

The Hornsey Vampires

(Season two of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 18 – Clufford Hall

“After the pain came pleasure. Actually not pleasure, just the cessation of pain and that felt like pleasure. For the first time since the Egg of Astaroth had burned itself under her skin, there was no pain, none at all.”

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The rhododendron bushes had probably been planted when Clufford Hall had been new. Laura pushed her way through and came out of the other side with quite a few scratches. She wiped several spiders' webs out of her eyes and briefly crouched down to give herself time to feel for heartbeats. There were at least ten who were all close to her and moving even closer. Sam had been right about the Silver Dawn having enough money to employ a lot of armed guards.

“There she is.....One of them is near the arboretum.”

Damn, they must have been using image intensifiers; it was the only way one of them could have spotted her. Laura ran for the house and was up against the wall before bullets hit the ground where she'd been crouched. An explosion from the other side of the house told her Mabina was alive and causing havoc. Some of the heartbeats moved in that direction.

“Well done Mabina.” She muttered.

Laura wasn't an expert on trees; she just knew what she liked. The large tree quite near the house was perfect. A nice twisting trunk with plenty of handholds and branches that were just about close enough to the upper floors for her to jump from. A distance impossible for a human to jump, but just middling difficult for her. She really had won gymnastics awards at school.

“One is at the back of the house..... I saw him.”

Him indeed, Mabina would be insulted by that. All cats really did look grey in the dark though and Mabina was probably moving at speed. Laura needed to be moving fast herself and spending less time pondering on her next move. She went up the side of the tree furthest from the house and ran along a branch at a speed a squirrel would have admired. A long leap took her over the handrail of a second floor balcony, where she landed without making a sound.

“Oh, not now.” She mumbled.

The burning in her side probably indicated a few ancient gods of Egypt were taking an interest in the goings on at Clufford Hall. There were alarms going off and the constant sound of automatic weapons fire. Laura decided moving silently was an unnecessary luxury. Laura's size six boots were a nice mix of attractiveness and functionality. One kick from those boots and she was inside what looked to be a bedroom. Just enough light was coming in through a glass panel above the door, for her to avoid falling over anything.

“.....Gibson..... Tell them we've got one inside on the second floor....”

She saw his heartbeat less than ten feet away, moving along the corridor. Two shots through the wooden door and the heartbeat stopped. No cry, no sound of him falling over. Laura ran from the room, jumping over the guard's dead body. His radio might be useful; she stopped for a moment to pick it up.

“We've come for the Scales of Pendally.” She broadcast. “Leave now or we'll kill you all.”

Laura dropped the radio, it had served its purpose and for all she knew, it might have contained a location chip. More running, along the corridor and down the stairs to the first floor. Only one guard

to kill at the top of the stairs and she was where she'd wanted to be all along. Ground floor, well past the solid and well-guarded outside doors. Another explosion to the rear of the house was followed by a lot of gunfire.

"Damn Mabina, she's annoying them far more than I am."

Two guards seemed quicker than the rest, running to get between her and where she needed to be. The floorplans had an open space in the centre of the house, as large as a medieval great hall. Clufford Hall had been built with no such hall; the large space was relatively new. Whatever kept pulling at her mind and causing the Egg of Astaroth to burn her flesh, was in that open space.

"Just one of them.....Open fire, use grenades if you have to....."

The guards were fast and well trained. They were no match for a vampire though. Laura went into a deeper level of her fighting mode, her unconscious mind did it automatically. Colours became more uniform, backgrounds were ignored. Anything moving with a body temperature became brighter and given a yellow halo. The effect was many times more efficient than the best night vision device. The guard stood up to throw a grenade and Laura shot him twice, once in the head and then in the chest.

"Crap.... Now Magda will tell me off for burning the place down." She muttered.

The grenade had been holding some form of incendiary device and it had been dropped as he died. A large ball of red hot flame filled the corridor, starting several fires in the furniture and wood panelling. Laura remained where she was, watching the heartbeat of the second guard. He was moving forward while crouched down, a difficult skill to master. A good way to surprise an enemy who wasn't a vampire, watching his heartbeat moving behind a solid looking antique mahogany chest of drawers. The guard might roll out of cover or leap out, finger on the trigger of an assault rifle. Laura decided to mess with his head a little.

