in dead leaves, Niña's foot touched the ground. Her clothing changed and she was wearing a simple light blue robe, as was Giovanni.

“I'm assuming.....We've arrived.” Said Giovanni.

There was a huge tree some way off, so high it seemed to touch the sky. Tiny dots were moving around the base of the huge tree. It seemed the obvious place to go. With Giovanni walking by her side, Niña walked towards the tree. It took a while to get there, though they seemed to be expected.

“I was told you were both safe.” Said Simon.

Simon was wearing a robe too, though the woman he was talking to had most of Niña's attention. She had drawn so many images of her, before meeting her, or knowing who she was.

“Clara.....I feel as though I've known you all my life.” Said Niña.

“Niña, it seems we're destined to fight together.” Said Clara. “I just hope Daniel arrives before the great feathered serpent.”

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Laura looked over the landscape, as generals throughout history, had viewed their chosen battlefield. Not that there were many options, the great rock strewn valley was just about the only open area in the great forest. The underlying rocks had come close to the surface, ensuring nothing but grass and a few tough weeds, could grow in the valley. It was a large area, probably two or three square miles. More than enough space for her army to fight Q'uq'umatz. Quite close to her, the dragon was talking to Tim and Akiva. Everyone she needed to be in the realm of dreams was there, apart from Daniel. Laura wondered if he was somewhere, worrying about a taxi fare, or the price of a railway connection service. Wherever he really had got to, he was late.

“This hillside is best for the Gudara.” Said Jack. “As you'll know they have a long hatred of the serpent God. Once they get hold of him on open ground, he'll find it hard to break free. I'm not sure how many Gudara will survive, but they'll buy you time to get your friends into position.”

“Why do they have a grudge against Q'uq'umatz ?” Laura asked.

“You really don't know ?”

“No, Jack....I don't know. I've always assumed the Gudara were part of the realm of dreams. The first vampires, brutal and primitive as the dinosaurs in my world. They were the first vampires, I know that much.”

“Oh dear, this is awkward.” Said Jack. “You can't know why the great serpent hates you then ?”

Laura was getting angry. Yes, she probably should have been more curious about certain things. On the other hand, Wiremi should have told her, a long time ago. Then Jack had made the assumption she knew, which she didn't.

“Assume I’m a complete idiot, Jack. A fool who knows nothing. Now tell me, before I go off to be crazy deity bait.....Tell me ?”

Poor Jack, his expression indicated he hadn’t intended to upset her. Not demoralising your hero on the eve of battle, had to be high on anyone’s list of things not to do.

“Sorry, Laura..... Q’uq’umatz created your world and he was very into the purity of his creation. Nothing could be allowed to exist, without his approval. As he’d created every living thing, that wasn’t an issue. The Gudara though.....As you know, they have the ability to go anywhere, in any world. You did know that ?”

“Yes, Jack.....My own Gudara has transported me to some very strange worlds.” Said Laura.

“So, you’ll understand that once they’d found your world, the Gudara arrived in large numbers. They fed on the blood of anything then, even what could be drunk from the dead. Q’uq’umatz tried to exterminate the new and unwanted addition to his world, but never succeeded. The Gudara were almost wiped out, but clung onto life with some tenacity. Eventually they became the ancestors of today’s vampires. The Gudara still hold a grudge for all those who were slaughtered. The serpent God holds a grudge because they spoiled the purity of his creation. Today....The Gudara will get a chance to punish Q’uq’umatz. It should be quite a battle.”

As Laura watched Karkengara stomp about and practise engulfing areas in flame, she tended to agree, it was going to be one hell of a battle. There was only one slight flaw in the overall plan.

“I’ll give Daniel a little longer.” She said. “Then I’ll go and lure the feathered serpent into our trap, whether Daniel is here, or not.”

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Daniel was down on his knees in the straw, which smelled of pig shit and blood. His favourite sow.....Actually Gwen’s favourite out of all their pigs, was having her piglets, farrowing as it’s properly known. Quite an old sow, though often the older mothers had the fewest problems. Daniel had named Pumpkin when she was just a tiny piglet, one not destined to be fattened up for meat. Pumpkin was having a few problems giving birth and although a God from another world was waiting for him, he refused to abandon the large female pig. Gwen was at the head end of Pumpkin, trying to keep her calm.

“She knows the last one wasn’t alive.” Said Gwen.

“I’m not letting her lose another one.” Said Daniel.

He had no problem with sending their pigs to be slaughtered for meat. It was how the small holding survived, it wasn’t a charity. He believed in a weird kind of symbiosis between them and their livestock. He and Gwen did everything possible to give the animals a good, if short, life. Then the animals provided meat and eggs, which kept the small holding solvent. Making sure Pumpkin’s piglets lived, was part of their side of the symbiosis.

“You’ll be fine.” Gwen muttered at the sow. “Daniel will look after your babies.”

Great, more pressure to deliver what he wasn’t qualified to deliver, literally. Living at the end of a long lane and in the middle of nowhere, had its good points. Not though, when you needed the local veterinarian to arrive. The local woman was good, a real character. Gwen called her Herriot, though not to her face. A Jovial lady vet from somewhere in Yorkshire, who really knew her stuff. Sadly, Herriot was on another emergency call out and might not be in Pitmedden for hours. Daniel was using his fingers and a penlight to inspect Pumpkin’s private parts. In fairness, so did the vet, when she was there.

“Oh no, the next isn’t moving.” He said. “That might mean all the piglets behind it are dead too.”

Two live and active piglets were fussing around near his knees. Pumpkin usually had seven or eight at a time, so that could well mean five or six were dead. Why ? He'd kept pigs long enough to know there was rarely a simple answer to that question. It was so unfair to Pumpkin though, she was one of the best mothers. Gwen was crying....Crap, he was crying.

"We need to leave here." Said one of the glowing creatures.

"I can't leave her like this."

Daniel wasn't sure himself, if he was talking about Pumpkin, or Gwen, or maybe both of them. The God from another world touched Pumpkin, a stroke of the poor creature's head, the way Gwen had been calming her. For all Daniel knew the alien God was simply mimicking Gwen's actions.

Something happened though, Daniel's hand felt movement.

"This one is alright, I can feel it." He said.

If only it was as easy as that. It was hard work getting Pumpkin to deliver the remaining piglets; she had to be tired out. Eventually Daniel was handling seven alive and very active piglets, with Pumpkin definitely taking an interest in her babies. Just one was dead, which wasn't good, but many times better than it could have been.

"Thank you." Said Gwen, to the glowing being.

"Yes, thank you.....Pumpkin is like one of the family." Said Daniel.

"Time can be bent, twisted and reshaped, but there are limits.....We need to leave here....Now."

Daniel was covered in dirt, blood and a lot of the fluid that had covered the piglets. They didn't seem to care though, the alien Gods. They touched him before he'd had a chance to say farewell to Gwen. One moment he was in the shed where his sows gave birth, the next he was blinking in bright sunlight. In front of him, at least fifty tough looking fighters were training, while being watched by a huge dragon.

"Don't worry.....The myrmidons are on our side." Said Tim.

"Hi Tim.....I think I'm a little late, sorry."

Daniel was about to apologise for his grubby clothes and the smell of pig shit. His clothing had been changed though and he was wearing a blue robes, with moccasins on his feet. Laura wasn't stood far away and she was looking him up and down.

"Well.....I can finally go and be feathered serpent bait." Said Laura.

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