

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 14 – In The Dark

“She’d seen the plans for the chateau, the Psochics seemed to have an inside man placed with the Silver Dawn, perhaps more than one. There were two automated gun turrets at the front of the house, though Laura couldn’t spot them. She did spot the domed building on the roof, which held ground to air missiles. There were rumours the defence technology used had been put together by the same people who did the White House and Area 51.”

»

Unpacking their caving lamps and hooking up the batteries didn’t take long. As they looked around the rather grey and uninviting cavern, Liz was fairly sure where they were.

“I don’t mind being underground again.” Said Clara. “Be nice to be away from direct sunlight for a while. Just until the sunburn finishes healing.”

“We might be in the dark for a while.” Said Liz. “This might be one of the outlying regions of Neter-khertet. A touching point perhaps between that world and ours. I won’t be sure until we get to the 10th gate.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” Said Mabina. “It means we’ll be in complete darkness until we get to the final gateway. And we’re likely to meet creatures who have no fear of vampires.”

“Where the hell are we ?” Asked Clara.

“I’ll know for certain once I see the 10th gate.” Said Liz. “I’d rather not say too much until I’m sure. We need to start being careful though, extra special careful.”

The air didn’t taste right, another clue that she was right. Liz could still walk at a decent pace, while carrying a heavy load. There was still a vague feeling of breathlessness though and Clara’s breathing sounded a little laboured.

“We should move more slowly.” Said Liz. “We need to let our bodies acclimatise to the air down here.”

“Is there less oxygen ?” Asked Mabina.

“If I’m right, just about everything in the air will be a little different.” Said Liz.

“A few facts and a little clarity right now, would be nice.” Said Clara.

“All in good time Clara.....I need to be certain.”

The cave system was more like a maze than anything natural. Liz could find the way though, the next gate was letting her know where it was. Like an insistent child, it almost seemed to be calling her name over and over again. Probably just her mind having trouble translating a language she didn’t understand. It really did sound as though the gate was shouting ‘Liz,’ two or three times a minute.

“All the tunnels look the same.” Said Clara.

“Don’t worry, I’m being shown the way.”

Liz had expected to spend the last two or three gateways in the constant darkness of the outer underworld, but half the gates! If she was right, they were in the realm of Osiris.

“Perhaps he’s punishing me for something.” She muttered.

“Who is punishing you ?” Asked Clara.

“I’m still not sure.....Not far now.”

They had to crouch to get through one series of tunnels. Crouching was fine for a while, but after a mile or so, her back had a perpetual ache. All the time there was little in the way of colour or features in the tunnels. Always flat rough walls of a uniform dull grey.

“You must be right Liz, this place doesn’t smell, look or even vaguely feel like our world.” Said Mabina.

“Please....Tell me where we fucking are ?” Yelled Clara.

“Most religions have some sort of underworld, a place where the dead are sent, or go. There is usually an outer area of the underworld. Some call it limbo or purgatory, a state between life and death. Occultists often refer to it as the edge of the abyss.” Said Liz. “The whole kingdom of the dead is ruled by Osiris and called Neter-khertet. According to the ancient religions of course, others might argue about that. I believe we’re in the Limbo part of that realm, still quite close to where it touches the world of the living.”

“So we’re not in our world anymore ?” Asked Clara.

“If I’m right, we are most definitely no longer in our world. I just need to see the gate.”

Another section of caves that required a lot of crouching and even going along on their hands and knees for a while. It was almost a relief to enter the final cave and see the 10th gateway, almost.

“We’re there.” Said Liz. “Past this gate and there is no return. We’ll be in constant darkness and the only way out is for me to reach the 21st gate. I can then take us all back to London.”

“No more gorgeous Greek Islands.” Muttered Mabina.

“I’m hoping neither of you take me up on the offer, but you do have a last chance to change your minds.” Said Liz. “We can go back to the last gate. I can activate it and take you back to that wonderful island near Rhodes. Then I’ll carry on alone.”

