

## Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 12 – Hampton Court Palace

**“Fresh coffee and a few more rounds of bacon sandwiches and it was like a normal Sunday morning in the house in Hornsey, or it would have been if Clara had been there, and if it hadn't been Sunday evening.”**

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The Orangery Café at Hampton Court had been a strange choice of venue. It had that school dinners feel to it, with kids eating boiled eggs and teachers grateful for even five minutes to relax with a coffee. Quite large though and being busy most of the time, made it the perfect public place to meet someone she was slightly unsure of. Laura had met a boy there once, when she'd been a normal eighteen year old girl. Only six or seven years before, yet it felt like several lifetimes ago.

“Excuse me.....Would you mind taking our picture ?”

Laura had dressed like any other tourist, right down to the faded jeans and trainers that looked brand new, just out of the box. She'd even bought an 'I Love London,' T shirt from a place near Oxford Circus Station, that morning. She looked friendly and totally harmless.

“Of course, no problem.”

About five of them, all dressed in bright clothing, lots of primary colours. There was a hint of a Scandinavian accent to the woman's voice. They had a proper digital camera rather than a phone and Laura took three pictures of them to be sure of getting a good one.

“Thank you.” Said the delighted looking tourist.

He was already there, sat at a table quite near the window. Patsy's description of him had been perfect, right down to wearing an expensive suit all the time. He was looking around, as though expecting someone to come and take his order.

“They don't come round to take your order, or at least they didn't the last time I came here.” She said. “You have to order at the counter.”

“There's no sign.” Said David Huynh

“That'd be too easy..... You obviously don't come to these sorts of places that often. I'm Laura by the way....You must be David.”

“I am.”

“I'll go up to the counter.” She said. “Can I get you a coffee ? Maybe something to eat ?”

He was looking a bit wary, almost as if she'd offered to buy him a cup of hemlock.

“Hmmm it's just.....Patsy ordered for both if us when I met her.” He said. “I'm not that keen on another sausage sandwich, or the brown sauce.”

Laura had to chuckle, it sounded just like Patsy.

“Oh dear, she probably hoped you'd drip sauce on your shirt.”

“I did.”

“You're not the first David.... Patsy can be tricky until you get to know her. I fancy a simple frothy coffee and a plain cheese roll. That alright for you ?”

“Perfect Laura....Perfect.”

Not the way she expected their meeting to begin. Laura carried a slightly grubby tray over to the table David had claimed. Two decent looking frothy coffees, a couple of cheese rolls and a few bags of junk food to fill the gaps. It was pretty much the same as the meal she'd had there, when she'd been eighteen.

"Thank you." He said. "I can see why you picked here. Lots of kids being taken around by bored and fed up teachers. The adult groups look to be all foreign tourists, who'll take no notice of us."

"Yes, we could shout and no one would take any notice." She said.

"Oh, are you hurt ? I just noticed your eye."

He rubbed an index finger against his own right eye, to show her what he meant.

"Yes, I should have checked my makeup." She said. "I have been through the wars and almost blown up. Not that you'd believe any of it if I told you."

"You mean I'd never believe you'd joined up with Akiva Yatsko ?" He asked. "Strange name by the way, though it is his real name. Or I'd never believe you've both taken up tomb robbing as a career ?"

He expected a jaw dropping moment, so she gave him one. Laura was getting better at acting and liked to think she could fool most people. The Silver Dawn obviously knew more than she was happy with them knowing. No mention of Dessie though, or the Couziniers. Most importantly they didn't seem to know about her little bit of Quid Pro Quo for Horus. Or of course, David might be playing her in some way.

"Yes David, those are the sorts of things I thought you'd never believe."

The coffee was alright , actually better than alright and chewing at her cheese roll gave her an excuse to stop talking. David seemed like a chatterer to her, the sort who can't stand silences. Thirty seconds of not talking looked to be his limit.

"We could help you, the Silver Dawn has resources, far better resources than the Psochic Order. There would be terms and conditions of course. The most important being your agreement to work solely for us."