"I see you..... Why not come out to play?" She shouted.

He leapt out, finger hard on the trigger, spraying the corridor with bullets. Laura was ready though with a Glock in each hand. She fired four times and the guard was dead on the floor. At first she thought he'd missed her, but the slight pain in her right elbow was letting her know he hadn't. The bullet had passed through her jacket, clipping her skin on the way out. Her arm worked well enough and the blood loss was minimal. She ignored the wound and dug around in her back pack.

"Time for you guys."

She muttered at the two large canister grenades. They were for the doors that Sam had said were likely to be guarded and securely locked. Internal doors that had to be dealt with to get into the large room in the centre of the house. Laura put full clips in both her guns and decided caution wasn't going to get the job done in time.

"..... There's another.....Must be a dozen of them....."

Actually just two, but she didn't bother to correct the guard walking towards her. He went down before even getting a shot off, as did the second guard he'd been talking to.

"Run you idiot, or Mabina will get there first." She muttered at herself.

The guards in front of the door fired at her, but didn't pursue her. Laura thanked whoever had filled the house with heavy hardwood furniture. The large dresser gave her cover, while she pulled the pin out of one of the grenades.

"I have no idea what this will do." She shouted. "You should begin running away about now."

Heavy and awkward to throw, she did well in getting it to land at the feet of the guards. They didn't run, one even tried to pick it up. They both died in the explosion, which even caused the heavy

dresser to rattle about. The door looked damaged but still standing. Laura used the other grenade and when the smoke settled, the door was gone.

"You didn't beat me by much."

Mabina looking dishevelled, had arrived at the door a matter of seconds after her. Not just grubby with ripped clothing, there was a burn mark on her cheek.

"A win is a win and I should get a bonus for taking less damage." Said Laura.

"I had the toughest way in."

"Yeah, yeah..... Yada, yada."

"Have you taken a proper look yet ?" Asked Mabina.

There was a large hall beyond the door. More antique furniture, even the sound of a grandfather clock striking the hour. Lots of leather sofas and shelves covered in books. It looked like a very comfortable private library. Laura stepped through the scorched doorway before there could be any argument about who went first.

"It's here Mabina, you must feel it ?"

No answer, she was probably sulking. Laura looked back and Mabina seemed to be frozen in the doorway. Her side hurt, the metal disc felt as though it was burning her ribs. He was there with her again, the man with the head of an Eagle. If only he'd find a less painful way of letting her know he was around. Laura fell to her knees, the pain was becoming too intense to bear.

"Please stop it..... I'm no use to you like this."

The pain stopped when everything took on a golden tinge. Laura thought she might have passed out, when the library vanished and she was falling through a thick gold coloured mist. She could almost hear Wiremi's disapproving voice.

"More wasted grains of sand Laura....."

Was she shortening her life with every battle to find one of the artefacts ? If she was it didn't worry her too much, her life was never going to be that long. A few centuries at the most, before she slowed down at just the wrong moment, or let something grab her attention at the worst possible time. It would probably be another vampire that ended up killing her.

"I'd rather have a short adventurous life than a long boring one." She mumbled.

The falling sensation stopped as the walls of the room took on a solid feel. Gold, everything was gold, even the floor tiles. The pain from the Egg burning into her was back, but it wasn't too bad. The hot humid air told her she probably wasn't still in Clufford Hall in Hampshire.

Laura holstered her guns and felt the wall. Tiles made out of gold, she recognised the feel and colour, even in the light from oil lamps hanging from the ceiling. Lamps made out of gold of course. Was it someone overcompensating for something, or just the usual way of building shrines to the most ancient of gods ?

"I'm not dreaming, I know I'm awake." She muttered.

A long central hall leading to a shrine, she was certain of it. A hall about the same size and shape as the library at Clufford Hall, but now she was probably somewhere in Egypt. The bowl was still calling her though, the Scales of Pendally. By the time she'd walked the length of the hall, it didn't surprise her to see the man with the head of an Eagle sat on a throne of Gold. Horus, Magda had named him and he had the bowl she sought on his lap.

