

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 1 - Old Royal Naval College

"The Silver Dawn sniper could be hiding anywhere and the first sign they were there might be just a slight muzzle flash. By then it could be too late, they'd have fired their first shot."

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~ Simon ~

Spring had arrived in London; it was a warm, rain free night in early May. Simon Atherton sat on the roof of the Old Naval College in Greenwich, watching patrons coming and going from the nearby Trafalgar Tavern. A light breeze rustling the new leaves on the trees made it hard to make out words, but he could hear the occasional loud voice and laughter, from those parking their cars in Park Row. One couple even stopped for a kiss before walking towards the riverside tavern.

"There is something about observing without being observed." He said.

"Some would call us peeping Toms." Said Clara Copley.

For two vampires the rooftop offered a feast for their senses. The usual sights, sounds and aromas of spring, mixed in with the sensations coming from the river traffic on the Thames. To make the night perfect, there was also the potential for violence, perhaps even a chance to feed.

"I know I always say Giovanni talked crap most of the time." Said Simon. "He was good at the tactics of staying hidden though. He taught me about the benefits of keeping to the rooftops."

"You once told me he had two left feet."

Simon had to chuckle. Giovanni had turned him, giving him the questionable gift of immortality. For an assassin for the Medici though.....He really did once fall off a garden wall. Luckily it had been a low garden wall.

"Poor Giovanni, he never seemed cut out to be an assassin." Said Simon. "I often wonder if he survived to see the arrival of the twenty first century."

"I can see movement." Said Clara.

The two hundred year old tavern with its clientele had nothing to do with why they were in Greenwich. They were there to guard Jake Rice, even if he was totally unaware of their presence. The Old Royal Naval College was now used by the University of Greenwich. If you wanted, you could hire one of the ornate rooms, to hold a conference, or a private meeting. That was exactly what their old enemies had done, the Psochic Order.

"Didn't the Psochics try to kill you, several times." He'd said to Laura. "Surely if someone wants the new head of their order out of the way..... Shouldn't we be cheering them on?"

"It's about keeping them fighting each other without anyone actually coming out on top. I must admit I wasn't sure about guarding him, until Mabina explained it. If the Order of the Silver Dawn manages to kill Rice, they'll become far too powerful."

It made sense, even if it went against his natural tendency to want every enemy dead, drained of blood and buried. That conversation with Laura had taken place ten days before. Neither he nor Clara had seen Jake Rice, but there were pictures online of the famous collector of antiquities. It was Rice who'd once owned the Half Moon of Thoth.

"It's definitely him, we should move." Said Clara.

He didn't doubt her, vampire vision was as good as the best night sight. Simon concentrated on the group of figures moving across the square below. At one time the Naval College was almost

infamously dark at night, like an imposing shadow on the south bank of the Thames. Universities don't like the dark though, they'd installed decent lighting along all the outside pathways. Simon didn't really need vampire eyesight to recognise Jake Rice.

"I'll go to the right." Said Simon.

"Festina lente." Clara said to him, before running across the roof to their left.

Festina lente, Make Haste Slowly. It had been the Medici family motto. Simon had taught it to Laura, who'd used it in front of Clara. So now of course, it had become their motto, the saying all three of them used. Many thought the Medici motto was a piece of nonsense, but they just didn't understand it. Simon did, though he'd take the secret to his grave.

"You look so ordinary Jake." He muttered. "No one would believe a secret occult order wants you dead."

Just the average middle aged businessman in a suit, walking with a group of well-dressed business people. Mabina wasn't sure if the threat was genuine, but it was definitely credible. The Order of the Silver Dawn had a little previous, they'd already made one failed attempt on Rice's life. Mabina had heard a rumour, so there they were, trying to keep an enemy alive.

"I hope you hired the same caterers as last time Jake."

Simon was close enough to hear them, though he only recognised three people out of the dozen or so walking below. A tall attractive woman in a grey business suit had asked about the catering.

"Oh yes, Julio was free to look after us this evening." Said Rice.

Vampires can move far faster than a human and one of the few things Hollywood got right was the extra strength. Simon's muscles were denser than human tissue though and subsequently heavier. He really could drop from the roof into the flower bed below, without being damaged. Physics would create a thump though, as his feet hit the soil. No training or experience gained over countless centuries could stop that.

"Just move a little further away Jake." Simon muttered.

Human hearing was fairly crap to begin with and deteriorated over time. When Simon dropped from the roof, he was fairly certain no one would hear the thump as his feet hit soft soil. No jumping, he simply stepped forward far enough to miss the guttering and dropped like a stone. A little effort required to keep him from ending up in an undignified heap on the ground, but he'd dropped from far higher. He peeked between two bushes.