Laura had already decided to work for the Silver Dawn. There was though, a fairly small list of terms and conditions of her own to get David to agree to.

"Alright David, I'm here and listening..... Tell me what you're offering ?" She asked.

"I took the liberty of bringing this."

A letter from the inside pocket of his expensive suit. Addressed to the house in Hornsey, using her full name. She was being offered the position of Security Manager for the Silver Dawn, at a salary with lots of noughts in it.....And there were quite a few perks. The employment agreement that required her signature talked in the usual terms about non-disclosure agreements and not working for any other similar organisations for at least a year, should she decide to leave.

"We will expect you to work exclusively for us." Said David. "Your.....Hobby with Akiva is your own concern, but no more acting as a guard for the Jake Rice, the new leader of the Psochics."

The week before had been tough and she'd arrived home to find Simon and Patsy exploring a part of the house, where there had been no part of the house when she'd left. Worst of all, the new wing of the Hornsey house was right next to her room. Laura was tired and in no mood to explain things to David.

"We never were on the side of the Psochics" She snapped. "Oh, sorry, I'm just tired."

"I need to understand Laura, if we're going to work well together.....Do you want another coffee ? And they must do something more exciting than cheese rolls ?"

"A young man bought me brownies last time I was here.....They were good."

Laura really needed eight hours sleep to get her thoughts organised, but David was back with a tray in about five minutes.

"The brownies do look good, I got us two each." He said.

"Good.....A sugar rush."

"Have you got a hangover?"

"You wouldn't believe.....Actually you probably would believe. My housemates kept me up all night, exploring."

"Exploring what?"

"So..... Do you want me to explain the relationship my vampire coterie has with the Psochics?"

"Never happy with that use of coterie, but yes.....Please explain why I got it wrong?"

"Yes we did some work for Judith, but only for the pay. There was no great loyalty to the Psochics, quite the opposite. You must have heard about the death of Magda?"

"Yes I did, and rumour has it.....You might personally have killed Sam Isaacs, the previous leader of the Psochics."

"No, that is nonsense. I do know who did it....And you really would never believe that. Vampires tend to be mercenaries, loyal as long as the pay is good. We're not humans, never forget that. We only protected Jake Rice to stop the Silver Dawn destroying the Psochics completely. Having you at each other's throats for decades is far better for us."

"That is far more Machiavellian than I imagined." Said David. "Thank you for explaining it..... Here, this part of the employment agreement isn't for the personnel file. I will need it to be signed though, when you're ready."

Another letter from the same inside pocket. Laura wondered if he might produce a white rabbit next. The letter was a secret appendix, detailing everything that could never go on a document that might turn up in a court one day, or in the hands of a human solicitor.

"Wow, you guys are thorough." She said. "I'll need to agree this with Simon and Clara, though I can't see that being a problem. As I said, we never really did pick the Psochics as being on our side."

"I will need a signature on the documents fairly quickly."

"Let me read it now and we can deal with any problems." She said. "As for agreeing it with my housemates....I can find them wherever they are."

"Of course, you have Egg of Astaroth. I hope you're keeping such a priceless artefact in a safe place."

"I am....Now eat your brownies while I read."

The egg was quietly nestled under the skin below her left breast. Laura didn't think there was likely to be anywhere safer. She'd often wondered why it had buried itself there. Perhaps there were those who could sense its presence if it wasn't hidden inside her flesh? That was a problem for another day, she read the two page document David had given her.

"I'm hoping we covered everything." He said.

"Shush."

Was it wrong to shush a guy who'd just offered her an annual salary that looked like her projected lifetime earnings at the hotel? Probably, but she was becoming more and more intolerant of chatty humans. It was all there, even mentioning the guaranteed safety of the vampires she considered as her family. Vampires used in a document she had to sign. It was a first and made her think David had probably typed out the contract of employment himself. It was all very similar to the agreement the Hornsey coterie had with Mabina. Both sides were to be considered inviolable. She didn't even have to agree to give up her private enterprises.

