

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 18 – Bags of Salt

“Listen young vampire and remember my words. If you had a really big secret, the biggest of all secrets, where would you hide it ?”

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“To Giovanni they were the Dark Brotherhood and at the time I was still getting most of my knowledge from him.” Said Simon. “Later I found out they thought of themselves as a sort of holy fraternity, keepers of the sacred flame of knowledge.”

“You’ve yet to mention a woman’s name Simon.” Said Patsy. “Now a fraternity of brothers, but no sisterhood. Your world then seemed to be a bit of a boys only club.”

Chinese food had been ordered and they were watching something on TV with the sound down, a compilation of old Madonna videos being shown on a station he’d selected at random. Patsy had already given an oath to never divulge a word of what he was about to tell her.

“Seriously Patsy, people have died for talking about even knowing the great secret.” He’d told her.

“Alright.....I will take the oath seriously.”

Some of the seriousness of his warnings was for effect, but he really did know of several strange and unusual deaths among those who’d served the Medici, those who hadn’t kept their mouths shut. Unpleasant deaths that had involved nasty diseases that often took years to be fatal. Simon refilled their wine glasses and settled back to tell her everything. The entire story of a night in Florence he would never forget.

“It wasn’t really a boys club, though it looked like that on the surface.” He said. “There were clever women who knew how to wield power and influence behind the scenes. Many knew far more than Giovanni, though I never realised that at the time.”

The doorbell rang and by the time they had a coffee table covered in food that smelled wonderful, he’d lost track of where their conversation had ended up. Simon munched at a spring roll.

“Ahh yes, I’ll begin the night Giovanni told me the Brotherhood wanted to see me.”

“You’re not teasing me are you ?” Asked Patsy. “I will get quite annoyed if this conversation goes nowhere.”

“I promise you.....You’ll soon know us much as I do about the Brotherhood. They had a kind of motto above the door to their headquarters in Florence, their lair. It was really a plea for protection from.....”

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~ Then ~

~ Florence Italy – During the rule of the Medici ~

“Why me ? I’ve come with you because we’re friends.” Said Piero Rossi. “I don’t know these people though, apart from by their reputation, which isn’t good.”

“You can’t refuse a summons, even the Pope himself would think twice before upsetting them.”

There it was above the rear door of their headquarters, the door used by a few trusted individuals and those summoned to appear before them.

Sigillum Sanctum Fraternitatis

It made no more sense than Giovanni bringing him to see an influential religious order. The words seemed to be asking for protection, but who from ? The Brotherhood were ruthless and had few living enemies.

“Don’t all religious orders hate us ?” He asked. “Do they know you’re a vampire ?” He asked.

“They know Piero and they know you are too. I think that might have something to do with the summons, though I can’t be sure.”

Crap, they were both going to be killed, but Giovanni was right. No one ever refused an invitation to see the Brotherhood. Just coming up to midnight when Giovanni banged on the door with the hilt of his dagger. The Brotherhood it seemed were traditionalists when it came to the time for clandestine meetings. A small flap opened in the door.

“We’re expected.” Said Giovanni.

That was it, no names and the door opened up to allow them access to a garden at the rear of the building. As the door slammed shut behind them, Piero wondered if he’d ever see the outside world again. There were rumours about the Brotherhood having a prison area in the deepest of their cellars. It was a bit of a relief when they were allowed to keep their weapons.

“Do you even know who we’re seeing ?” Asked Piero

“No, stop asking so many questions. We’ll soon know why we’ve been summoned.”

The Brotherhood were wealthy, certainly wealthy enough to pay the wages of a lot of guards. Three armed guards stood next to the door they entered, with another two on the inside. Even if they weren’t that well trained, there were a lot of guards and they probably were well trained. Even two vampires would find it hard to fight their way out.

“You’re late.....This way.”

A hooded member of the Brotherhood, the first they’d seen and he was escorted by two more armed guards.

“My fault.” Said Piero. “I had duties to perform.”

