

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 15 – The British Museum

“There was a rug next to her bed, far better quality than the one in her room in Hornsey. No stains on it either, no memories of messy takeaways after too much prosecco. She’d soon change that though. Laura sat cross legged on the fluffy cream rug and closed her eyes.”

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Once all three of them were on the other side of the 10th gate, they began coughing. There was a musky taint to the air, coupled with something Liz didn't want to be the first to mention.

“That’s it; I’m now hallucinating with my nose.” Said Clara. “Can anyone else smell a slight trace of sulphur in the air ?”

“Most legends are originally based on a little truth.” Said Mabina.

“I’m smelling it too. A bit more than just a trace.” Said Liz.

The worst surprise arrived when Liz turned to look at the other side of the gate they'd entered. It had become a routine, a reassurance that if she wanted to, all three of them could be returned to where they'd been. There was nothing behind them apart from a solid looking stone wall.

“Oh.... Crap !” She said.

Liz hadn't meant to say anything, the words had come out of her mouth because of shock and a little despair. Clara and Mabina both turned and looked at where a gate would have been, where a gate should have been. Clara even began prodding the wall with her blade.

“Not surprising really.” Said Liz. “We’ve passed the point of no return.”

“We’ve survived this far....We’ll be fine, you’ll see.” Said Mabina.

“So that’s it.....No way out until we get you to gate 21 ?” Asked Clara.

“I’m afraid so. Laura might still be able to reach us, if she wanted to, or had a need to.” Said Liz.

Their lights were showing walls around them, walls of several small buildings. It looked like they were in the town square of a village. The interesting thing was above them. Liz had assumed they were in a dark cavern, probably a huge one. Mabina had obviously taken a better look.

“The town is lifeless, I’m not picking up anything alive, not even a rat.” Said Mabina. “There’s a sky above us though, a sky with no stars.”

“She’s right.....That is weird.” Said Clara.

Liz should have known of course, but there were holes in her knowledge. An underworld with a sky was strange, though she had a slight recollection of something about it in the ancient scrolls Laura and her had acquired from Andrew Mordaunt.

“We’re still in the outer edges of the underworld.” Said Liz. “The sky isn’t part of our world though. I believe it’s the home of some truly unpleasant flying creatures. We should try and keep under cover where we can.”

The door on the nearest house was lying in the street, not a promising sign. Liz still felt more comfortable inside the ruined dwelling than she had outside. Their lights showed ruined furniture and a fireplace that didn't look as though it had been used in a very long time.

“Judging from the size of the chairs, whoever lived here was probably human.” Said Clara.

Liz was tempted to suggest they slept in the house until morning. There was no morning though, just a perpetual night until they reached the final gate into Duat, the true underworld.

"We should push on towards the 11th gate." Said Liz. "Whatever happened to this village, was probably decades ago."

"Too soon for a break?" Asked Mabina. "It seems like hours since we stopped."

"It would be nice." Added Clara.

"I must admit, a quick nap would be nice." Said Liz.

Just getting her pack off made Liz feel much better. She could easily carry the weight, but no matter how she packed it, something always managed to dig into her hipbone as she walked.

"Plenty of broken wood for the fire." Said Clara.

Once they had a fire and a few tins had been opened, their temporary den looked almost cheerful. A good drink from the water they'd collected from the stream with the tiny fish and Liz couldn't have felt better after a slap up meal at the Ritz. Not having a front door wasn't ideal, but Liz felt tired enough to sleep in the middle of a field.

"I'll take first watch." Said Clara.

It felt as though she'd been asleep for some time, before someone pulling at her shoulder woke her up. It was Clara and she was pointing towards the fireplace.

"Sorry.....Did I oversleep?" Asked Liz. "Is it my watch?"

"Look Liz, look..... They've been here for over an hour. They seem harmless."

Waking up wasn't easy, it had been a while since she'd had the luxury of hours of uninterrupted sleep. A little blinking to remove the junk from her eyes and she could see that Mabina was also awake and looking at the fireplace.