“Just one thing.” She said. “My activities with Akiva aren’t just something on the side to earn cash for a few of life’s little luxuries. I am obligated to a little Quid Pro Quo with someone I can’t say no to. I may require quite a bit of time off, at least for a while.”

“I can’t see that being a problem Laura. Nathalie Aurigny has already told me your official start date can be a few months before you actually start. The important thing is getting you onboard. May I ask who it is you’re obligated to ?”

Here it came, she could already imagine his reaction.

“It’s Horus.”

His face quickly went from a smile to a frown.

“Yes, very funny.....If you don’t want to tell me, you only have to say so.”

“No really, I’ve sat and talked with him, as close as I am to you, on many occasions. He brought a friend back from the dead....I really do owe him a few favours in return.”

“I am impressed Laura, hugely impressed. It may be that with such a connection....You may be the one to help our scholars with their work. We’ve tried many times to contact Horus and the other Ancient Gods of Egypt. We’ve been shunned every time. One of our most talented occultists even died in the attempt.”

“I have my own theory about why I’m useful to him. I might share it with you when I know you better.”

From the same pocket of his very expensive suit, David pulled out an expensive looking pen.

“I’m even more keen on you joining us. Will you sign right now Laura.”

“Not now, I need to see Simon and Clara first. It won’t take me long, I promise.”

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Mabina tried to never look too excited or impressed by anything, it always felt a bit tacky. They’d been underground for a few hours though, looking for the 7<sup>th</sup> gate in a labyrinth of tunnels. If it hadn’t been for Liz and her ability to sense where the gates were, they might have been stuck underground for months, maybe even years. It wasn’t just that the cavern they emerged into was beautiful, there was the relief at finally finding the 7<sup>th</sup> gate. Mabina broke a personal rule and expressed her excitement vocally.

“Oh.....Thank fuck.....I thought we’d never find the gateway.” She yelled.

“I did think the 7<sup>th</sup> would be a bit special.” Said Liz. “There is the whole mystic thing with sevens going on. The 14<sup>th</sup> gate will probably be even more impressive, and then there’s the 21<sup>st</sup>.....After this, I imagine the last gateway to the underworld will be beyond amazing.”

“I know we’re still some way off, but it looks like the obelisk is made of gold.” Said Clara.

Their lights were the only illumination in a cavern the size of several aircraft hangars. The bright LED lights reflected off the crystals, which seemed to cover the walls and the ceiling high above their heads. Crystals were reflected in crystals, which in turn were reflected...Until the entire cavern seemed to be almost alive with twinkling lights as they walked slightly downhill. In the distance was a single tall obelisk that added a golden glow to the reflected light.

“Gold marks the spot.” Said Mabina. “That has to be the gateway.”

“I’m not feeling drawn to it, but you’re probably right.” Said Liz. “It’s the only thing that could be the gateway.”

They had to find a path between stalagmites, which twinkled with purple and red crystals. They were constantly heading slightly down a gentle gradient, until they came to the shallow stream. Mabina couldn’t resist running her hand through the water.

“The water looks clean, there are even tiny fish.” She said. “Not that I’m silly enough to taste it.”

"I am, we need to fill our water bottles." Said Liz.

Mabina watched as Liz cupped her hand to bring some of the water to her mouth. She should have told her it was a stupid idea, but they really were running low on water. Besides, Liz kept telling them she was almost indestructible. There was a smile on Liz's face as she sipped the water.

"Wonderful.....Better than comes out of the tap at home."

"I just know my empty water bottles are at the bottom of the pack." Said Clara.

"Maybe we should wait an hours, just in case Liz dies." Said Mabina.

"Yes, very amusing."

It took a while to empty their packs and fill the water bottles, without accidentally catching any of the tiny fish with the water. Their rest breaks tended to be taken by accident, more than actually planned. No one had come out of anywhere to attack them and the sound of tinkling water definitely had a restful effect. Clara was fast asleep, her back against a glittering rock. Liz seemed to be resting rather than fully asleep, Mabina could see her looking downstream.