“So tempting Liz, but no. You’re stuck with me.” Said Clara. “I just wish the gateway was a bit more.....Inviting.”

“A chance to see Duat.....You’re stuck with me too.” Said Mabina.

The gateway had a look of Stonehenge about it and other prehistoric sites. Two upright stones, with a lintel on top. Long tall uprights that had to be thirty feet in height, topped by an equally massive lintel. No prehistoric engineers could have lifted any of the vast stones. The ominous parts of the gate were the skulls.

“Nothing says beware, you’re about to enter hell, quite as well as piles of skulls.” Said Mabina.

“A little crude maybe, but effective.” Said Liz.

Each upright had a pile of skulls at its base. Not real skulls, unless they were from a race of giants. Huge stone skulls, the work of a brilliant sculptor by the look of them. To add to the overall effect, the lintel was topped by several even larger skulls.

“Osiris isn’t the most welcoming of Gods.” Said Liz. “Or the most forgiving. We need to be careful of our words once we’re through the gate. Nothing that could be taken as being disrespectful.”

“No slagging off the Ancient Egyptian Gods.....I get it.” Said Clara.

Liz was about to activate the gate, when there was the sound of running feet. The two huge dogs appeared to come out of the cave wall, snarling, their jaws running with saliva. Clara and Mabina held up their huge antique weapons, though Liz instinctively knew the creatures hadn’t been agitated by them.

“No..... They won’t attack.” Shouted Liz. “They’re mine, or they will be. Created by Anubis, the defender on tombs. They’ve been attacked.....See, one has wounds.”

Huge doglike creatures with huge jaws and long pointed ears. One had a nasty gash across its face, though the wound wasn't bleeding. Liz patted the creatures as though they were domestic pets and felt them relax.

"This one should heal." Said Liz. "Someone else has been this way.....As I said, not everyone wants to see us reach the final gate."

Clara actually petted one of the creatures, though Mabina didn't seem keen. Once the guardians of the gate were calm and settled, Liz put her hand against one of the lintels.

"Ready."

Clara waved her hand in the general direction of the huge stone arch.

"Get on with it Liz, before I change my mind."

~ ~

Akiva Yatsko dropped the strong silver alloy chains on the floor. Everything ended up on the floor. Probably a health hazard, though eventually they'd have to find another abandoned apartment. Then all the crap could be left behind. Not the chains though, they were far too useful.

"They can go back on again just as easy." He said.

Walter and Emily Couzinier looked terrified and instantly vanished.

"I told you.....I knew they'd do that." Said Laura. "Now we'll have to wait for them to remember they're stuck here, locked into this place and stuck with us, whether they like it or not."

There were days when Akiva liked to annoy Laura, but not today. Like her, he wanted to find out about their next favour for Horus, and get on with it. He no longer believed half the tales the Couziniers told them, and he no longer wanted their company. Once the dead tomb robbers had served their purpose, he intended to have them removed by a skilled exorcist he knew.

"Walter.....Emily." He shouted. "It's no use; we're all saddled with one another until all this is over. Eventually you will have to talk to us."

Nothing, just the occasionally fleeting image of the ghostly pair, as they hurtled through the apartment at speed.

"We'll have to ignore them for a while." He said. "Anyone want more coffee?"

"My turn.....If that's alright?" Asked Tim. "I could clean up the kitchen a bit too, if you don't mind?"

"No, not at all. I've never seen the attraction of cleaning and tidying myself, but I can watch others doing it for hours."

A minute after Tim had gone into the kitchen, there was the sound of running water and the smell of citrus washing up liquid. Akiva was beginning to warm to Tim Chance.

"You've got a keeper there." He told Laura.

"He normally hates housework." She said. "But he probably doesn't fancy a dose of food poisoning from the kitchen."

"Fair enough."