"Spirits, ghosts, wraiths..... Call them what you like." Said Mabina. "It's unusual for a fire to attract such creatures. Drawn to it like moths to a flame, but it doesn't seem to burn them."

The ghosts of four people, they'd definitely been human when they were alive. A man, woman and two children, both boys. Their clothing looked to be from a bygone age, though it was hard to be certain. The wraiths shimmered like a television image with poor reception. They moved constantly around the fireplace, as though getting themselves warm.

"Do you think they can see us?" Asked Liz.

"Oh yes, watch this." Said Clara.

Clara had obviously spent some time experimenting, before waking them up. She moved towards the fire and the wraiths avoided her. She put out her hand to touch one of the children and he vanished, appearing again at the other side of the room.

"See.....They're aware of us." Said Clara.

"And they don't seem to like us." Said Liz. "Come on, we might as well pack up our things and head for the next gate."

Another adult had joined the wraiths before Liz had her pack on her back. A woman, who was joined by a man before they were all ready to go.

"Good job we're leaving." Said Clara. "I can see this place getting a bit crowded."

Mabina threw two more pieces of ruined furniture on the fire before they left.

"Can't do any harm and they do seem to enjoy the heat." She said.

There was something about the deserted village, they didn't need any warning about being careful.

As they crept out of the house, Liz kept them to a path that followed close to solid looking wall.

There were more wraiths heading in the direction of the fire they'd lit in the abandoned house, a lot more ghostly apparitions of all ages.

"I think the whole damn town is going to end up around that fireplace." Said Mabina.

The beating of large wings caught Liz by surprise, even though she'd been alert for such things. Maybe their lights had attracted whatever the creature was. It swept over them, close enough for Liz to feel its wingbeats on her cheeks. It went through the arc of their lights for a brief second, showing them a creature that looked like a huge bat.

"Crap.....What is that thing ?" Asked Clara.

Once out of the reach of their lights, the beast was invisible against the pitch black sky. They couldn't see it, but the sound of heavy wingbeats told them the brute was still close.

"I have a vague memory of such a beast from some ancient scrolls, but I was researching something else at the time." Said Liz. "I know they're dangerous and quite capable of killing a vampire. As for a name ? It might come back to me."

"Could it kill you ?" Asked Mabina.

"Probably not, but I'd rather not give it a chance. The experience would probably be unpleasant."

As if to prove it was dangerous, they saw it pick up the ghost of a small child. Strange to hear nothing but the constant wingbeat, as they tiny wraith struggled to free itself. Perhaps the beast was satisfied with its catch. It circled them once, the poor ghostly child hanging from its jaws, before it flew away.

"I've seen some dreadful things..... But that." Said Mabina. "I'm quite nostalgic now about the Greek Islands, even if the cops were taking shots at us."

"It must devour the poor thing in some way." Said Clara.

A few minutes after the flying beast had flown away, they appeared again. The constant flow of ghosts, heading towards the ruined house with the fire.

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Her apartment at the Silver Dawn chateau had been tastefully furnished. A bed that wouldn't have looked out of place in a four star hotel, a three piece suite that must have cost a small fortune. For some reason though Laura Selway felt more at home sat on her old chesterfield sofa, in rooms with metal walls. She'd brought just about everything from Akiva's place in Jerusalem, apart from the bed. Akiva had asked her to leave that behind, as it was far better than the one he'd been sleeping on.

"Some sort of metal shelving would be a good idea." Said Tim.

"Yes, good idea. I had no idea I'd built up such a pile of munitions."

Her sniper rifles had pride of place in a cabinet, but the floor was covered in various types and sizes of ammunition. She'd even acquired a few claymore mines, though she couldn't recall where from. In one corner and piled quite high, were the Weapons of the Fallen, which Horus had given her. Add at least twenty hand gun and enough protective clothing and body armour for a small army;

"I'm beginning to think I might be a bit of a hoarder on the quiet." She said. "I feel bad about the Weapons of the Fallen being left on the floor, some are sacred objects."