"I'm not sleepy." Said Mabina. "If you want to sleep, I'll keep watch."

"I'm fine, just a little confused. I'm still not feeling any sort of connection with the obelisk, but there is something down there though, in the distance."

Liz was pointing downstream, at the end of the cavern they could barely see. There were fewer sparkling crystals down there, more areas of shadows and complete darkness.

"We might as well try the obelisk though, now we're so close." Said Liz. "Once sleeping beauty is awake."

Clara opened her eyes and yawned, before rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She looked at them with eyes that still looked at least half asleep.

"Me ?.....I wasn't sleeping.....Just resting my eyes."

"Yeah.....Right." Said Liz.

"At least no one is trying to kill us this time." Said Clara.

"Oh crap Clara.....You know better than to say something like that." Said Liz.

"Yep, we're jinxed now.....No doubt about it." Said Mabina.

It was an easy uphill trudge to the golden obelisk, though Liz did lose her footing once and ended up squashing a bug of some kind.

"Shit.....This place has.....I'm not sure what they are." Said Liz.

"Ewww yes, like a cross between a centipede and a cockroach." Muttered Clara.

"Jinxed, fucking jinxed.....Told you so." Said Mabina.

They were probably what was causing the twinkle effect, by walking across the crystals. Mabina doubted if the bugs had ever seen humans before, or even creatures that were sort of human. Now a right foot in a hiking boot had squashed one of them, and they obviously didn't like it.

"They're everywhere." Said Clara.

"Stop stamping on them, you're just annoying them." Said Liz.

"Annoying them ! There are millions of them." Yelled Mabina. "And.....They bite, one of them just took a nip at my hand."

No good talking to Liz, she was walking towards the tall gold obelisk and seemed to have forgotten all about the mass of scuttling bugs.

"Oh, damn.....They bite hard." Said Clara. "Can't you do something Liz ?"

No good, Liz was next to the obelisk, so Mabina ran after her.

"It's a ziggurat, create in my honour, or to be more precise, to honour all the keepers who have ever kept the 21<sup>st</sup> gate closed against the forces of chaos. It's covered in a form of cuneiform I can understand, yet I've never learned. All of it praises the Unnamed." Said Liz.

"Well...Can you open it ? Those creatures are small, but there are so many of them. I think they might be able to cause serious damage." Said Mabina.

As if to emphasise the point, Clara came running up, pulling several of the bugs out of her hair.

"One bit right through my boot." She said. "Come on Liz, you're the goddess of this place, or something like that. Can't you do something before they eat us alive ?"

"You shouldn't have stamped on them, they obviously don't like it."

"Stop being awkward Liz, we only came to help you." Said Clara.

"If I change here, it will be hard to change back, I know it. Once I've taken up my duties I will be able to change at will. Here though.....Oh, it will be so hard to change back."

Stamping on them definitely caused them to attack, poor Clara's legs were covered in writhing, biting bugs. Mabina had a few on her arms, but so far at least, they seemed intent on biting Clara.

"They'll kill Clara and then us Liz.....Do something !" She shouted.

"Alright, just remember that whatever you see, is still me."

It was quite easy to ignore Liz as she changed, stomping on bugs had become essential for survival. Mabina helped Clara, by pulling angry creatures off her face. When the bugs began to disintegrate into a dry grey powder, she knew Liz was finally doing something.

"Crap Mabina.....Look at her." Said Clara. "I'm glad she warned us....The size of... that thing."

"It's still our friend, I think this place must be doing something to her."

The creature that had been Liz was now three times the size Liz had ever been, perhaps four times. Whatever had happened to her as part of the change, seemed to break the laws of physics. The monster beginning to roar at the bugs, was mostly body. A body with black undulating skin. Many arms, far too many to count in the circumstances, and at least four thick legs. Every arm ended in tentacle fingers, which were all vibrating. It was the fingers which seemed to be creating the ever growing growling noise.

"They're dying, she's killing them all." Shouted Clara.

"Not all of them, some are running....."