Nothing more needed saying the Brotherhood would know he was employed as an assassin by the Medici. They were taken through a maze of corridors, none with windows. After going down several sets of stairs, Piero began to worry about the cells in the deepest cellars. The hooded man stopped in front of a door and turned towards them.

“They only want to see you. Giovanni will have to wait here.”

“That’s ridiculous, they know me.....They can trust me.” Yelled Giovanni.

More guards arrived, all watching the hooded member of the Brotherhood for a signal.

“You will wait here Giovanni, is that understood ? Your presence isn’t required tonight.”

“Very well.”

His friend, the man who’d turned him into a vampire, seemed to crumple up as he leant against the corridor wall. Piero had never known his friend to be scared of anyone, but he seemed to be worried about upsetting the man in the hood. One of the guards unlocked the door and once they’d passed through, he heard it being locked again.

“Not far now Piero Rossi.....Though the hour.....You were supposed to be here at exactly midnight.”

“Who will I be meeting ?”

No proper answer, though the hooded figure seemed to find the question amusing. He chuckled until they reached a red door with several strange characters painted at the corners. The man pushed the door open.

“Come inside.....You’re only the fifth person to enter this room and the first vampire.”

A circular room with about a forty foot diameter, well-lit by several oil lamps hanging from the walls. An almost empty room, apart from a table and two chairs in the centre.

"Sit my friend, sit.....Either chair will do."

Piero sat in the light of a single candlestick in the centre of the table. There was a carafe of red wine and two glasses next to the candlestick. A thought entered his head, it was obvious really.

"It's you I'm meeting, I understand that now."

The hooded man sat opposite him and poured them both a glass of wine. He pulled back his hood to reveal the face of a quite ordinary middle aged man with a tidy short beard. A man so ordinary that you'd walk past him in the street without noticing him. Even his smile was a little nondescript.

"You're right, you are here to see me. You won't find my name in any records of the Brotherhood, but I am Brother Alberti and I currently oversee the work of the Brotherhood."

"You're the boss, you run everything?"

Brother Alberti merely smiled at him and nodded. Piero relaxed and took a sip of the truly excellent wine. If the Brotherhood had meant to harm him, he'd have been chained up in their dungeons by now. He even leant back slightly in the hard wooden chair. No harm in being polite though, the Brotherhood had a long arm and a dangerous reputation.

"I am at your service of course." He said.

"Oh, you are Piero, you really are. You won't realise it until close to a millennia has gone by, but I'm about to change your entire life."

"My first duty is to serve the Medici, but....."

Brother Alberti banged the table and waved his hands, as if dismissing his words.

"Listen young vampire and remember my words. If you had a really big secret, the biggest of all secrets, where would you hide it?"

He had some recent experience of just such a problem. He had love letters from a woman of noble birth. If they were found and their contents read, he'd have to flee to save his life. He might even have to leave Italy.

"I'd keep it in a place no normal man can reach." He said.

Alberti seemed to like that, he actually applauded.

"Well done young vampire, I can see you've a brain as well as being useful with a blade. You're right, almost totally right. A secret was left, a truly huge secret. There are clues, the main one is the phrase that several have tried to claim as their own. Festina Lente."

"Make haste slowly.....Surely that's meaningless nonsense?"

"You might think so and many others have too. You'll find versions of those three words recorded right back to the beginning of writing, when people just cut notches into wooden sticks. Who left that hint for us, that clue? Most occultists think it was the ancient Gods, but I think it goes back even further."

"Surely there is only one God." Said Piero

There it was again, that smile that could have been an agreement, or something far more subtle.

"I can see why you'd say that my young friend." Said Alberti. "One day, after you've lived for a few hundred years, you may think differently. Do you still attend mass and take communion?"

"No, Giovanni told me that wasn't a good idea. Being on holy ground, drinking the blood of Christ.....He hinted at terrible consequences."

There was that smile again.