"Pity I can't use that disc you've got under your skin. I could go to a DIY store I know in Clapham and be back with the shelving in no time."

"No need, they'll have everything we need here." She said. "Get on the internal phone, if you can get the thing to work. Ask reception to put you through to maintenance. They'll have miles of shelving."

Despite Nathalie Aurigny showing how to use the phones and another lesson from a lady in HR, all Laura had managed to get out of the phone in her den, was a few crackles. Tim seemed to have a natural affinity with the system and he was soon talking to someone called Mike in maintenance.

"What colour do you want the shelving ?" Tim asked her.

"Not worried.... Anything."

More muttering at Mike, who Tim seemed to be getting on well with. She had been tempted to tell him to use her name if he had any problems, but Tim was getting on fine.

"Won't be long, I'm going round to the stores to see what they've got." He said.

"Grab some stationery if you can, we're bound to need some."

"Right."

And without really trying to engineer it, she was alone. There was something she wanted to do and if she tried to do it with Tim around, he'd be curious. After all, she had promised him there'd be no secrets kept from him in future. Not that Laura considered that to be a rule carved in stone or anything. Tim was curious though and he'd hover, probably peeking through a gap in the door.

"Just this time, the first time in the chateau." She muttered. "I want to be alone."

There was a rug next to her bed, far better quality than the one in her room in Hornsey. No stains on it either, no memories of messy takeaways after too much prosecco. She'd soon change that though. Laura sat cross legged on the fluffy cream rug and closed her eyes.

"Gudara... Come to me." She said.

She'd tried different words and phrases, even altering the tone of her voice. After a lot of experimentation, she'd gone back to using the simple words Wiremi had told her to use. To Laura it seemed that her intent was the thing, the fact that in her mind, she needed her Gudara to come to her. She'd once tried the instructions in Latin and he'd come to her. Laura opened her eyes and her personal protector and sometimes her assassin, was sat in front of her.

"Thank you for coming." She said.

She held his hand and enjoyed hearing the strange growling sound that meant he was happy. It was their routine, sat knees touching knees, with her trying to ignore him being completely naked. Her Gudara even had a certain scent about him, a natural smell that shouted masculinity. At first she'd been a little scared of him, until he'd almost died trying to protect her.

"You need to memorise this place, I will be spending a lot of time here. Do you understand?"

His huge simian looking head nodded at her.

At first there had been a need to please, with him claiming to understand things he didn't, at least not properly. They were past that now and Laura trusted him completely.

"If you need me, you can still wait in my room in Hornsey, but I will be using these rooms quite a lot too. I'm going to be working for the Silver Dawn, you probably know of them?"

Another nod and Laura couldn't help wishing that solving all her problems was as easy as calling for her Gudara, or sending Tim to get shelving from the stores.

"If only you were a skilled hacker my friend." She muttered.

Her Gudara became quite animated by the word hacker, a chortling sound was added to his usual happy growl. Much as she respected her Gudara, she really couldn't see his huge clawed hands operating a keyboard.

"Do you know a hacker?"

A nod.

"A good one, an expert?"

Another nod.

"Can you bring them here now?"

Laura had taught him a few other movements of his head, but most of the time nodding or shaking his head covered just about everything. She envied Jack his ability to link minds in some way with her huge friend. Her Gudara shook his head and Laura was on familiar, if rather tedious ground.

"Can you bring them here tonight?"

Another shake of his head and a finger prod to her shoulder that was probably harder than he'd intended. She understood.

"You can take me to see them?"

A nod.

"Can you take me now?"

Shaking head.

"Can you take me later today?"

It took quite a while to agree that her Gudara would take her to see a master hacker at about seven that evening. Given the obvious limits a Gudara from the realm of dreams had when it came to 21st century Technology, she wasn't getting her hopes up.

"Are they really good?" She asked.