No use trying to even shout any longer, the roaring noise was loud enough to hurt her ears. Huge numbers of the bugs were forming a growing layer of dust on the ground. Some were running away from the monster that been Liz, and the noise it was making. They were running downstream, following the shallow stream. When the roaring stopped, the slaughter of the bugs was over. There was an instinct to help Liz, but also a visceral fear of getting too close to the monster.

"I have done what I can."

Said a voice that seem to come from a creature no wholesome or good God had created. The voice was that of an abomination, a creature whose mere presence caused an offence to creation. It was also the voice of her friend. Mabina forced herself to move closer.

"You did it Liz..... Are you alright ?"

Oh, so hard to actually look at the face of that....Thing. For a moment Mabina thought she might unconsciously open her bladder, as that inhuman face looked at her. Mabina had seen some sights over the many centuries she'd existed, but that dreadful, ungodly face.

"Leave me, I need to change back."

Mabina needed no second telling. Clara joined her, as they setup camp on the far side of the stream. They heard the screams as Liz turned back into her human form. By the time Mabina checked on her again, Liz was back to looking as she usually looked.

"I'm still vomiting up sticky black vomit." Said Liz. "Pools of the damn stuff.....I'll soon be ready to travel again. We need to go downstream, I'm now certain of it."

"The surviving bugs ran that way."

"I know, but I doubt if they'll bother us again. Even what seem mindless creatures, aren't that stupid."

Clara had their camp dismantled, folded and in their packs by the time Mabina got back to her.

"Is Liz alright ?" She asked.

"Yes, fit enough to travel.....As for what we both saw....."

"Supposing she gets to the 21<sup>st</sup> gate and decides we're her enemies ?" Asked Clara.

It was a terrible question, far too dreadful to be answered until Mabina had thought it through. For now she picked up her pack and ignored it. They found Liz waiting by the stream and then followed her as she headed downstream.

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Simon had enjoyed finding and exploring the four new rooms with Patsy, though he did think it might all be a waste of time. Everything looked very nice once it had been touched and the dragon creature with the head of a lion, made friendly purring sounds when stroked. There was a simple truth though, even if Patsy might not want to hear it.

"We've looked at, pressed and thumped everything." He said. "All those rooms and none of it does anything, nothing useful that is. A purring dragon is nice, but.....It's all basically useless. Then of course, there's the problem of the rooms with ghosts in them, or wraiths, or whatever those people are."

"They seem to stay where they are." Said Patsy.

"Weird unwanted guests are still weird unwanted guests, even if they're quiet and well behaved."

He didn't want to stamp on her enthusiasm, but the dragon creature from the crate didn't seem to have given them anything worthwhile.

"I must admit to being a bit disappointed." Said Patsy. "It does give you some nice extra rooms for guests. If you can think of a way to explain the weird views from the windows."

"Or that the room they're in might vanish while they're in it." He said

"Or strange scruffy ghosts might visit you in the night."

They were on a roll and a lot of laughter led to a tickling fight and some good old fashioned snogging in the kitchen. There were no clocks in their strange new annex to the house and Simon rarely wore a watch. As he looked in the fridge, hoping to find the basics for a quick Sunday lunch, he noticed the time.

"Wow, it's seven in the evening." He said. "No wonder I feel hungry. I know it's the lazy option, but how about my famous bacon sandwiches and anything else I can find in the fridge ?"

"Sounds good to me.....I'd better call my mum or she'll worry."

Patsy was the only one of them to use the landline in the hallway. He heard her pick it up and begin talking to her mum. They hadn't slept much the night before. Even a couple of hours on the mattress in the spare room had turned into sex, rather than sleep. Simon felt tired as he checked use by dates on anything in the fridge that didn't require cooking.

"A large pack of bacon.... Check." He muttered. "And we've some soft cheese with garlic and a jar of olives....We have a feast."

There was even some French bread that hadn't gone too hard to chew. Patsy returned as he was putting half a pack of bacon in the frying pan.

"How's Evie? I hope you gave her my love."

"Oh, my mum still has her crush on that nice Simon.....The neighbours think Zeus attacked their dog."