"Yes, well..... Holy ground does call for care, but only if you're being disrespectful, though again.....I think the underlying rules predate Christianity by a long way. Taking communion isn't disrespectful,

though I have heard of vampires being a little weak for an hour or so afterwards. Better that than questions being asked about why you no longer attend mass. Heretics are no more appreciated than vampires.”

“Giovanni never attends mass.”

“Giovanni is a fool and if he doesn’t die by his own stupidity, he’ll only ever be a low level assassin. You on the other hand.....Have such potential. Don’t let rumours start up about you.....Start attending mass again.”

It made sense and he definitely trusted the head of the Brotherhood more than Giovanni.

“I will....I’ll go this week.”

“Good, good.... I was telling you about the great secret, the greatest of secrets. Some have thought it was immortality, but that is easily within the grasp of any true adept of the dark arts. Some think they will be granted Godlike powers, but again.....To me at least, that sounds a little tame for such a great secret. Even the Gods must have limited powers, or the entire universe.....But I’m drifting, as I often do. In truth no one knows the nature of the prize, though it must be something very special.” Piero had to ask, even if Alberti thought he was being impertinent.

“Why am I here though ? I’m like Giovanni, a low level basher of heads and bringer of death for the Medici. I’m no adept of anything, or a scholar.”

“You’re not, but you are a vampire with a decent brain. There are steps to finding the great secret you see, steps that change a man. Firstly you need longer than the usual three score years and ten to find all the clues and steps along the way. Find a way to extend your life and the various changes will kill you anyway. It looked as though only one of the Gods could find the great secret. That I discovered over two hundred years ago and it was.....Disappointing.”

“Yes, I can see why it must have been very disappointing.” Said Piero.

Alberti laughed and filled both their glasses.

“Drink young vampire, drink. I’m about to send you on a journey you will never forget, or you can ignore me and remain....What did you call it ? Yes, a basher of heads. You see it occurred to me that only one type of human has a body that is fairly indestructible, though they’re not really that human anymore. But who am I to judge, perhaps Piero Rossi finding the great secret was written in time by someone greater than we can comprehend.”

“You mean vampires don’t you ? I still think you’ve got the wrong person, though I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Excellent... Let’s get Festina Lente dealt with. It sounds meaningless, but not if you’re looking for a secret that can’t be found in a single human’s three score and ten lifetime. Less haste dear Piero, don’t try to rush things. Find the steps and allow your body to change and develop. Alas my own body is unlikely to last for more than another hundred years, but I will help you where I can.”

“Thank you, where do I begin ?”

“I can see glimpses of the future and I do know a girl child will be important to you. That idiot Giovanni will find her somewhere and bring her home. Don’t let him harm her, she will be the key to.....You will have to find that out for yourself. I’m in Rome for much of next month, but then I will send you on various errands related to the great secret.”

“Thank you, but what if I get something wrong ? Will I lose the opportunity of solving the problem forever ?” Asked Piero

Alberti looked down at the table for a few seconds, as if thinking about an answer.

“Perhaps.....Though I doubt it. The old Gods haven’t gone away young vampire and they’re still powerful. You need to be noticed by them and I will think of things to send your way, now and in the

future. Ways to make sure you have the attention of the old Gods. Once you're noticed, I believe they will help guide your path."

"Thank you."

"I will see you when I return from Rome."

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"Does Clara know all this?" Asked Patsy.

Everything he'd just told her and that was her first question. Simon realised that if he lived for another eight hundred years, women would still sometimes surprise him. They'd eaten all the Chinese food and a lot of beer bottles were now empty, yet he couldn't remember doing it. There was a feeling of catharsis though, from finally telling the whole story to someone.

"Not really, though she is aware that I carry a burden through life."

"A burden?"

"I feel that I let Brother Alberti down Patsy. Niña died, I failed to save her from the flux. Alberti told me to seek for a sign, a new path to find the great secret. There was so much going on though, so many wars to be fought. When Alberti died, I stopped even trying."

"Surely Clara would understand? You should have told her."

"Telling a vampire though, someone who will be around for countless years, always by my side.

Knowing I'd abandoned a sacred duty I took an oath to complete...."