It took quite a while for the two ghosts to realise there was no escape from being bound to the apartment and its occupants. Tim had brought in coffee and the entire apartment was smelling much better, by the time Walter and Emily were stood quietly, just behind the sofa. Akiva smiled at Laura and ignored the long dead tomb robbers for another quarter of an hour.

"So..... Which of you is going to give us the next quest?" He asked.

"We could tell you a pile of rubbish.....There was no need to use the chains." Said Walter.

Akiva picked up the chains, giving them a good rattle. He enjoyed seeing the ghosts flinch.

"You lied to us and tried to get us killed." Said Laura. "There had to be a punishment of some kind. There are probably worse punishments than those chains."

"There are, trust me." Said Akiva. "I'm told the shrieks of spirits thrown into the abyss, are truly terrible to hear and carry on for eternity."

"Alright..... We're sorry." Said Emily. "I'll tell you what your next piece of Quid Pro Quo will be, but you won't like it. Dangerous, your human friend will need toughening up a bit."

"Let me worry about him." Said Laura. "Tell me about the next quest. Keep it honest and remember how much the chains hurt, if you're tempted to lie."

Akiva took notes, even though he had a pretty good memory. Tim just sat there, a constant look of surprise on his face.

"You're looking for something that once belonged to Thoth, though it was once missing for centuries. A sacred Ankh, the one he's carrying in all the carvings." Said Emily. "Most Ankhs are just for display, harmless pieces of sacred decoration. Not his though, not the original."

Akiva had to ask the obvious.

"What does it do?"

"I've had a bit of a run in with Thoth before." Added Laura. "It was quite unpleasant."

"He's the God of Wisdom, science, the arts and much more besides." Said Walter. "The Ankh is said to grant the bearer the wisdom of the Gods and the hands of an artist. Like most artefacts which claim to grant Godlike abilities, there is a sting in the tail."

"Tell them Walter, no holding anything back this time." Hissed Emily.

"Yes, tell us Walter." Said Laura.

"Best if I tell you a bit of history about the Sacred Ankh of Thoth." Said Walter. "Roman soldiers recovered it from a tomb near Luxor, though the exact details aren't known. It vanished for a while, until being listed in the personal property of Pope Urban the VIII. He was a very clever man according to the history books and a renowned patron of the arts. He lost the support of the people though and when he died, an angry mobbed stormed his residence. The Ankh became lost in the world of thieves and vagabonds for a while."

"I'm picking up an idea of the sting in the tail." Said Tim. "Pride before the fall, being a victim of your own hubris maybe? Am I close?"

"Very close, but let Walter continue." Said Emily.

The two ghosts seemed to have forgotten their animosity. Walter seemed to be enjoying showing them how good his memory was, and the depth of his knowledge.

"The Ankh was definitely owned by a member of the British royal family, Charles the 1st no less. The Psochics kept excellent records, which I was allowed to see, and the unfortunate Charles owned the Ankh right up to his execution. If anyone can be said to truly own anything touched by the Gods. Charles was a clever man, until his head left his shoulders."

"The side effect of the Ankh is obvious now." Said Laura.

Emily was silently clapping her hands and jumping about like an excited toddler.

"Let me tell them Walter."

"Alright my dear, they might guess, but tell them."

"The Ankh gives Wisdom and the skills of an artist." Said Emily. "It also massively improves the luck of whoever owns it. At some point the luck will be reversed..... Though when that happens seems quite random. There are rumours that Genghis Khan briefly carried the Ankh into battles. He's also rumoured to have given it away at just the right moment."

"Rumours dear, just rumours." Said Walter. "Ownership by Genghis Khan has never been verified, unlike it being in the occult collection of Adolf Hitler for many years."

"Really....The Adolf Hitler?" Asked Tim.

"There has only ever been one Adolf Hitler." Said Emily. "His love of the occult is general knowledge."

"Talk to your new friends in the Silver Dawn, they will confirm it." Said Walter.