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Judith quite liked being on her own as long as it didn't go on for too long. She could have the radio on all day, tuned to a local station that played Jazz round the clock. Her hours were flexible while

Sam was away and two hour lunches were the norm. There was a night guard of course, but he didn't show up until she was about to leave.

"Damn."

Not a fire alarm, just a movement detector telling her something was happening in the top floor storeroom. Birds were like feathered Houdinis, they were forever finding a way in. The building maintenance man had once found a nest with three dead chicks in it. Judith was the official key holder, her phone rang within seconds.

"Yes I am Judith, confirmation code 14897."

"No, I don't need anyone to call..... It'll be a bird again."

Sam had a lot of expensive stock, the security company hooked up to their alarms were paid to be suspicious to the point of paranoia.

"Yes..... I will call you back after I've had a look up there."

"I promise it will be within half an hour."

Fuck, she'd wanted a quiet afternoon listening to the radio. Some sort of finch the maintenance guy had told her last time, small enough to get into just about anywhere. Judith pressed the button which meant someone was investigating the potential intrusion. Should she call someone? Sam had several members of the police force on his payroll. Last time Yosef had teased her for days though, endless jibes about dangerous killer finches.

"No..... I'll have a look first." She muttered.

The elevator seemed noisy, far more clatter than usual. All her imagination of course and building anxiety. She should have asked for a couple of burly police officers to join her, Sam wouldn't have minded.

"I'm sure the doors don't usually grind like that."

Even with the lights on the storeroom felt too dark. It was almost a relief to find the packing case with the missing side, it had happened before. Only twice during her time working for Sam, but Magda had assured her it was a rare, but not unknown event.

"Sam has some clients who are a little..... Unorthodox in the way they work. Nothing to worry about, just keep Sam informed."

Magda had told her after the last item had mysteriously vanished from a locked room on the top floor. Judith risked ruining her stockings, kneeling on the grubby floor in front of the crate. The front of it looked to have been eaten away or corroded in some way, there was fine wood dust everywhere. The crate was among the pile of boxes only Sam knew about.

"..... Just keep Sam informed....." She mumbled to herself.

Pictures on her phone which she'd copy to her computer and send as part of an encrypted email. A pic of the side to get the reference number and about three pics of the empty inside of the crate. As she got up her stockings caught a rough edge on the concrete floor.

"Crap! I'm putting those on expenses."

Sam's email would go off before she went home, she just needed to call the security company. It meant going through the security code and two other validation questions of course. Eventually she was passed to someone dealing with the potential intrusion at their address.

"Yes it was a bird again. I'll get the maintenance guy to check all the window shutters."

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An ancient deity who might be on her side. Laura wasn't sure of the etiquette involved so she simply stood and waited for him to react. There was definite unmistakable beckoning from his right hand.

Laura walked forward, stopping close enough to take the bowl, if it was offered. Horus lifted the bowl, but didn't give it to her. Instead he placed it on the throne to his left.

"Are you worthy?"

No sound, the words formed in her mind. A deep male voice speaking English.

"Probably not." She replied.

"A perfect answer for one of your kind. You always were our favourite children. Blood is all, yet people forget. You are in pain, show me."

Laura undid her jacket and pulled her blouse away from the burnt flesh that covered the Egg. He tutted at her, beckoning her closer, then closer again. She was so close she could see his gold coloured bird like eyes. There was an odour too, a faint smell of Jasmine. His hand reached out, touching the burns, gripping her flesh.

"Oh, please stop..... That hurts."

"Be quiet."

After the pain came pleasure. Actually not pleasure, just the cessation of pain and that felt like pleasure. For the first time since the Egg of Astaroth had burned itself under her skin, there was no pain, none at all.

"What you call the Egg is my key, the key to the abyss." He said. "Now it is yours for a while. Never remove it, never give it to those you found it for. Do you understand?"

Perhaps it was where she was, or perhaps it was being in the presence of an ancient deity who'd called her one of his favourite children. For whatever reason, she answered him honestly.

"I won't remove the key from my body, but the rest..... No I don't understand. What do I do with it? What is it doing to me?"

Laughter, the clear sound of gentle laughter seemed to come from all around her. Laura was beginning to suspect they were surrounded by beings she couldn't see.

"All in good time.....You will need this."