"Easier to tell a human girlfriend who'll be dead and buried in another sixty years or so." Said Patsy, He'd hurt her, he could see it in her face. No words were going to help, so he simply nodded at her. Again she surprised him by hugging him.

"Thank you for being honest." She said. "And yes....I do understand why telling Clara would be a very hard thing to do."

Hugging her gave him a chance to organise his thought and memories, it had all happened a very long time ago.

"Did you ever find anything to do with the great secret?" Asked Patsy.

"There were times when I felt different after something happened in my life, but I think that might have been my imagination. I thought finding Laura might be a sign, until she killed a Van Helsing and caused so much trouble."

"Yes, I love her like a sister....She is a bit wild though."

"Full on feral." He said.

They laughed for a while and it was as if the pieces of a jigsaw suddenly fell into place. He had the outer edge of the puzzle completed, he was sure of it. Now the rest of the puzzle should be easy.

"I am such an idiot."

"Yes, but anything specific Simon?"

"Alberti told me to get noticed by the ancient Gods. That must have happened when I went to Jerusalem with Clara. The crates we were given to us by a grateful Judith. The snake that still lies under the skin on my arm, the statue of the Dragon....Best of all, a way to step back in time and save Niña from the flux."

"I think you might be right."

"I know I am."

"How will you save the girl?"

"I'm not sure yet."

It might be as easy as leaving her a note to leave Florence until the flux outbreak was over. Simon was beginning to understand the cussedness of the universe though. It probably wasn't going to be that easy.

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The roadway needed lights of course, the beauty was wasted in the constant darkness. The flat even cobbles made out of what looked like the best marble. Balustrades down either side of the wide road, with beautiful statues every twenty feet or so. The sheer beauty of it all made it look out of place in the darkness of the grimy cavern.

"It definitely needs a few streetlights." Said Clara.

The hounds seemed to agree with her by giving a sorrowful long howl. Mabina quite liked the idea of something so exquisite being only seen by the dead on their way to the underworld.

"I like it as it is." She said. "Even the Gods are unlikely to waste their times on streetlights on the royal road of the dead."

"Only the pharaohs used this road." Said Liz. "The general hoi polloi use another path, though I'm not sure where that is."

"Yet." Said Clara.

They did all laugh. Liz and her promise of almost omniscient understanding of their predicament when it was effectively useless, had become a bit of a shared joke.

"I do know that this road will take us all the way to the twenty first gateway." Said Liz.

"Yay, no more trudging through mud and wading through streams." Said Clara.

Mabina loved the roadway, but as always, she thought first of the practicalities of their situation.

"How far to the 15th gate?" She asked.

"A long way, we'll need to find somewhere to sleep before we get there." Said Liz.

"We can all do without sleep for a while. How far is it?" Asked Clara.

"Twenty eight miles, maybe a little more." Said Liz. "A good road under our feet will help of course."

"And my feet already ache." Said Mabina.

Liz began walking down the centre of the royal road and almost out of habit, they followed her. The first couple of miles were fine, a decent walking surface felt so good under her feet. After about five miles it started to feel tedious and boring.

"I almost hope we find a hole in the road to have to walk around." Said Clara.

"It's like driving on a motorway." Said Mabina. "After a while you dream of crappy little B roads."

"We could walk on the cavern floor next to the road." Said Liz.

Clara looked at her and they shook their heads at the same time.

"I'm not that bored." Said Clara. "Not quite yet."

Their hounds were still roaming and coming back with bloodied snouts. Once one of them brought back half of something that looked like a large rat. It placed at it Liz's feet like an offering.

"Good boy." Said Liz, as she petted the huge hound.

"Pity you can't train it bring back pizza and prosecco." Said Clara.

None of them felt like picking up the half eaten rat, much less eating it. They'd probably walked about halfway to the next gateway, when Mabina noticed their hounds' noses looked to be wet.

"Wait.....Stop." She yelled. "I think your brutes have found water Liz."

All three of them fussed over the hounds, which the creatures actually seemed to enjoy.