Another nod of the head and a lot of chortling. Getting a name was almost impossible. She'd once tried a board on the floor and a pointer, but every letter took ages and involved a lot of growling. In the end she'd written that form of communication off, as far too annoying. She could get a gender for her seven pm unannounced visit though.

"Is the hacker a woman?"

A shaking head, but Laura had learned never to assume anything.

"Is the hacker a man?"

A nod.

"Good, you can go now. Come back for me this evening at seven."

She'd barely had time to put coffee and water in the brand new coffee machine, when there was a huge amount of noise out in the corridor. She investigated and found Tim with two guys from maintenance, with a staggering amount of shelving on two electric trolleys.

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Simon wasn't good with kids and he knew it. He barely got on with adult humans, but he could pull on his sales persona with adults and wing it. Children were different to adults though, they could spot insincerity at a hell of a distance. Nicola Jordan, Anthony's wife, had two young kids and both of them had sussed him out. The youngest, still very much a baby, howled if he got close. The toddler had started to hide behind the sofa.

"I think kids can sense I'm a sales guy." He told Nicola.

Nicola smiled and he smiled back, but it was a huge relief when Anthony came back from the bathroom.

"Getting to know the sprogs Simon.... Good, good." Shouted Anthony.

Anthony was one of those people who shouted everything, all the time. Simon thought there had to be people five miles away wondering what was happening in the Jordan's house. The baby sprog howled, while the toddler decided to cling to his mother.

"I'll check the food; we should be eating in about.... Half an hour." Said Nicola.

The toddler ran after his mother and the baby in its crib stopped howling as Anthony made a few baby noises at the child.

"I never saw myself getting married Simon. Me a father of two.....I wouldn't change anything though, not a thing."

It all sounded wonderful and Nicola would be able to hear every yelled word in the kitchen. Simon knew Anthony had at least two current girlfriends. He'd even made a couple of attempts to get Laura into bed.

"Do you think you'll make an honest woman of Clara one day?" Asked Anthony.

The dinner night had been more of a summons than an invitation. Anthony couldn't sack him now he owned half the business, but he could make his life a constant battle. With everything else going on, Simon didn't want a pissed off Anthony added to the mix. There had been almost a demand to bring Clara too.

"Sorry, she's abroad at the moment. I can't even get through to her by mobile."

He'd told Anthony, with all the sincerity and conviction of an honest man. Getting Clara back from the underworld was beyond even the most severe command from Anthony.

"I'm not sure, we haven't really discussed marriage."

"Kids though?" Anthony persisted. "People have a family without marriage these days."

Nicola returned from the kitchen and walked right to the other end of the through lounge, toddler in tow. She'd obviously been told to give them a little privacy.

"About fifteen minutes." She yelled on the way through.

"Hmmm... We're not really into kids, either of us." Said Simon.

"A pity.... Kids settle a man."

Simon had arrived confused by the invitation and now he was feeling even more confused. If Anthony wanted to talk about being settled, he really needed a chat with himself in the mirror.

There were rumours he'd had to settle out of court, with a baby momma he'd knocked up on a trip to Birmingham.

"It's been noticed that you're being very.....Pally with our Ronnie lately. Lots of whispering and doors closed meeting after office hours." Said Anthony.

Even when he was attempting a private mutter, Anthony could probably be heard by passengers in low flying aircraft. Nicola was glaring at him, a real look of disapproval.

"Crap Anthony, tell your source they got it wrong buddy. I like Ronnie, but not like that. To be honest she's about the only person on the team who knows her arse from her elbow, it's natural that I'd use her for some..... Speculative ideas I had."

"I like speculative ideas, as long as they make money. Anything you'd like to share?"

"Not yet." Said Simon. "I want to see how they work out."

At one time Anthony would have insisted and threatened, until Simon had invented a plausible lie to shut him up. One lie of Simon's had turned into a lucrative reality, which had been both weird and surprising. There were advantages to being a shareholder though, Anthony could no longer threaten to sack him.