Akiva believed Walter, there was no point in such an elaborate lie. If Hitler hadn't owned the Ankh, he knew the chains would soon be back on his wrists again. Plus Adolf Hitler.....If ever there was an example of luck being suddenly reversed.

"I assume we're going to recover the Ankh from a secret Nazi vault somewhere?" He asked.

"You might think so and much of Hitler's collection did wind up in the hands of private collectors with a.....Similar political leaning as their Führer. The Ankh was actually spotted by a team from the British museum. It was on public display after the war, but as it was once owned by such a man. The case it was in was a constant target of attacks. The Ankh was put into their vaults, where it has remained, undisturbed for decades."

"Well..... It'll be nice to be back in London again." Said Laura.

"Tough job though, getting at something in the vaults of the British Museum." Said Tim.

"I'm sure you'll manage." Said Emily. "You all seem very.....Versatile."

"Is that it Walter, the last job for Horus?" Asked Laura.

"Yes, I'd like to know that too." Said Akiva.

Akiva rattled the chain again, just to encourage a little honesty.

"I'm not supposed to say." Said Walter.

"Idiot!" Snapped Emily. "There's one more task for you after recovering the Ankh, but Horus will tell you about that himself. You'll never be completely free of him though, if he needs your services."

"Like the army." Muttered Akiva. "You can always be called up again, if the crap hits the fan."

~ ~

Simon had visited the strange room with the mirror a few times. At first the experience had felt like something too personal to share, but he'd worked out a theory about all the hauntings in the new rooms in the Hornsey house.

"I don't think any of it is real Patsy."

While the cat was away and all that....Simon did feel a bit guilty about Patsy being there nearly every night while Clara was away. They were curled up together on the sofa, watching a dreadful film neither of them was really interested in. Patsy turned the sound right down on the TV.

"So what are all those people then?" Asked Patsy.

"A memory of a kind, held there by the strange dragon statue from the crate. I might be wrong, the memories might be part of the old building we see.....But the statue activates them. I'm completely certain of that."

"Can I be honest?"

"When aren't you? Go on."

"It all sounds a bit of a leap from seeing the same scruffy group of people a few times."

She was right of course. He hadn't told her about seeing Giovanni and Niña though. It all still felt a bit too personal to share, but he had to convince her.

"I've been having my own version of the haunting." He said. "I've seen Giovanni and the girl Niña. They were sat having a late meal, in the rooms I remember so well. They looked as real as you do now."

"You didn't mention that before."

He kissed her cheek.

"Sorry, it just felt a bit too private to share."

"That's alright..... Show me now though. Show me this haunting from your past."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Normally Simon didn't bother keeping the house that warm, vampires tended not to feel the cold until it was about minus five. Patsy was constantly chilly though, one of those people who reached for the heating controls on cool summer mornings. The house had to be the same temperature as the tropics, until they reached the landing where the mystery door stood open.

"Wow, tell me I'm not imagining that chill breeze." Said Patsy.

"You're not, I can feel it too. I've felt it other times, but not as bad as this."

He held her hand and took her past the rooms they knew were full of strange apparitions.

"I need to wake up the statue." He said.

Simon breathed on the statue, trying to warm up the cold golden metal of its body. His body temperature was cooler than that of a human, but hopefully warm enough. A little breath, coupled with some stroking and the dragon statue began to move.

"You're becoming an expert at that."

"I come and watch through the mirror every night. It's become a bit of an addiction Patsy."

"What mirror?"

"You'll see."

The books he needed to press were never there when he followed the dragon into the room with heavy old books on the shelves. He hoped the dragon wasn't a trickster, about to make him look crazy or a liar.

"Any moment now....."

The three massive books seemed to arrive out of nowhere. Still covered in dust, they'd probably looked the same for countless centuries. All had titles written in Latin, but he knew which one to push. As Patsy had said, he was becoming an expert at it.

"Wow, another room..... Do you think there are others?" Asked Patsy.

"Probably, there might be a room for a memory of yours too, I don't know. For all we know there might be hundreds of hidden rooms, maybe thousands."