"Mabina rarely lies about her skills. I suspect Zeus is a little extra protection for Evie. Is that a bad thing?"

"It might be if I have to explain a dead burglar to the police."

"Talk to Mabina when she gets back, but personally.....I feel better knowing you have Zeus in the house."

"Oh, you old romantic."

They were two cups of coffee and several bacon sandwiches later, when there was the sound of something, actually several somethings, being dropped in the lounge.

"Only me, don't panic.....If anyone is actually home?"

"We're in the kitchen Laura." He yelled.

Laura had looked better and she looked very tired. Not that Simon was silly enough to tell her. He'd learned long ago that women didn't react well to such well-meaning honesty.

"Oh, coffee....Brilliant." Said Laura, as she poured a cup.

"Sit down, I'll put more bacon in the pan." He said.

"The garlicky cheese thing is good." Added Patsy.

Fresh coffee and a few more rounds of bacon sandwiches and it was like a normal Sunday morning in the house in Hornsey, or it would have been if Clara had been there, and if it hadn't been Sunday evening.

"So Laura, did you find whatever it was you went looking for?" Asked Patsy.

"Yes, but like so much else in my life at the moment, none of it seemed to make sense. I told Tim I'm a vampire by the way, though he already had his suspicions. I told him while we were staying in Jerusalem."

"Wow, do you have to kill him now?" Asked Patsy.

"Oh, definitely." Said Simon. "Can we come and watch?"

"You pair of.....Did Mabina put you up to this?"

"No, we're crazy without her influence." Said Patsy. "How did Tim react?"

"Fine, I think. He told me that he loved me and.....I think I told him I...."

"Oh dear Laura, did you use the L word?" Asked Patsy.

"Come on, guy in the room." Said Simon. "Say what you did Laura and then no further mention of it, please."

Poor Laura, her face looked like she was going through root canal work.

"I told him I think far too much of him to kill him....That I'd miss him too much."

"Wow, steamy stuff." Said Simon.

"Leave her alone Simon, I can understand why she said that." Said Patsy.

Simon would never understand women, even after nearly eight hundred years of trying. Laura looked happier though, for getting it off her chest.

"Come on then, I'm dying to know." Said Laura. "Why do we have another set of rooms on my landing?"

"It was the dragon statue in the crate." Said Patsy.

“One of Walter & Emily’s crates.” Said Simon. “So far at least, the rooms don’t seem to be of any use.”

“I’d ask them for you, but I’m beginning to doubt everything they say.” Said Laura. “Why were you two moving furniture about in the early hours.”

The change of direction caught him unawares, but Patsy had obviously understood. She did blush very easily for a woman who dated a vampire.

“Oh, that wasn’t.....We slept in the spare room above your bedroom.”

“I see, coitus very noisius.....No problem, but there is a sofa bed in the lounge.” Said Laura.

“More coffee ?” Asked Simon.

“Oh yes, then I must see these useless rooms of yours.” Said Laura.

“Where’s Tim by the way ?” Asked Patsy.

“I left him in Jerusalem, I’ll be back there tonight. I only came to London to meet David Huynh from the Silver Dawn.”

“Why ? Is he still alive after your meeting ?” Asked Simon.

“Yes, very much so. They’ve offered me a job.”

Simon rarely had the moments when life felt like a dream, or when dreams felt like real life. There was a sense of unreality about the idea of Laura working for The Order if the Silver Dawn.

“What would you be doing for them ?” Asked Patsy.

“Oh Patsy, the salary is brilliant.....They want me to be their Security Manager. I need Simon’s blessing of course and Clara’s..... What do you think Simon ?”

Why not ? It had been a fairly surreal few days and he had no doubt that whoever Laura worked for, at heart she’d always be Laura. He crossed himself and tried to look serious.

“You have my blessing child, go fourth and enjoy yourself.....Come on.... First we’ll show you the room with the scruffy people in it.”

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There was no mistaking the pull of the real gateway, now that they were getting quite close to it. It was like a beacon in Liz’s mind, a very insistent beacon.