"There they go with their shit hearing." He muttered.

Simon rubbed his shoes together to remove loose soil, before walking fast enough to keep up with the Psochics, without catching up with them.

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~ Clara ~

Clara had the longest distance to run, right along the top of the building that ran parallel to Park Row. Then she had to head west and try to arrive at the building being used for the Psochic's meeting, at about the same time Jake Rice arrived. She found herself enjoying it all; the leaping over obstructions, the thrill of seeing without being seen. Clara Copley had been born five hundred and twenty five years ago, yet at times like this.... She still felt like an energetic young child. Even the danger was fun; actually especially the danger.

"I'm hungry Zoë and you know Sam, he'll probably be a no show again."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I don't need his shit right now."

Two female students, standing right under the covered walkway Clara needed to run along. Luckily their shared disdain for the infamous Sam, was causing them to walk away. It gave Clara time to

adjust the scarf stretched across her face. It was a warm night, but it was only May after all. A scarf nonchalantly pulled across her face wouldn't cause any surprise if she was seen. It was a university campus with quite a few cameras in key spots. Some form of disguise was essential.

"These days, if you get your face into a police database, you might as well leave the country."

Or so one of Tom's techy geeks had told her. Laura had once laughed at her precautions against being caught on a camera, but even she went out 'scarfed up' now.

"Come on Zoë." She muttered. "He's not coming. Piss off and get drunk on cider or something."

No leaping onto the covered walkway, at least not from that height. As the two girls drifted away, Clara used the gaps between the stonework to quickly scramble down the side of the building. No hanging off drain pipes, she'd had one or two nasty surprises when fixing bolts hadn't taken her weight. She dropped the last ten feet, hearing a clang as her feet hit the walkway roof. No problem, the two girls were in the middle of what looked like a fierce argument.

"Can't be late, Simon will dine out on it for years." She mumbled.

Simon was older than her, born in thirteenth century Pisa. He always joked that his next big birthday was going to be surviving to be a thousand years old. He also had the misguided idea that being older than her made him wiser than her. A misconception she was determined to prove wrong. Clara ran along the walkway roof at speed, faster than any animal on the planet could have matched. She crouched down when she saw the Psochics arrive at the hall where they were having their meeting. A meeting after a superb banquet it seemed.

"I do hope Julio does something with truffles again." Someone said.

"Oh yes, the man is a genius with truffles." Said a woman in a grey suit.

It happened sometimes, with reflexes honed and perfected by her unconscious mind over centuries. It might have been an out of place sound, or movement out of the corner of her eye. Whatever the reason, Clara found herself leaping off the roof and grabbing hold of Jake Rice.

"I know her.....It's one of them.....A vampire." Someone shouted.

Clara cursed whoever in the university had decided to install lights everywhere. She felt like a bird trapped inside a very well-lit cage. None of the attendees of the meeting were likely to be armed, but they'd have guards nearby who would be.

"Stop struggling Jake, I'm here to help you." She yelled.

There was no one near her as she struggled with the new leader of the Psochics. The pain in her shoulder had to have been caused by a bullet. Any human would have gone down, left sprawling on the ground and screaming for help. Clara wasn't human, she picked Rice up in her arms and ran for the doors to the function room.

"Fuck !" She shouted.

The second bullet hit her lower back, somewhere near her right hip. If she hadn't moved, it would have probably hit the centre of her back. A bullet through the heart would kill her as easily as it would kill a human. Her vampire body was incredible tough and healed fast, but destroy her heart or brain and she'd die. Clara crashed through the doors, before dropping Rice on the floor and trying to cover him with her body.

"Get off me." He said.

"Keep still, I'm here to keep you alive."

"You..... You're one of them."

Her back hurt like hell and her right leg was becoming numb; never a good sign. She just wasn't in the mood to explain inter-cult politics to Rice, even if he was prepared to listen.

"We decided it's best for us with you alive." She said.

No fool, he wouldn't have been elected leader of his order if he had been. He understood, nodding at her and ceasing to struggle.

"Who do you think it is?" He asked.

"The Silver Dawn, we heard a rumour about tonight."

The two doors hadn't quite closed, leaving a tantalising glimpse of the horror going on outside. Lots of gunfire, though it was impossible to tell who was fighting who. Whoever it was, gunfire was bad news. Someone was bound to call the police and they had the biggest gang in town. No one wanted to fight it out with the police, no one.

"I'm assuming you brought armed guards?" She asked.

Jake Rice nodded.