He ignored the window with the view he knew so well, he'd show her that later. Simon went straight towards the mirror and they were there, as they always were. Patsy actually gasped as she saw the room on the other side of the mirror.

"I know them from the pictures, but to see them.....Moving about....."

"I bought the mirror for Niña. I hung it on the wall at just the right angle for her to use for her self-portrait." He said. "Glass mirrors were still rare then, the damn thing cost me a fortune."

"You must have cared for her a great deal."

No mistaking the edge in Patsy's voice, though he still couldn't understand her jealousy of a long dead girl he'd never shared a bed with.

"We both did.... Giovanni was always bringing her something to make her happy. Look.... There he is, in those expensive boots of his."

"Where are you?" Asked Patsy.

"I'm not sure, it appears to be a repeating loop of just one night out of so many. I might have been out on a little business for the Medici, or I might be resting in my room. I think there might be a way to find out, if you don't mind being.....A sort of insurance policy?"

She was giving him the look again, the one that seemed to say she'd much prefer a normal boyfriend who didn't do weird stuff, or drink hot fresh blood to survive.

"I can step into the recording Patsy, I'm certain of it."

He hoped his own enthusiasm might draw her in, but if anything, she looked more worried and miserable.

“This is why you brought me up here, isn’t it Simon Atherton ?”

Fuck, she’d used his full name. Had Clara taught her that trick to use at just the right moment ? He hoped not, or the implications were terrifying.

“I wanted you to see them Patsy. I’ve put my arm through the mirror and they took no notice. I think it must be like the other rooms. As long as I don’t actually touch them, they won’t know I’m there. I can see that life again Patsy, a time that was so important to me. I just need you to watch, in case I get stuck in there.”

“Me.....I’ve got no superhuman powers Simon. How would I get you out ?”

“You can go for help. Laura is into a lot of weird stuff and has some really useful contacts in the world of.....Trust me, if anyone can get me out of being stuck in a haunting, it’s Laura.”

“Then wait for Laura to come home.” She snapped.

He’d offended her and only had a vague idea of how. Luckily pissed off girlfriends could have been his speciality subject on a quiz show. Contact was good and hugs were even better. He hugged her and kissed the side of her neck.

“Did you see the view from the window ?” He asked. “Giovanni and I fell off that bridge quite a few times, messing about when we were drunk. Luckily the river is deep enough to break your fall and vampires are hard to drown.”

He felt her relax and knew she was going to agree to be his backup plan.

“Alright Simon, go into your past if you must. Get stuck in there though.....And I might just leave you there.”

“It’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

He’d pushed his arm through the mirror and waggled it about before. It felt silly, but the two people he’d known so well in 13th Century Italy, didn’t seem to notice anything was happening. He’d felt a pull, a knowledge that he could follow his arm into that room in Italy, if he wanted to, if he was crazy enough.

“Here I go.”

“Good luck.”

“Oh, can I borrow your phone ?” He asked. “I want to try something.”

He rarely carried his phone about when he was at home, but Patsy kept hers on her all the time. She handed it to him, before kissing him.

“I’m curious now.... You have to go.” She said.

“Anything weird happens, contact Laura.”

Simon put his arm into the mirror and let his entire body follow it through, into that weird loop, the haunting of his old life. He’d been called Piero then of course, Piero Rossi.

“Oh, you cook so well little Niña.” Said Giovanni. “Ahh, if I was the marrying kind.....”

The girl chuckled and Simon remembered so much, the memories triggered by Niña’s chuckle. He was there in the room with them, but obviously they couldn’t seem him. Giovanni made a half-hearted attempt to stand up, before falling back into his chair.

“Dear sweet Niña, I need more wine.”

“I will get you wine, but then you have to promise to keep still while I draw you.”

“Beastly child, I am at your mercy.... Get the wine and I will keep as still as I can.”