"Definitely water." Said Clara. "Can you get them to take us to where they found it?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can." Said Liz.

The roadway had spoiled them. Clambering over the four foot high balustrade was easy, but scrambling over broken ground had never been that much fun.

"Slow down your brutes." Yelled Clara.

"I can sense where they are, it's not that far away." Said Liz.

For one dreadful moment, Mabina almost lost her footing on some loose rocks, but Liz grabbed her arm just in time.

"Thanks."

"I found Liz's brutes." Yelled Clara. "There's a waterfall.....Wow."

The hounds were scampering about like puppies around Clara, as she playfully threw handfuls of water at them. It would be their first opportunity to top their water bottles up in quite some time. Even Mabina felt the urge to get a little excited.

"Did you drink any of it Clara ?" Asked Liz.

"Yes, it's wonderful.....So clean and clear."

"You should have let me try it first. You remember, I'm the virtually unkillable one. Still, the hounds seem happy to drink it."

It looked like there was a good spot to camp quite close to the falls, a flat area with only a few rocks to clear out of the way.

"Can we officially call this our camp for.....What we call night ?" Asked Mabina.

"I was hoping someone would suggest that." Said Liz. "Of course our water bottles will be at the bottom of our packs again."

They were and then Liz suggested washing out their empty packs under the waterfall.

"Just to get rid of any blood residue from those dolls."

Nothing to use to make a fire, but their camp felt quite comfortable once they'd settled down with their lamps turned down to an almost cosy glow. Rations were getting low, but they still had enough food. Two vampires and a legendary guardian of the underworld, didn't need that much to eat.

"Damn, your beast has brought me another half-eaten rat." Said Clara.

"It must like you Clara."

Mabina noticed the bag of salt Liz had given her in London, they all had one at the bottom of their packs.

"Do we need the salt Liz ?" She asked. "The bag is getting grubby and it has to weigh a few pounds."

"I've become quite attached to mine." Said Clara. "I was thinking of naming it."

"Oh yes, the salt. Put it near the top of your packs, we will probably need it before we reach the seventeenth gate." Said Liz.

Mabina knew the question was probably going to lead nowhere, but she had to ask.

"Why will we need the salt then ?" She asked.

"They don't like it....It will deter them from following us."

"Who Liz ? Who will it deter ?" Asked Clara.

Liz just shrugged and smiled, which was the cue for quite a bit of laughter.

"There are times when our trudge through the underworld feels a bit like an old computer text game." Said Mabina. "Step into the darkness and get eaten by the Grue."

"Unless you have a bag of salt handy." Added Clara.

Poor Liz, they were teasing her quite a bit. Liz was digging about in the pile of stuff she'd emptied out of her pack. She held up something that glinted silver in the glow from their lamps.

"A flask of brandy I brought for the right occasion." Said Liz. "This seems to be the perfect occasion to drink it. Any takers ?"

“Oh yes, and I’ve still a tube of crisps somewhere.” Said Clara.

“Perfect, your dodgy memory is totally forgiven.” Said Mabina.

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A rainy night in Central London, which was perfect. Rain kept all but the most ardent tourists off the streets and the occasional dog walker. Rain also meant she could wear a hood all the time without looking suspicious.

“Are you in position Jim ?” She asked

A headset rather than a blue tooth device stuck in her ear, she’d heard too many anecdotes about them falling out if things got....Interesting. Just one earpiece on the headset, to leave her right ear free to hear what Akiva or Tim might be saying. The microphone was stuck right in front of her chin and reminded her of a rock concert rather than a heist.

“Ready.” Said Jim Weaver.

Her hacker would remain in the van, she’d agreed to steal the rings he wanted and perhaps a few other pocketable items at the same time. After all.....If she’d gone through all the effort to break in anyway....

“Are you two ready ?” She asked. “There is no changing your mind once we begin and I’m not leaving the museum without what I came for.”

They had guns, mainly to intimidate any guards who might want to be a hero. If an armed police team was sent in though, things might change.