"The best, they'll give their lives to protect me."

There was a growing pool of blood near her hip, and sadly it was her blood. Through the gap in the doors she saw someone fall to the ground. Still a lot of gunfire out there. So infuriating not knowing who might be winning. Simon was out there though and he was worth ten of anyone's guards. Ten at least, probably more.

"We're going to die." Said Rice. "Seems so stupid, dying at a routine meeting after all the things I've been through."

"I didn't come alone, we'll be alright." She said.

How many armed guards were there? The firing seemed to go on and on. When the screaming started, she was sure she'd seen Simon run past the gap in the doors. Eventually there was silence, apart from the sound of sirens. Probably not heading towards the Old Naval College, but they reminded her of the need to get away, quickly.

"We should be leaving." She said.

Fast healing only went so far, her shoulder still hurt like hell. Unlike in the movies, real vampires needed bullets to be removed before healing completely. Her hip was the worst problem, her leg was beginning to go numb all the way down to her toes.

"Where will you take me?" Asked Rice.

"Wherever you want to go." She replied. "You're not our prisoner. We really did come here to keep you alive."

Clara pulled her Yemeni Janbiya out of its scabbard. A short curved blade, the weapon had killed many of her enemies, even others of her kind, a vampire or two. She placed herself between the door and Jake Rice, the blade held up and ready.

"Don't run, no matter what happens to me." She said. "Simon will come to protect you if I fall."

"Do you think all my people are dead?" He asked.

No point in lying or trying to sugar coat it, she just nodded at him. The doors opened with a crash, revealing one of the biggest men Clara had ever seen. She didn't recognise the man, though she did recognise the assassin's blade sticking out of his side. Simon followed the huge man in, pushing him to the ground in front of her.

"I saved you one, a big one, plenty of blood." Said Simon. "I knew you'd need to feed after I saw the first bullet hit you. Drink quickly, my blade bit a little too deep."

Once the heart stopped beating, the blood became bitter and unpalatable. Clara could feed neatly, leaving no trace of blood on the ground. There was a need to drink quickly though, the blood would greatly increase her speed of healing. Plus the police were probably already on the way. Clara bit a large ragged hole in the man's neck, biting into his jugular vein. Never an artery, only fools and the newly turned were stupid enough to open an artery. Arterial blood ran too fast and too freely, killing

before a tenth of the blood had been drunk. As it was, with such a large wound.....Clara drank quickly, ignoring the blood pouring down her face, her neck and onto her clothes.

“Are you hurt ?” Simon asked Rice.

No answer. Clara looked up to find Jake Rice staring at her as she fed. He’d probably never seen a vampire feed, certainly not one feeding as messily as her. Blood everywhere, the large man still moving and alive. It had to be traumatic for a human to witness, even one of the Psochics.

“Don’t be scared Jake.” She said. “I need to feed so that my wounds will heal.”

After that it took her, the euphoria of feeding which made her feel almost drugged. For a few moments she was helpless, relying on Simon to protect her if it was needed.

“I need an answer Jake.” Persisted Simon. “Are you hurt ?”

“No, none of the blood you see is mine.”

“Good, you’ll need to go with us. There’s one of the Silver Dawn killers still out there and he’s very good. He never attacks us, but I’ve no doubt he’d kill you if you stay here.”

Clara felt so much better, for a start she now had feeling in her leg again. She stood up, though the pain in her shoulder was still bad. The bullet had probably bounced around a bit, causing havoc with the joint. It would heal though, everything always healed.

“Where is Laura ?” She asked.

“She killed the sniper who was shooting at you.” Said Simon. “Then she went after the really good one, the assassin she seems to know. The last thing I saw of her, she was chasing him over the roofs, heading towards the Cutty Sark. Don’t worry, she’ll find her way home.”

Clara felt far better, a stomach full of blood always had that effect. There was still a slight wooziness, like the effect of too much wine on an empty stomach. That too would pass once she was on the move. Sirens now, definitely heading their way.

“Come on, we need to get out of here.” She said.

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~ Laura ~

Laura had found a spot on the roof of an old chapel. A perfect spot to cover Simon and Clara, if there was an attempt on the life of Jake Rice. She owned a few sniper rifles, three to be precise, though Simon insisted on calling it her collection. The first had been American, acquired for her by Tom Ives who ran a car breakers yard in Erith. Tom had connections and the rifle was good, but not perfect.

“There you go, can’t have you getting scratched.”