It was a game they’d played, right up until.....Poor Niña had been claimed by an outbreak of the flux. She chuckled again and Simon remembered the night she’d drawn Giovanni while he was almost too

drunk to move. Simon had been resting in his room that evening, after a long horse ride home from Bologna. Could he get to his room, would the haunting let him move that far.

“Oh.”

He hadn't meant to touch the girl. His hand had brushed her arm as she been drawing, quite by accident.”

“What's wrong ?” Asked Giovanni.

“I think we have a ghost.”

“Crazy child, there are no such things as ghosts.”

“I felt something.”

“Draw me girl, don't waste all my efforts to keep still.”

Simon walked down the passageway, past the stairs leading down to the front door. Could he get right out into the street ? If he could, it probably greatly increased his chances of being stuck in the haunting forever. He carried on along the corridor, until he was outside the open door to Piero's room, his room all that time ago. There he was, asleep on his back and snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

“You could have at least removed your boots.” He shouted.

An experiment really, to see if his old self and the two dead friends along the hall would hear him. Silence though, as Niña drew his drunken friend. Was Giovanni dead ? Simon realised he was now thinking of him as being dead. Vampires were immortals, but few ever lived truly long lives.

“We're too damn quarrelsome for our own good.” He muttered.

There was no signal on Patsy's phone, which wasn't really a surprise. The camera came up though, when he pressed the icon. He let the phone decide the best setting for the semi-darkened room , it was definitely better at working that stuff out than him. As he took the picture of the sleeping man on the bed, the flash went off.

“Now you're awake Piero.” He muttered.

Sounds were ignored, as were his movements as he walked around. A bright flash though.....Seemed to have an effect. It was weird seeing himself blinking and looking about, as if he'd seen a ghost. The picture on the phone screen was alright, but Simon was always a belt and braces guy when it came to pictures. He took two more pictures and his Piero self was sitting up in bed after the third flash had illuminated the room.

“The odd thing is.....I sort of remember this now. I'll leave you in peace old buddy.”

Simon had a vague memory of being woken by flashes of light in the night. It had been over seven hundred years before though, actually closer to eight hundred. He was an immortal, but even his brain cells weren't up to keeping memories perfectly intact for that long.

“I'm sure I assumed it was lightning.” He muttered.

He left himself from the past and walked back towards where the expensive glass mirror hung on the wall. Heavy and backed with lead and something else that was probably bad for your health, he couldn't remember what it was. Not that anyone had heard of health and safety then. The time loop was about to restart, he recognised the dialogue between Giovanni and Niña. If there was a point in the haunting where he was scared of getting stuck, it was where the loop began all over again.

“I just wish you two could hear me.” He muttered.

Simon had his arm in the mirror and was being pulled through in a way he didn't understand. There was no pausing, no changing his mind. Yet there was Niña looking and pointing at him. She could see him, he knew by the look in her eyes. A second or so later, Patsy was hugging him.

“She saw me, Niña saw me.....I know it.” He said.

“The mirror went blank as your hand came out.....I was worried you’d be stuck half in and half out. Promise me you’ll never go in there without someone out here to get help if you need it.”

“Oh I won’t, you have my word. I just hope the pictures I took made it back.”

Her phone found a signal to link up to again and the pictures were still there. His room from the 13th Century, with him lying on the bed, all that time ago. Full colour and HD, enough to give any historian a wet dream.

“Wow, you took a picture of your past self.” Said Patsy. “Aren’t you both supposed to go zap and vanish, or something ?”

“Only in the movies it seems Patsy. Hollywood really does have a lot to answer for.”

~ ~

Laura had intended to leave Tim with Akiva, or take him back to the hotel. Somewhere inside she knew that either option was wrong. For better or worse, he was going to help her in her task of stealing a priceless artefact from the British Museum in London. She was never going to be one of those women who dragged their boyfriend everywhere with them, but he was with her when she went to Brittany. No being diverted by a strange and rather eccentric God. One minute she was holding onto him in Akiva’s apartment, the next they were looking across a field at the mansion, the old chateau used by The Order of the Silver Dawn as their headquarters.