The bowl was back on his lap, yet he still wasn't handing it to her. Laura instinctively buttoned up her blouse, noticing that all traces of the dreadful burning had gone from her skin.

"The key is yours..... As will be the last item you seek, the object you call the Circle of Arcardis. The other of your kind, the one who used to be a queen will need just the bowl, the dagger and the crystal. Do you understand that at least?"

"Yes."

"Good..... Be careful when you find the Circle, it isn't of this world."

Again it was as if he was teasing her, holding out the bowl, but not quite giving it to her.

"They have a warrior, one even stronger than you..... He may delay you leaving, but you will not be seriously harmed..... Now go."

Once her fingers grasped the bowl, the Scales of Pendally, the world changed again. No sense of falling, the change was instant and confusing. Laura was back in the library in Clufford Hall, with Mabina staring at her.

"What happened? You seemed to vanish for a few seconds."

One of the few times they'd planned ahead, Laura had a bag folded up in her pack, one big enough to hold the silver, jewel encrusted bowl.

"I have a lot to tell you, but it will have to wait." She said.

She handed the bag to Mabina.

"Take this, I still have one more warrior to fight."

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Patsy Smart suddenly had a new role thrust upon her by Simon. He'd been nice about it and she was actually quite excited by it all. A little real peril, though nothing that was likely to get her tied up in anyone's cellar again.

"We will sometimes need a cut off between us and the human world." He'd told her. "Plus I'm going to be working weird hours for quite a while."

She'd agreed, of course she had, she'd have happily done just about anything for him. It was love, she'd stopped trying to fool herself about that quite a while back. Eventually her mum was going to make noises about marriage and grandchildren, but she'd deal with that when it happened.

"Nice house, must be worth a few bob." Said Adam.

Adam and Kerry came as a couple, though Patsy still hadn't worked out if they were just friends or more than friends. She'd made the decision to make sure there was a woman among the guards she'd hired from the agency. If she was in Tasha's position, she'd have wanted another woman to chat to occasionally. There were six experienced body guards who were going to look after Tasha round the clock, and her cat Rocky. Adam and Kerry were going to handle the nightshift.

"I saw the curtains twitch, we'd better ring the bell." Said Kerry.

Patsy had given the agency a fairly good description of the potential threat from Bill's firm and Tasha's part in his current incarceration at Belmarsh. Adam and Kerry seemed motivated and intelligent; they'd get to know Tasha as they went along. Patsy rang the doorbell.

"Hi Tasha, it's me Patsy..... Simon sent me, we spoke on the phone."

"Yes, the agency called to confirm, they even gave me a security word."

"Wallsend." Said Kerry.

Tasha smiled and opened the door fully, letting them bring in the bags containing Adam and Kerry's overnight things. Patsy thought of a million things that needed explaining, but decided they'd all get to know each other.

"So you're Simon's friend..... I knew some female just had to have stamped her mark on him."

Patsy didn't mind being the other woman, especially when she was the other woman who was allowed to come round on pizza nights and watch Netflix. Explaining it to Tasha though ? No, she was unlikely to be a long term part of their lives.

"He is a bit special." Said Patsy.

"Those green eyes."

Oh, if only you knew how special he was..... Patsy helped bring the bags into the lounge, where Rocky was busy having a nap on the sofa.

"I'm glad you're here." Said Tasha. "I'm sure I saw the same car going past the house several times."

"We'll give you some dos and don'ts." Said Kerry. "Don't keep looking out of the window though, it just tells everyone you're home. The car was probably the police, they promised to have the occasional look at the house."

"So you work with the police, they know about you ?" Asked Tasha.

"Yes, close protection is legit these days, our boss even pays his taxes." Said Kerry.

"Or so he tells us." Added Adam.

Officially Patsy was paying the agency. Simon was coming up with the cash and he in turn was going to be reimbursed by someone called Cyril. It was a complex and murky deal, even involving a senior guy in the police. Patsy had listened to Simon explain it all, before deciding she didn't want to know too much detail.

"I'll get some tea..... Are you hungry ?" Asked Tasha.

"I'd kill for a hot and spicy pizza." Said Patsy.

The agency said they'd fend for themselves when it came to food, but both of the guards grinned at the mention of pizza.

"Pet Rocky only if he comes to you first.....He's been a bit bad tempered lately."