“It’s what we came for Laura.” Said Akiva. “I won’t change my mind.”

“I won’t either.” Said Tim.

The rain picked up as the three of them crossed the road and followed the railings around the back of the museum. Jim was confident he could kill the power for about three blocks, including the electricity supply to the museum. That had sounded a bit like the plot to a bad movie though and anyway, the museum was bound to have a backup generator or two. Simon had raided a few museums and galleries in his time. Laura had listened and learned.

“Most small galleries and museums don’t think in terms of value.” He’d told her. “A weapon used by a famous person gets passed down through the generations, until poverty stricken Uncle Bertie has to open the decaying family home to the public. Just to make ends meet. Uncle Bertie has no idea the sword or axe is worth a small fortune. On the other hand the large and famous museums know all too well how sought after some of their exhibits are. When even major currencies are a little volatile, a few antiquities in a vault somewhere can be quite appealing.”

There’d be no lethal force waiting inside, it was London after all. Laura didn’t have to put on an act to pass as a local, she was a local, London was her home town.

“I can see the window, quadrant four.....Do your stuff.” She told Jim.

The Egg under her skin seemed linked to her memory, which was a pretty neat trick. She could travel to anywhere she’d visited before at any time in her life. She had to have been there though, or be able to see where she was going. Laura could see a cabinet through the window, lit up by the internal lights in the museum. Probably nothing special in the cabinet, but it was their way in.

“Hold on tight.” She said.

Akiva grabbed her jacket collar, while Tim wrapped his fingers around the belt on her jeans. The rainy night meant every sensible soul was indoors, as she used the Egg. No delays or unwanted detours through the realm of the Gods. A slight dizzy feeling and she was stood in front of the cabinet, her two partners in crime stood beside her. Everything in that part of the museum was dark.

“We’re inside.” She told Jim.

Jim had no idea how she'd entered the museum, she'd dropped a few hints about having an inside man on her payroll. The lights, the movement sensors and the ubiquitous security cameras, were now under the control of Jim in the borrowed Silver Dawn surveillance van.

"We need to move quickly." She said.

It felt strange to rush through the deserted museum, like frightened mice. Every move had been discussed and rehearsed over drawings and maps that might not have been 100% accurate. Every option had been thought about and given a simple code name in case of emergency. Jim had burst their bubble a little at the last run through, by being honest.

"I can turn off what I know about." He'd told them. "Easy in the areas where the public wander about, but in the heavily protected where they keep treasures like the Ankh.... There's a chance I might miss a movement detector."

Laura was keeping the idea of an alarm going off eventually as a certainty, it was the only way to stay alert and ready. They were sat on the floor behind a desk when the lights at the rear of the museum came back on. Lights had to come back on and sensors needed to operate, otherwise the computerised systems would notify someone.

"Everything I do will be logged, no way to stop that." Jim had told them. "With luck no one will look at the logs until we're long gone."

Missed sensors and a log file the computer might bring to someone's attention. It all sounded madness, but she had the Egg to get them out if things went pear shaped. She had no idea why going pear shaped was so bad, it was another of Simon's regular sayings.

"Stairs quadrant 1 next." She told Jim.

The lights near the stairs went out, though the emergency lights remained on. With luck there'd always be enough light to avoid using their flashlights. Laura crouched as she rushed for the stairs, the others following her. Down two flights of stairs and they were at a door no one seemed to have put on the plans. Obviously a new door, probably put in because of an obscure fire regulation.

"Fire door stairway 4. Need help."

"Sorry, not on the system."

"No problem."

It wasn't really, no wooden door deserved to be called a secure door, or so Clara had told her. Was it Clara or Simon who'd told her? Either way the idea was sound. Metal reinforced doors could be a problem for a vampire, but locked wooden doors.....They were just an annoying delay.

"Step back a bit guys, this might be messy."