She muttered while resting her current sniper rifle on the thin padding material, she’d already placed on the edge of the parapet. Her second rifle had been her own choice, though Olga had made a few recommendations. A variant of the Russian SV-98, with modified grip and a better suppressor. An accurate kill range of a thousand metres, firing standard 7.62x54 Russian ammunition. She still loved the SV-98, the way some mothers dote on a child who isn’t quite perfect.

“That food smells so good.” She muttered. “I just hope they get a chance to eat it.”

The caterer had arrived before her, someone all his staff called Julio. She’d watched them come and go, remembering their unique features just in case here was a fire. She had them all in her mind now, every junior cook and waiter. She’d be able to recognise their walk at distance and in the dark. Her third and current sniper rifle had been custom made for her by a genius in Munich. The German had seemed so unassuming, so ready to listen to her ideas. Loosely based on the German DSR-Precision DSR-50, but completely redesigned and fitted with a far better blast compensator. Using the .50 BMG ammunition made it a genuine anti-materials weapon, as well as being a highly accurate sniper rifle. Put simply, if someone was hiding behind a wall, her new sniper rifle would

penetrate the wall to hit them. The German genius had charged her a small fortune to create the weapon and she hadn't begrudged a single euro of the cost. Only a small clip, but with a sniper rifle.....If you couldn't get it done with five shots, you should have brought an Uzi.

"At last.....Nice landing Clara."

She barely heard Clara land on the covered walkway, so no human was likely to have heard the sound. Laura watched, as Clara adjusted the scarf around her face, while waiting for two female students to move away.

"Come on Clara, I can hear the Psochics below me."

Clara was running, at a speed no human could have matched. If there was going to be an attack on the Psochics, it would probably happen about now, while they were gathered in a group outside the conference suite. Laura had the sight on the side of her rifle, it felt easier to use that way. She'd already adjust the sight for the range, but another sniper might be anywhere. There was one, she could feel in her water, as Clara often said.

Where were they though? So many high roofs, towers and even a couple of domes. Normally she could see enemies, sense their presence. Recently though, the occultists had become far better at hiding from her. The Silver Dawn sniper could be hiding anywhere and the first sign they were there might be just a slight muzzle flash. By then it could be too late, they'd have fired their first shot.

"Here we go." Laura mumbled.

She felt the certain something Clara had felt, though she too couldn't have described it to save her life. Laura was the newbie of the North London vampire coterie, and by her own admission she still had a lot to learn. Turned by Simon to save her life, though she suspected he'd done it to see if he could. She was a genuine twenty six year old, the only one of them with a genuine passport and driving license. Real personal ID was so rare, that they'd bought the house in Hornsey using her name. Vampire groups were rare too, rarer than unicorn poo. Usually their kind were territorial loners, who viewed all other vampires as a threat. Three living happily together in one house.....That was rarer than an honest lawyer. As Clara leapt at Jake Rice, Laura scanned the roof tops searching for the sniper she knew had to be there, somewhere.

"Bastard." She muttered.

A muzzle flash, near the edge of a dome some distance away. A long shot, though easily within the range of a decent weapon. By the time Laura had the sniper centred in her night sight, there was another muzzle flash. Firing quickly, which usually meant losing accuracy. Laura fired just once, aiming just the right distance behind the muzzle flash. No scream, but she saw the sniper topple forward and fall. Good..... Simon must have heard the body hit the ground below and know the sniper was no longer a problem. Laura quickly moved her rifle, looking at the scene in front of the conference suite.

"Well..... No dead Jake Rice or Clara fighting for her life."

Guards and drivers from both sides began to appear from wherever they'd been told to wait. Quite quickly there was the sound of automatic weapons coming from the relatively small space. Tempting to let them kill each other, they'd only come with the objective of keeping Rice alive.

Laura recognised a large man she'd seen before. He'd fired at her during one of recent raids on buildings used by The Order of the Silver Dawn. She fired once, seeing a splash of red on his chest, before he crumpled to the ground. It was a mess down there, everyone seemed to be hacking at everyone else, often with anything they could grab out their car's toolkit. One Silver Dawn driver had already felled two Psochics with a jack handle.

"I hope you stay well away from that mess Simon." She muttered. "Let the herd thin itself out a bit."

Still no sign of Rice or Clara, she assumed they'd made it through the solid looking double doors and were inside the banqueting suite. One more shot at a Silver Dawn face she recognised and Laura decided to go and find Clara. It was too easy sitting on a roof using the rifle. Like shooting large fish in a very tiny barrel. There was no vampire code of honour or battle etiquette. It was just boring if there was no challenge, no personal risk.

Laura packed away her much loved sniper rifle, carrying it over her shoulder as she clambered down the outside of the building. Just before leaping the final few feet to the ground, she noticed the blue flashing lights coming along Trafalgar Road. The police were about to arrive, quite a few of them judging by the number of vehicles.