After saying that, Tasha vanished into the kitchen. Rocky walked across Kerry's lap, but hissed when she tried to scratch his head.

"A few days and he'll love me." She said.

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It wasn't just the sound of sirens, the reflection of blue and red flashing lights could be seen in some of the windows.

"Great, for once the local cops decide to be efficient." Said Mabina.

Some of the sirens might have been the fire brigade. Much of the rear section of the house was on fire and although Laura was no expert, she didn't think they'd be able to save much of the building. She'd done it again, yet another part of Britain's heritage destroyed by her hands. Actually it was a mixture of the guards' incendiary devices and her grenades, but Clufford Hall was inexorably turning into a pile of ash and rubble.

"So, who is this guy you have to fight?" Asked Mabina.

"I don't really know, but Horus said he was a better fighter than me."

"Horus..... You saw him again?"

"Yes, a full conversation. He said I'd have to fight another warrior better than me, though he won't kill me for some reason. He never mentioned you, so I think you should run away as soon as he appears."

"Trust me, I intend to..... You really did have a proper conversation with an ancient Egyptian deity?"

"Yes, but can we talk about it later? Now we should be getting out of here as quickly as possible."

The guards obviously weren't paid enough to risk being burned alive in the flames. No one challenged them as they ran or tried to shoot at them. There was one awkward moment getting past a fallen roof beam that was on fire, but otherwise they reached the rear doors of the house without too much trouble. Even the locked heavy doors weren't a serious problem.

"The table..... You get the other end..... One, two....." Said Mabina.

A heavy antique table that probably weighed the same as two men, propelled by two fairly angry vampires. The windows didn't stand a chance. Laura followed the table, jumping through the gap in the wall where the windows had been, Mabina close behind her.

"We're out, so much for your strange warrior." Said Mabina.

"He's there, in the trees, waiting."

It was that heartbeat again that belonged to something more than human. Daniel had told her there were quite a few strange mutations out there, some of them were even immortal, or close to it. She herself had been something slightly different, even before Simon had turned her. How many mutations out of the billions of humans who had walked the Earth at one time or another? Even Daniel wasn't sure, he just assumed it was a low number.

"Small enough to be lost in the background Laura." He'd once told her. "Vampires only spot them because you're moving at the same speed through history. Like you they change very slowly, if at all."

Laura gave her car keys to Mabina.

"If I'm not there in an hour take the bowl to Sam." She said. "Don't trust him though, Horus said you only need the bowl, the dagger and the crystal."

"I'll wait for you Laura."

“Go, go on.....Run.”

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Bill Jarrold had hoped a transfer to Belmarsh might mean an end to having to put up with cockroaches, but it hadn't, they were everywhere. The prison was no longer brand new though, it had been opened in ninety one. A long enough time for cockroaches to take hold, getting deep enough into the fabric of the buildings to ensure their survival. A nuclear war might shift them, but bug spray was never going to do it.

“Fucking solicitors.” He muttered.

The sun was coming up and he'd slept for less than an hour. Ryan, Steiner and Fain had sent a senior man into see him, but not a partner. He'd been hoping that Craig Fain might deal with his case, but it appeared he was too busy with other matters. Bill picked up a large cockroach from his mattress and squashed it against the cell wall.

“They'll regret crossing me, bastards.”

Bill still had some loyal members of the firm he could count on and there was quite a lot of money in a few offshore accounts. Helen knew where almost everything was and his wife had always been the one person he trusted. He only trusted her to a point of course, only idiots trusted anyone without a few reservations. Helen could get at the money in Bermuda, but only he knew about the Isle of Man property portfolio. That was his last line of defence cash, only to be used if there was no alternative.

“No touching my little pension plan.”

First he was going to work out a way of talking to his people on the outside. A change of solicitor would probably sort that out. Ryan, Steiner and Fain currently seemed about as much use as tits on a bull. Other pressing matters indeed, what a pile of crap. The murder of Olivia Reed was likely to make every news broadcast for the next year. It wasn't the sort of case his lawyers wanted associated with their new touchy feely brand.

“Bastards, they'll probably hold an office party when I sack them.”

Second on his list of things to sort out was Cyril. He was going to talk before he died and depending on what he said, Tom might be going too. Sad really, he'd known them both for years.