She was learning from Jim in the same way she'd learned from Simon and Clara. Even the Tech Guys at the Silver Dawn had given her some golden hints, without realizing it. It was a weird hole in just about every alarm system, that almost none of them listened for intruders. Body heat, movement, pressure pads....You name it, but the systems were nearly always totally deaf. Laura had no worries about noise, as a single kick left the fire door dangling off its top hinge.

"Curator's offices 5 through 11."

Corridors were really the issue, none of the office contained anything of interest. Again Laura crouched and rushed, just in case a camera had been missed. Nowhere to hide at the top of the next set of stairs, so they huddled together near a small pile of fire extinguishers.

"This is easier than I thought it would be." Said Tim.

"Oh, for fuck sake." Muttered Akiva.

"We museum thieves are a superstitious bunch." Said Laura. "Never tempt fate that way again Tim, ever."

Poor Tim, he looked so forlorn that she had to give him a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Lower stairway, quadrant 7.” She told Jim.

The lower they went, the more things Jim had to locate and turn off. Then there was the time needed to double check that everything really was turned off. A lot to do, but the lights on the stairs went off after only about two or three minutes.

“Looks ok, but you might find another fire door.” Said Jim. “We’re moving streets.”

That wasn’t a problem or a hint that there might be. It had been agreed that Brendan would move the van about at regular intervals. They ran down the stairs to find a newly installed fire door. So new that the repaired plastering around it hadn’t even been painted over.

“Fuck the fire regulations and screw whoever put this in.” Said Akiva.

It was a solid door designed to jam itself against the door frame. A door put in to keep any fire in the bowels of the museum from entering the stairwell for as long as possible. A few kicks would bust it open, but there was another problem; the lights were on in the room the other side of the door.

“Jim, we’ve got a problem.”

No answer, the van was probably still getting into its new position. The Silver Dawn encrypted comms were state of the art and probably uncrackable. Only probably of course, only a fool claims that any form of communication was 100% secure. Highly directional though and very short range. Laura wasn’t in the mood to wait for Brendan to park the van and realign the antenna. She looked through the small window of wire reinforced glass and saw what looked like a wide section of corridor.

“I can’t reach Jim.” She said. “Time to use my boots on it.”

“We should wait for Jim, there might be a camera above the door, or a detector.” Said Tim.

Akiva was looking at her expectantly, there was no need to ask what he thought. Like her, he seemed to live for those brief moments of fear and violence that terrified most people.

“Jim, are you there ?”

Nothing.

“We’re against the clock.” She said. “A silent alarm could go off at any time. The first thing we might hear will be a lot of policemen in their size nines, clumping down the stairs.”

Not strictly true, as Jim was almost certain to see the Museum’s computer system react to an alarm going off. It made her feel justified though, in giving the door a hefty kick. A good door, the museum had obtained value for their money. Laura had to kick it four times before it flew inwards and banged on the wall of the corridor.

“Easy fuc.....” She almost said.

There had been a camera above the door and a movement detector, she could see them both once she was on the other side of the door. She could also hear the alarm system trying to wake up everyone in Great Russell Street.

“Laura.....Something huge just happened.” Said Jim.

“Yeah, that was me I’m afraid.”

“The alarm system is calling everyone and shouting for help.”

“Can you stop it Jim ?”

“No, too many independent subsystems. I might be able to quieten it down a bit though.”

The moment had come to grab her guys and run of course, press the disc against her ribs and leave the museum with its shrieking alarms. She had promised herself not to leave without the Ankh though, a promise she meant to keep.

“Turn off everything between us and where they keep the Ankh Jim.”

"That'll take a few minutes."

"Do it Jim. I don't want anything to get in our way and I don't want their computer to know where we're heading."

"Alright."

She'd expected Akiva to begin telling her they needed to stay, while Tim told her they should leave before the police arrived. Instead her troops were strangely silent, leaning against the wall, waiting. It took seven very long minutes before Jim's voice was back in her ear.

"It's done, though I can't guarantee you won't find another new fire door."

"We can deal with those. Leave now Jim, get Brendan to take you to the hotel."

"You might need my help."