“The problem is the countless generations of people who’ve existed since the gates were put in place.” She said. “The pyramids were built by a civilisation wanting to add their own touch to the gate. Here someone built that ludicrous ziggurat. All trying to shout me, me, me at the universe and the Gods, when really the Gods don’t give a crap about them.”

“Is it me, or is she being unusually grouchy today ?” Asked Clara.

“No, it’s not you, she’s pretty bad.” Said Mabina.

“Sorry.....It’s all adding to our problems, slowing us down.” Said Liz. “Here.....We need to enter this hole in the cavern wall.”

“Really.....That small hole ?” Asked Clara.

“I’m afraid so, we’ll need to push our packs in front of us.” Said Liz.

“I just hope we don’t meet bugs coming the other way.” Said Mabina.

They didn’t, though getting all their gear through the narrow passageway was hard and tiring work. The chamber on the other side was another full of reflective crystals, which seemed to magnify the light from their lamps.

“Now..... That has to be the gate.” Said Mabina.

“It is, and no one has felt the need to add their own crap to it.” Said Liz.

Two simple stone uprights, with a lintel on top. There wasn’t even any carving on the rough stones that formed the 7<sup>th</sup> gate.

“So much power, even I can feel it.” Said Clara. “How old are these gateways Liz ?”

“They were placed here once there were souls to carry to the underworld. How many years ago that is ?.....That is beyond my knowledge, but it was a very long time ago.”

The bugs knew her now, they knew she was death to them. The survivors were keeping their distance at the far side of the chamber. Liz approached the gate and felt something, almost a guiding intelligence.

“This gate is different.” She said.

“In what way ?” Asked Mabina.

“I’m not sure, it seems to be.....Aware of our presence. No matter, we have no other option. We have to use the gate.”

“Should we have our weapons ready ?” Asked Clara.

“It can’t hurt. Stay close to me and be ready.”

Liz felt a definite presence, an intelligence examining her as she activated the gateway. On the other side it was quite dark, but there was a moon in the sky they all recognised.

“Not in a cave and we’re somewhere on planet Earth.” Said Mabina. “It might not sound much, but I’m immensely grateful none the less.”

Behind them the gateway was different, the stones more crude and worn. They were in a clearing covered in grass, which was surrounded by trees. They’d all noticed the figure in the darkness, but Clara mentioned it first.

“A fellow vampire, I can sense it.” She said. “One known to us all now that I look a little harder. Though why she should be here.....”

“It’s.....How on earth ?..... It’s Laura.” Said Liz.

Sat in the dark, on top of a small pile of bags, it was definitely Laura. Their lights were causing her to shield her eyes, as they moved closer.

“I was asleep, I’ve been here a while.” Said Laura. “I have no idea where this place is, he sort of dumped me here and told me to wait.”

“Who dumped you here ?” Asked Liz.

“Horus of course, I needed to ask Clara about something. The bags are full of extra things I thought you might need. There’s food too, I brought you some decent food.”

“Oh my darling Laura.” Said Clara. “You always were and always will be, my favourite child.”

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“I’d love to stay tonight, but.....”

“I know Patsy; your mum will go ballistic if you vanish for another night.” Said Simon.

“And I’ve got work tomorrow, with two hours of college afterwards.”

“I do understand.....We’ll just have to move Chinese food and sex night to Tuesday.”

Patsy playfully thumped him on the chest, before running through the rain to the Uber cab. He waited for her to wave as the cab pulled away, and of course he waved back. He knew that a good part of her reluctance to stay another night was a growing unease about the dragon creature and the rooms it had created. Laura hadn’t helped.

“No, you can’t just leave the door open to all this. The door needs nailing shut.....And maybe bricked up too.”

Her reaction when they’d shown her the rooms wasn’t what he’d expected and it had an effect on Patsy. The two of them were best friends after all and there was a lot of mutual trust. Simon didn’t think there was anything that threatening about the extra rooms.

“Though I might be wrong.” He muttered.