"Alright Simon, I'll be patient, for now. It's just that you had that unplanned vacation recently, then you're seen whispering to Ronnie.....You're definitely settled aren't you Simon?"

Anthony was a large, loud black guy, whose father had arrived penniless on a boat from Trinidad. A father who'd died in the Stockwell area of London, still penniless. Simon had forgotten how insecure Anthony could still be.

"Fuck Anthony, are we having the conversation about me looking for another job..... Again?!"

Nicola tutted loudly.

"Sorry Nicola, but your husband is being a bit of a dick again."

"I know Simon, believe me, I know.....He just won't listen to me."

"So you're definitely not thinking of leaving?" Asked Anthony.

"No.... You're stuck with me, until..... You're old and grey a decided you've made enough cash to retire to that house in Trinidad you keep on about building."

"Oh, that pipedream." Said Nicola. "Are you two alright now?"

"Yeah, there never was a problem." Said Simon.

"We're cool." Added Anthony.

"Good, I'll serve dinner before it dries out completely in the oven."

After about the third swoop by a creature with large wings and sharp claws, they'd decided to turn off their caving lamps. They all had nasty wounds from teeth and claws, some far too close to their eyes. Clara was certain her night vision would enable her to lead Liz and Mabina to the gate, as long as Liz could indicate the right direction.

"Everywhere has some light, even if it's just a faint glow." She'd told the others. "People lived down here once, it can't be totally dark."

The theory was sound, but completely wrong. They'd been stood in the dark for about fifteen minutes and Clara still couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

"I can't see a thing, how about you guys?" Asked Liz.

"No, not a damned thing." Said Mabina.

"I was wrong, we'll need the lamps to find the 11th gate, I realise that now." Said Clara.

"We'll get bitten to pieces." Said Mabina.

"I have a bow in my pack." Said Liz. "I'm not very good with it, but these creatures fly quite slowly and they're probably not used to people fighting back."

Clara turned on her lamps and the others did the same. There was quite a bit of blinking until they all became used to the bright LED lamps again. Almost immediately there was the sound of beating wings, huge beating wings.

"Come on, we can go in here while I dig everything out my pack." Said Liz.

A proper house rather than a one room dwelling. Part of the tiled roof had gone, but it was still a substantial building of at least four rooms. Clara took off her own pack, knowing that they'd be there for a while. It was almost a universal rule that anything they needed in a hurry, was jammed in a hard to get at part of their packs.

"Oh shit, everything has to come out." Muttered Liz.

"Plenty of old furniture to burn, I'll start a fire." Said Mabina.

"You're just curious." Said Clara. "You want to see if a lot more ghosts are drawn to the fire."

"Aren't you?"

"I'd be a lot more curious if the wraiths could fight the huge bats for us."

"They're vargouilles I think, the name just came back to me." Said Liz. "A kind of flying wolf who hunt in packs, feeding on any who try to trespass into the world of the dead. I might be able to control them, eventually."

"I know, when you've been to the 21st gate." Muttered Mabina.

"I've heard of them.....I always thought they were just a legend." Said Clara.

"You mean like the Unnamed, keeper of the 21st gate." Said Liz.

"Yeah, alright.... Point taken."

The broken furniture burned well, become a roaring fire in no time at all. Almost immediately the ghosts arrived to gather close to the fireplace, as though warming up cold ethereal bodies.

"They probably know how to fight the vargouilles." Said Mabina. "If only there was a way to talk to them."

Liz had the bow out of her pack, complete with a quiver containing quite a few arrows. She was busy fitting the string, before doing a full test pulls with the large wooden bow.

"I'll keep them away while we make a run for the gate." Said Liz. "No trying to fight them off, we'll just run like..... Like fuck."

"Are you really any good with that thing?" Asked Clara.

"I know the opinion of a loving boyfriend might be a bit biased, but Brendan thought I was really good. We went into the countryside to practise, sticking targets on bushes. I did manage to hit a lot of bullseyes."

"Alright, plan A is to run for the gate while Liz keeps the flying wolves off us." Said Mabina.