“They draw power from the various prehistoric sites in the area.” She said. “Strangely most of the people they employ aren’t aware of that.”

“It’s a beautiful building.” Said Tim.

“We’ll go around the field, it looks a bit muddy, and it’ll give them plenty of time to notice us. They are bound to be nervous, but I don’t want them to be too nervous.”

Laura wasn’t certain about the time in northern France. It was morning; Akiva had told her the time difference was no more than an hour. It had obviously been raining; the ground was covered in puddles.

“We timed it right; the rain has stopped, for now.” Said Tim.

They weren’t expected and although she was there to accept the job they’d offered her; they’d have probably preferred if she’d called first. Laura understood of course. Vampires turning up unannounced tended to make anyone jumpy.

“Better security than the White House I heard.” She said. “But I don’t think they’ve spotted us yet.”

“They might think we’re locals out for a stroll.”

“When I’m head of security things will change.”

Tim smiled at her, he was well aware that simply turning up had very little to do with testing the security response. It was her one last chance to put the Silver Dawn in their place, before accepting their job offer. Her rather mischievous inner demon needed one last outing. They were twenty yards from the old manor house, actually on the tarmac driveway, before any guards appeared.

“Now we walk slowly and try to look harmless.” She said.

They’d been her enemy for so long; she’d done so much research on them. Laura knew there were Seers on the premises who’d know a vampire was walking towards the manor house. The guards would also know she could well be their next boss. There were about five of them, strung out in a line. All armed with assault rifles, which were aimed at the ground. Laura stopped and let them come to her.

“I’m Laura Selway and this is Tim Chance. We’re here to see Nathalie Aurigny.”

“Are you expected ?” Asked the guard closest to them.

“No, but I’m sure she’ll want to see us.”

All very high tech for an ancient occult order, the guard spoke into a microphone attached to his collar. He mumbled rather than whispered; Laura heard him mutter something about the new boss. Any reply was probably through an earpiece, though she saw the guard nod.

“We’re to escort you to her office.”

She was left unmolested, but two of the men approached Tim.

“Searching my friend would be unwise.” She said.

Good, they looked nervous.

“I would take it as a sign of bad faith and I have a long memory.” She added.

No one wants to upset their new boss. The one who’d spoken to Nathalie shook his head at the others and Tim was left alone.

“Follow us please.”

Laura and Tim followed them. She’d seen the plans for the chateau, the Psochics seemed to have an inside man placed with the Silver Dawn, perhaps more than one. There were two automated gun turrets at the front of the house, though Laura couldn’t spot them. She did spot the domed building on the roof, which held ground to air missiles. There were rumours the defence technology used had been put together by the same people who did the White House and Area 51.

“It must be a nice place to work.” Said Tim.

“Yes, I’ll have my own office.”

Through some fairly invisible scanners near the reception area and they were being taken along a corridor that wouldn’t have looked out of place in the Palace of Versailles. Marble floors, every inch of wall space filled with artwork. Even quite a lot of antique furniture.

“Wow.” Said Tim.

“The order can trace its roots back a long way Tim. We’ve probably more priceless objects than most museums. We actually loaned two Rembrandts to the Louvre last year.”

Nathalie Aurigny had come to meet them, grinning as she shook Laura’s hand and then Tim’s. Quite a small lady with a svelte figure. Immaculately dressed in clothing that told everyone she was the boss, the woman whose ideas drove the order forward. Laura hated the term power dressing, but Nathalie seemed a natural at it.

“David said you were almost certain to accept our offer.” Said Nathalie. “Most people would have sent a letter, or called on the phone..... But you’re not just anyone Laura. I wouldn’t have offered you the job if you had been.”

“Plus by employing me, I’ll be pissing out of the tent, rather than pissing in.” Said Laura.

Nathalie laughed, a long genuine laugh.