"Go Jim, get away from WC1, you've done what was needed. With luck I'll have those rings you wanted when we meet again."

"Alright..... Good luck."

He'd done something, the alarms were quieter, but they hadn't stopped.

"Come on, we need to run." She said.

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It was cold and the ferocity of the water hammering over the falls was probably bruising her skin, but Clara liked their camp with its built in shower and constant supply of fresh water. Strange blind insects had arrived to eat any food they hadn't cleared away, which had surprised Liz.

"No light, so no plants, so no bugs. Yet here they are." She'd said. "It explains what the creatures eat that our hounds are catching."

"Your hounds Liz, they're nothing to do with me." Mabina had told her.

Just about all her clothing was a little smelly, but she'd washed out a few pairs of knickers before going to bed. They were dry to the touch, so she pulled on a pair before dressing.

"Oh, bliss."

"What's bliss?" Asked Liz.

"Clean.....Or at least clean-ish panties."

"Damn, I never thought of doing that." Said Mabina. "I'd kill for some clean new knickers, fresh out of the wrapper."

"Well.... Don't think you're getting mine." Said Clara.

Her clothes actually felt heavier each morning with the grime and dirt, though she had nothing else to wear. She was keeping one clean set of clothes to wear when they'd reached the final gateway and Liz could take them home. Liz didn't seem to enjoy buttoning up the shirt she'd been wearing for a while.

"Maybe the shower was a mistake." Said Liz. "It makes my clothes feel so crusty."

"And smelly, we all stink a little." Said Mabina.

"We stink a lot and the blood on my jeans is attracting the blind cave bugs." Said Clara. "Nothing can be done about it, we're not going to find a legendary laundry of the afterlife."

"We could wash everything and hang about for a day or so until it dries." Said Mabina.

Even she had obviously only half meant it. Everyone wanted one thing above everything else, to get to the final gateway and then get home. Clara was still daydreaming about sex with Simon, under crisp clean sheets, when they were back on the road and trudging again.

"How far Liz?" She asked.

"Eleven miles, maybe twelve."

The marble cobbles they were walking on were beautiful and Clara kept herself free of boredom by finding patterns in the swirls of yellow in the white marble. Eventually she was back to the routine of walking forward, following Liz, without really thinking about it. Running on mental autopilot was dangerous, but she couldn't help it.

"Wow, look at that." Said Mabina.

"What.....Where ?"

Clara found herself trying to get her weapon ready, while trying to shake off brain fog. There was no enemy, just another beautiful waterfall quite close to the road. It was a gorgeous sight, as their lamps created hundreds of small rainbows as they hit the water droplets.

"Yeah great.....Can I go in the lead for a while ? I was gone there for a bit, no idea where I was."

"Sure Clara, no problem." Said Liz.

"I drifted a bit for a while.....Think of the people you hate, I mean really hate." Said Mabina. "Anger is good at keeping you awake."

"Thanks, I'll give it a try."

Anger worked fairly well, though she discovered that pouring cold water over her head worked far better. By the time they saw the creatures standing in front of the fifteenth gate, she was wide awake.

"Do you think these ones will run away like last time ?" Asked Mabina.

"Not this time." Said Liz. "They've chosen their spot and intend to stop us, I can feel it."

Liz dropped her pack on the road, which was a good sign that mayhem was about to begin. The hounds were growling and keeping close to Liz.

"The gateway looks interesting." Said Clara. "A nice pointed arch makes a change from the usual Stonehenge style uprights with a lintel on top."

The gateway was a section of wall, with a pointed arch made of dark stone built slightly in front of it. Nothing fancy, but most of the gateways had been fairly basic. The trick seemed to be getting past the dozen or so creatures so that Liz could activate the gateway.

"Do you know what the creatures are Liz ?" Asked Clara.

"They're another creation of Anubis, though another probably now controls them. Very tough and very dangerous. Try to keep your distance and keep slashing and stabbing at them."

"But they can be killed ?" Asked Mabina.

"Yes, they will die.....It won't be easy though."

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