"What's plan B?" Asked Liz.

"We all get eaten by the Vargouilles."

Once outside Clara could see what had to be hundreds of the shimmering ghosts, all heading towards the fire they'd lit in the large ruined building. As she watched, a Vargouille must have pounced in the darkness. She couldn't see the creature, just the ghost struggling in its grip.

"It got an adult.... Judging by the size." Said Mabina.

"Bastard things." Said Liz. "The range is too far though. If one tries that trick closer to us, I'll try and hit it."

Clara led, with Liz telling her which direction to take them, while she scanned the constantly dark sky, bow up and ready. They followed several stone walls, crouching to offer a difficult target for the flying monsters. Although they often heard the beat of heavy wings, they managed to get quite close to the 11th gate, without being attacked.

"We've run out of walls to use as cover." Said Clara. "It looks like a large open field.... How far to the gate Liz."

"Can't be sure, but no more than fifty yards."

"Fifty yards with no cover." Said Mabina. "But we can't hide behind this wall forever."

"Ready?" Asked Clara.

"Go on then, if you must." Said Liz.

They ran away from the wall at a good pace, their caving lights filling the endless night of that world with the brightness of brief daylight. Clara saw the ghosts heading for the fireplace they'd filled with burning wood. There were so many, hundreds of them of all ages. One was pulled up into the air and Liz had obviously seen it happen.

"Brendan was right, she's damned good with that bow." Muttered Clara.

The twang of a bowstring, followed by the screams of a wild beast. After the silence of the ghosts, the noise seemed to fill Clara's head. Her lamps caught the Vargouille as it rolled across the ground, dropping the wraith from its claws.

"You got it..... Killed it." Shouted Mabina.

The huge brute was badly hurt, though it seemed determined to hang onto life. It thrashed about, screeching, probably calling for members of its pack for help. Mabina finished it off by separating its head from its shoulders with her longsword.

"Bastard." She shouted.

The ghost it was trying to capture was gone, though Liz had spotted something.

"Look.... There, look." She said pointing.

It seemed there was to be a plan C, even if they hadn't discussed it. Liz began walking towards one of the wraiths who was stood in front of a large structure of some kind.

"He's beckoning us over." Said Mabina.

Unusual indeed and as they got closer to him, the ghost of a man could be seen to moving his lips.

No sound could be heard, but he obviously wanted to communicate.

"Watch the sky, we're really exposed here." Said Clara.

It wasn't a building, the structure he seemed to be guarding was a vast unlit bonfire, the largest Clara had ever seen. The quiet wraith was pointing at the bonfire which had to over a hundred feet tall and perhaps thirty feet across at its base.

"What does he want?" Asked Mabina.

The wraith was making a movement with his hands that was obvious to Clara, but she had been young during a period in time before matches had been invented.

"He's miming striking a flint." Said Clara. "He wants us to light the fire."

"I'm happy to do that for him, it might deter the vargouilles." Said Liz.

Liz lit the fire and the wood must have had centuries to dry. As if waiting for that moment for a very long time, it seemed to burst into flames with a kind of joy. Soon the heat and light from the huge fire was filling the field for hundreds of yards. It was also bringing out the wraiths in their thousands.

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Laura's Gudara was cold to the touch; he'd obviously been investigating where he intended to take her. Vampires didn't really feel the cold unless it was fairly extreme. She put on a thick winter coat with a hood though, just to make sure she'd look right when they reached wherever it was he was about to take her.

"I would take you, but these super hacker types can be a bit paranoid, or so I'm told." She said.

"That's alright; I've got plenty to keep me busy. Still lots of shelving to put up." Said Tim. "Did you know they have Netflix in France?"

"I think it's on just about everywhere." She said.

Tim was getting very excited that the chateau's Wi-Fi had several streaming services as standard. She didn't blame him, she was looking forward to a few binge, pizza and prosecco nights herself. She had no idea if the hacker was going to be a bit weird, her knowledge of such people was limited to movies and she knew most of it was probably crap. She didn't even know where her Gudara was about to take her. Judging by the temperature of his fur, their destination might well be Siberia.