“Just so long as you’re not casting me as J Edgar Hoover in that old quote.” Said Nathalie. “Yes.....I suppose if I’m being honest. There is an element of buying your loyalty Laura. But I really do need an excellent head of security. The last one was dreadful..... Really dreadful.”

Laura had heard he was dead, sacked by several rounds from an assault rifle. Not that she was going to mention it. Her Lyndon B. Johnson quote had used up her self-imposed smart arse comments quota for the day.

“I brought the signed paperwork back.” Said Laura. “I have just one minor point to clarify, if you’re available ?”

“Yes.... Yes...Of course. Then I’ll give you both the grand tour of the building.”

Nathalie’s office looked modern and suited her. There was one piece of modern art on a wall, otherwise the décor was quite Spartan. Laura took the envelope out of her pocket and handed it to Nathalie.

"All signed, but we need to discuss my Gudara." Said Laura. "I try to only use him as a last resort, he's nearly died trying to protect me on two occasions. He's definitely not part of the deal."

"Is that all ? I have no problem with your Gudara being yours and yours alone. Sit for a moment and I'll sign an official offer letter. Do you have a date for finishing your tasks for Horus ?"

No sooner had Laura and Tim sat in what was obviously the visitor's corner of the office, when two assistants appeared with trays of drinks and things to nibble. A five star hotel couldn't have done it better.

"I could get used to this." Said Tim.

"You're welcome here Tim, I'll arrange for you to get a card for the doors....Now Laura, have you a date for me ?"

"I've one job to do for Horus in London and then one final bit of Quid Pro Quo that I know nothing about. If we say I'm totally yours two months from now, will that do ?"

"That will do very well."

Nathalie handed her a letter saying she was going to earn a small fortune, for mostly doing things she enjoyed. For immortal creatures, vampires didn't usually make a success of their finances. For every rare vampire millionaire, there were a thousand living in squats and wearing clothes a tramp would reject. It came from being fairly feral creatures who were usually loners. Laura wasn't a loner though, she had friends and was determined to be one of the rare wealthy vampires.

"Thank you, I won't let you down." She said.

"I know you won't Laura. If one of the Ancient Gods of Egypt has faith in you....So do I."

"Horus can be a bit..... Let's just say he's not what I expected." Said Laura.

"Who is Laura..... Who is ? Come on, I'll show you your office. It's a real home away from home."

Her office was larger than the entire ground floor of the house in Hornsey. It was halfway down a modern wing that had been added to the chateau. Lots of light, but all diffused through plenty of net curtains.

"You've got your own bathroom, bedroom, even a kitchen area." Said Nathalie. "The best bit though, is through the metal door at the rear of the kitchen."

Like a magician, Nathalie pulled a key card from out of her jacket and handed it to her.

"Personal to you and will get you into anywhere." Said Nathalie. "Please don't lose it."

Laura pulled the card through a reader and after an audible click, she opened the door. There was another set of rooms beyond the door, all with metal walls.

"We ruined your lair, for which I'm sorry Laura. So here is a new one. Store what you like, the walls will withstand just about anything that might go bang by accident. It was an armoury by the way, which I had converted for your needs."

Probably a little unkind, but Laura suddenly felt relieved that she had a secure place to store her things, away from Akiva's squalid borrowed apartment in Jerusalem. Just getting away from Walter and Emily took a depressing weight off her shoulders. The rooms were perfect, she could even feel an air conditioned breeze on her cheeks.

"I assume no cleaners will be letting themselves in when I'm not here ?"

"Only if you ask them Laura."

"Can I start moving in today ?"

"You can, but first I'll give you the tour I promised.....And I'll get someone to show you how to use the phones. The damn system wasn't my choice, far too complicated....."

Nathalie was in full flow, trying to tell her everything in about two minutes. Laura ignored most of it and just took in the wonderful set of rooms that were to be her new lair. She even held Tim's hand and pulled him closer.

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ January 2021