He turned off all the lights that weren't on timers and headed upstairs to go to bed. He was tired, yet something kept him walking up the stairs until he was stood in front of that door again, the door which was new and led to impossible rooms. Nailing it shut seemed extreme, but there was a heavy old hall cupboard on the landing below. Shoving that in front of the door would be fairly easy.....

"No, I refuse to be infected by Patsy's.....Paranoia." He muttered.

Just one last look though, to satisfy himself nothing unpleasant was going on in the new rooms. Simon opened the first room and nothing had changed. Still the same woman doing something in a sink, while a man looked out of the grubby window. The children in ragged clothes seemed to going through the same series of movements in their play. Whoever or whatever they were, the people in the room felt like a recording stuck on repeat.

"Harmless though."

The rooms and the hallway always looked dimly lit, though the gas mantles were only in the four best rooms. Everywhere else it was if a hidden source of light permeated everything, but only with a very dim light. Simon entered the room with the dragon creature and couldn't resist stroking its leonine head.

"You feel like a friend rather than a foe.....If only you could talk."

It hadn't moved while Patsy was there and had remained as a statue when Laura had touched it. Now it jumped off the desk and walked straight through the wall to his right. There was a bookcase with one huge tome sticking out slightly further than the others. They'd looked over the rooms all the previous night though, pressing and shoving at anything that could be pressed or shoved. The massive ancient book hadn't been there then, he'd have sworn to that. Of course he pushed the book and part of the wall swung open.

"Here's where I become poor Simon, who so tragically went missing, never to be seen again."

It was a small room and everything looked clean and tidy, rather than another dusty hallway. The dragon creature had found a table to jump up onto, right under the single window.

"No, it can't be !" He yelled.

The view was perfect, yet it was making him distrust his own sanity. That view was one he knew very well and nearly eight hundred years hadn't distorted the memory. It was a view of the bridge over the river, of the side of the church, of the moonlight twinkling through trees. It was the view from the window of his bedroom in Giovanni's house. Simon stroked the dragon creature, causing it to rub its head against his shirt.

"Is showing me this madness your work ?"

No answer, he hadn't expected there would be one. Out of the corner of his left eye he saw a movement, a movement so small a human would have missed it. There was a mirror on the wall, quite an ordinary looking mirror. Everything in the room looked to be Victorian, maybe Edwardian. Simon was no expert, but he had lived right through the reign of both monarchs, and many others besides. The mirror looked older, much older.

"Now I know I really am insane."

As he moved closer he knew the lamp lit room with the three people finishing a meal. It was Giovanni and the girl who seemed to be their cook, cleaner and confidant. All in exchange for three decent meals a day and a comfortable bed. Simon knew the man Giovanni was yelling at, it was him. They used to row a lot in those days and Simon noticed his voice used to be harsher then, far more aggressive. As always, Niña used to move between them, offering drinks and the occasional kind word to soothe a wounded ego. If it hadn't been for her, they might have eventually killed each other. The scene looked so real, the words being spoken were so clear. Simon carefully moved his

index finger closer and closer to the glass. At about a quarter of an inch away, little sparks began to come off the glass and painlessly hit his finger.

“I wouldn’t do that old friend.....Not yet !”

Simon turned and there was Giovanni, he was even wearing those ridiculously expensive boots. There was a lack of clarity though, as though his old friend was a ghost. The image vanished before he could say anything in reply.

“Oh, no Giovanni..... Does this mean you’re dead ?” He muttered.

Giovanni had always mixed a rash boldness in fights with having two left feet. Bravado and clumsiness combined were a fatal combination for someone employed as an assassin for the Medici. Luckily there really did seem to be a deity who looked after clumsy vampires. Giovanni had survived intact from some dangerous encounters that would have killed a man with ten times the skill. To think that his old friend might be dead.....

“Sleep.....It’ll all seem better in the morning.” He muttered.

Simon didn’t wedge the door closed, or push the hall cupboard up against it. He went to the bedroom he shared with Clara and undressed, before falling naked onto the quilt. Within seconds he was fast asleep.

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