"Save me some pizza." She yelled at Tim.

"Will do."

Laura grabbed her Gudara's arm and felt one of his huge paws go across her back.

"You're sure this guy is an expert hacker?"

She felt his head nod, twice. How would he know though, the only person he could talk to was.....She pulled away from him.

"Did you go and talk to Jack?"

Her Gudara nodded and Laura knew there'd probably be another angry call from Gwen, or maybe Daniel. A trip to the farm in Pitmedden explained the cold and Laura wondered if she did need a heavy coat.

"How would Jack know a hacker?" She muttered.

No good asking her Gudara, his skills in certain areas were annoyingly limited. She'd shown him a map of the world and asked him where they were going. The map seemed to fascinate him, the way Picasso's paintings fascinated her. He obviously had no idea what it was though. It seemed the only way to get answers was a bit of a leap of faith. She grabbed hold of his fur again.

"I'm ready, take me there." She said.

It was dark apart from a few yellow streetlights and it was cold enough to need her thick coat. They were in some sort of Perspex.....It was a bus shelter. The street lighting wasn't brilliant, but good enough to see that the destination on one bus timetable was Cleckheaton. Unless there was a

Cleckheaton in Siberia, her Gudara had brought her to the wilds of West Yorkshire. He gently patted her shoulder, before pointing at a house across the road.

“The hacker is in there ?”

A nod before he vanished, leaving her alone. Getting back to France wasn't a problem, she had the metal disc under her skin. It was just that what looked like a council built semi-detached house in West Yorkshire seemed an odd place to find a super hacker, the real hacking Mr Big. Laura crossed the road and walked up the garden path. The house had only one window showing a light, an upstairs room, more than likely a bedroom.

“Please don't be a spotty fourteen year old.” She muttered.

No door bell, or at least not one that worked. Laura thumped on the door for about five minutes, before deciding that if she couldn't get into the building fairly easily, she deserved to get a fail grade in Vampire 101. At least there was a name on the broken bell push, a Dymo label saying Jim Weaver, though it might have been the last tenant, or completely fake.

“Time for us to get acquainted Jim.”

At some point the local council had put in double glazing that wasn't exactly the best on the market. The double doors that led from the lounge to the garden at the back of the house, could have been busted open by a determined toddler. Laura had vampire strength, though she didn't need to use that much of it. She rapidly wobbled the doors in and out, feeling various parts bend and break. One final really hard pull and the doors opened, leaving a small pile of bits of metal and plastic at her feet.

“Easy fucking peasy.”

Once inside she closed the doors and they fitted back together pretty well. Jim was going to need new doors and she was quite happy to add the cost to his fee. For now though, a casual observer would see nothing wrong. With a skill only a vampire is capable of, she moved soundlessly across the lounge and into the hallway. Jim was the sort of person who left hall lights turned on, a real gift to a burglar.

“Anyone there ? I've called the police.” Came from upstairs.

He hadn't she'd have heard him. Vampire didn't have really super hearing, but it was many times better than a human's. Laura flattened herself against the wall and watched as Jim Weaver slowly came down. The first thing she noticed were the slippers and faded blue dressing gown.

“What do you want ? I have a dog.”

No he hadn't, it would have been going crazy by now. A few dogs didn't seem worried by her, but most went crazy if a vampire was anywhere near. Jim wasn't impressive as he came down the stairs, though she didn't need his sartorial skills. About thirty five, maybe a little older, with a shock of scruffy blonde(ish) hair. Laura waited until he was at the bottom of the stairs, just in case he made a bolt for it. The closer she was the easier he'd be to catch and the less noise there'd be to worry the neighbours.

“Hello, are you Jim weaver ?”

At least he didn't run, though he did look terrified. Laura pushed back her hood and smiled. A boy at school had once said her smile was her best feature. Jim still looked like he might faint at any moment.