“There's no room for feelings like affection or nostalgia in modern business.”

He'd read something similar in the local rag once and had adapted it to his own style.

“Bastards.” He muttered, as he squashed another cockroach.

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Clufford Hall was going through its final hours. If someone was wealthy enough they could probably rebuild the old house, but it seemed unlikely. Laura had never heard of the place and it definitely wasn't on the tourist map for the New Forest. An old pile of stone, brick and wood that was fast becoming nothing but a pile of rubble. Laura dropped her backpack on the ground, along with her guns. He only had a blade about the size of her assassin's blade.

“Who are you ?” She asked.

She had to yell, they were still some distance apart. The emergency services were there in force, but none of them appeared to have seen the two people squaring up for a fight close to the woods. It was dark and the flames had to be blinding. Sirens were still shouting out to the world that a tragedy had occurred, even if everyone there already knew that. Enough noise to cover a fight between two humans who were more than human. He didn't answer her.

The assassin's blade Simon had given her was from the time of the Medici and was probably priceless. It had seen a lot of battles before she'd used it and quite a few since, yet there wasn't a single nick in the blue steel blade. No adjustments had ever been needed, no lumps of duct tape to

hold it together. The weapon had been created by a craftsman in Florence, during the renaissance and it was still perfect. He held up his blade and nodded at her.

Laura enjoyed fighting and her mind automatically ceased worrying about things like pain and death. The notion of self-preservation was still there somewhere, but only as a good idea, not a prime concern. First would come a little testing of his speed.... She ran at him, blade held high.

'Boom !'

Something exploded deep inside Clufford Hall, probably the gas pipes. Laura ignored it as her blade was blocked by his. He had strength, she was almost pushed backwards. One more strike that didn't get past his blade and they were apart again, pacing round each other like angry alley cats.

"You're strong, I'll give you that." She shouted.

How well could he see ? Everything about him was an unknown. Her mind had him as the only target she needed to worry about. Every move he made was accentuated by her visual cortex, everything else was rendered in grey. He made the next move, running at her before sidestepping at the last moment. As she moved his blade tried to pierce her shoulder, but she was gone. Laura turned quickly, aiming to stab him in the right eye. Crap he was quick, rolling away from her and springing up again ten feet away.

"Not bad." She yelled.

He was rubbing his upper arm and nodding at her. Had she ? Yes, there was a little blood on her blade, she had cut him without realising. Laura wanted to gloat about being better than him, about getting first blood. He was good though, very good, he deserved respect. She tasted the blood on her blade and simply nodded at him. Someone had seen them, there was shouting from the direction of the house.

"We need to finish this." She said.

He was fast but not that fast, he was skilled with his blade but she had tasted his blood. The one thought uppermost in her mind as she ran at him, was that he could be beaten, he wasn't invincible. Their blades met, running over each other five or six times. The voices of the police were clear now, shouting at them to stop.

"We've sent for the dog handler." One of them yelled.

Laura might have laughed if she hadn't been fighting for her life. She had yet to meet a dog that didn't run away from an angry vampire. He was stabbing at her, trying to find a way past her blocking blade. An exposed shoulder and she left him with a decent four or five inch scar to remember her by. Success was her undoing, a moment where exhilaration and excitement came before caution. As she stabbed hard at his face, he blocked her assassin's blade and twisted. The priceless blade given to her Simon broke in half.

"No !" She shouted.

Stupid to get so upset, Simon would have told that things were just things, they didn't really matter. Her concentration went and she felt his elbow hit her hard between her shoulder blades. He was so damn strong. The blow put her face down on the grass, waiting for the blade between her ribs, skewering her heart. The fatal blow never came.

Laura spun, jumping to her feet, the broken blade still clenched in her hand. The man was gone, she couldn't even sense his heartbeat.

"Stay there.....Don't move."

Two policemen shouting at her from some distance away and they didn't look keen on coming any closer. Laura put her broken weapon into her backpack and picked up her guns. The police moved even further away, but she had no intention of hurting them. They weren't worthy adversaries and

besides....Clara had given her a final warning about hunting Van Helsing. Laura ran, vanishing into the woods, heading towards where she'd left her SUV.

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