“Look, I know this is going to sound crazy.” She said. “Do you know someone called Jack who lives on a farm in Scotland ? I think he talked to you about me.... I'm Laura.”

“Jack, yeah.... Jack hashtag 26 on Twitter. He did mention you'd be coming to see me. Most people send me a direct message on social media before they arrive.”

So Jack was online now, that was a bit surprising. Mind you, Liz had talked about Jack being Jack 2.0 since Wiremi had done something to him. Probably something else Gwen would blame on her.

"Sorry." Said Laura. "I will pay to have the doors replaced. Shit locks anyway, I did you a favour."

"What did you do to my doors?"

"Can we talk Jim? Is your name Jim Weaver?"

"Yeah, that's me..... Come upstairs, but you're paying for those doors."

"No problem."

At some point in time, someone had showed Jim what a computer could do and something in his head had sparkled, or exploded, but in a good way. Laura remembered a similar thing happening with her and powerful firearms. The window she'd seen with a glow coming through the curtains was the master bedroom. It looked like something out of a movie about the CIA, or maybe the NSA. A room full of widescreen monitors, all connected to batteries of computers.

"I wouldn't like to see your electric bill." Said Laura. "Is it just you living here Jim?"

"Yeah, since my mum passed away."

"Sorry."

"It's alright..... We never really got on."

The room fascinated her, with all its screens showing Jim's timeline on just about every social media system she'd heard of, and a few she hadn't. He obviously liked to keep up to date with the news, several media outlets were showing the day's events. Every screen had a chair in front of it, so she had quite a lot of choice when he asked her to sit down.

"Do you want a drink..... Coffee, tea maybe?" Asked Jim.

"Hmmm it's the evening Jim, got a proper drink."

"I've a few cans of Special Brew."

"Perfect."

Jim leaving her alone as he went to get the beer, gave her the perfect opportunity to be nosy. She was no expert on computers, but Jim seemed to have everything, lots of everything. Expensive to buy, probably more than the house was worth, maybe the next door house too. He had to have a fairly impressive hustle going on, and Jim didn't look the sort to rob banks.

"Just admiring your computers."

His face lit up.

"I could order pizza, if you're staying for a while?" He asked.

Was she the only female to have put her bottom on that chair? Laura thought she might well be. Jim looked a little smitten, which was fine, up to a point. Special Brew and pizza though, they were like catnip to her and it seemed to be an age since she'd last had a boozy night with a genuine geek.

"Pizza would be wonderful Jim, something meaty."

He ordered it then and there and by the smile on his face, they were now buddies.

"So Laura..... What do you need from me?" He asked.

"I need to get into the British Museum's computer system."

She'd expected a lot of sucking at teeth, like a car mechanic trying to up the price of a repair. Instead Jim actually looked disappointed.

"Government and public body systems are fairly easy, they never spend enough on security, or hire decent people to run them." Said Jim. "To be honest, it's easier to pay a fed up member of staff to use their login, than it is to hack the system. There are always fed up members of staff. You'd be amazed how much time I spend digging around the National Register of Archives."

She had to ask.

“Why their site ?”

“Everything is there Laura..... Everything done by just about anyone you can name. They’ve even got the Magna Carta on there.”

“Great.”

Poor Jim, he didn’t understand her lack of enthusiasm, she could tell. Was he still smitten ? Probably, by the way he looked at her bottom as she picked up another can of beer from the floor.

“Are you driving Laura ? I have a spare room.”

“I have transport arranged.”

The pizza arriving saved her from having to refuse to elaborate. While they ate, Jim showed her lots of social media memes about goats, which were surprisingly amusing.

“So Jim, can you get me a login for the British Museum ?”

“Yeah, I know a middle man.....Probably get you one right now. Are you into computer games ?”

“I was quite keen on Doom 3, when I was at school.” She replied.

“A real rave from the grave.... Here, try a little Doom Eternal while I make a couple of calls. Keep the volume down though, or the neighbours get a bit grumpy.”

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