"Time we weren't here." She muttered.

He was there, on an area of grass not that far from her. She'd first seen him when Clufford Hall was going through its final hours. Her fault really and not the only bit of English heritage she'd inadvertently burned to the ground. True it had been a Silver Dawn property, perhaps stronghold wasn't too strong a word. 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 had fast become nothing but a pile of rubble. All her doing and she still felt guilt at destroying so many things of beauty contained within the old building. He'd been there, the human male who'd nearly beaten her in a fight.

"You!" She yelled at him. "Here.... Right now.... Let's get this finished."

It was the man dressed in black, the same man who'd broken the Medici assassin's blade Simon had given her. Laura had managed to replace the blade by stealing a similar weapon from a museum. So easy to steal from museums if you're a vampire with all that extra speed and strength. She'd made a pledge on that blade, while all alone in her room one night.

"He'll feel this blade as it bites into his heart.... That I swear."

She pulled the blade from her belt, holding it in her hand as she ran at him. She passed Simon on the way. He seemed to be waiting for the two groups of occultists to wipe each other out.

"The police are close and there are many of them." She told him.

"Come with me Laura. You know he'll keep running and refuse to face you."

"Tonight will be different, tonight I will catch him."

She ran, climbing up buildings if he went up, coming down to the ground when he did. There was something odd about how he felt to her. Human most of the time, with a human heart beating in his chest. Sometimes though he was much more, though she had no idea what he was. Tonight was going to be different, she was certain of it. She followed him high, right up among the masts of the famous Cutty Sark.

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~ **Mabina** ~

Of course pouring the concrete made sense. Mabina Gladitch still didn't like the idea of covering the cellar's dirt floor with tons of concrete. She walked slowly over the floor, remembering when the energy it contained had saved her life. Mabina dug the toe of her shoe into the ground, hating what had to be done, yet knowing it was essential.

"They'll be here in the morning." Said Brendan. "Once the pouring starts it can't be stopped."

"I know Brendan; we've gone over it lots of times." She said. "I won't stop them at the last moment. You have to let me grieve a little though. This floor has saved my life and rejuvenated my body."

"How many are buried here?" He asked.

No harm in telling him, he knew her true nature. She knew plenty about him too, including the fact that good old friendly Brendan had killed the last head of The Psochic Order. When it came to having dirt on each other, it was a matter of mutually assured destruction if one of them talked.

“Clara once tried to work it out and came up with somewhere between four and five thousand.”

“Five thousand.... No wonder it needs to be buried under concrete.” Said Brendan. “If the police ever had cause to start digging.....”

“I know Brendan, I know. All the centuries of making humans believe we’re nothing but a fantasy could be undone. If they began to believe in vampires again.....Yes, I know the floor needs to be covered. I do worry how it might react.”

“The floor will react ?” He asked.

“It might react, I’m not sure.” She replied. “The hungry ground was created according to instructions in the ancient books of my family. To be honest I never believed it would work, until it brought me back from the dead. It’s a conduit for the powers of the dark forces no one has really understood for thousands of years. If they think covering it is an ungrateful act.... There are personal risks for me.”

“I see.” He said.

Of course he did, Brendan had been a devoted acolyte for quite some time, even calling her his queen. He was now free of her influence, a paid employee. It was useful that he owned a building repairs business and could arrange for the concrete to be poured by people who didn’t ask too many questions.

“You’d be amazed how many people in Chelsea are building basement rooms.” He’d told her. “It’s a sign of the times I suppose, staying home in your own private pool or underground cinema. Everyone seems to be pouring concrete these days.”

In the event of her death, the house would pass to an offshore company. That in turn was managed by a firm of solicitors in Jersey, who’d been told to accept instructions from Simon or Clara in the event of her being uncontactable for a year and a day. There was continuity now, no reason for anyone from the police or the local council to come and look through the house in Chelsea. It had been their house, the home she’d shared with Roy for a very long time.

“It seems like burying memories of Roy.” She said.

Mabina always cried when memories of Roy surfaced. Not many tears, just a single hot salty tear from her left eye. Roy had been one of her finest warriors, when she’d been queen of much of the area in the east now called Romania and Bulgaria. Not called Roy then, he’d taken several modern English names over the years.

“You must have really loved him.” Said Brendan.

“To be honest, I didn’t, not as first. He was a necessity at a time when women didn’t travel the world alone. Turning him into an immortal companion was a necessity too. Over time he became a habit.....But eventually I did love him.”

“I can understand that.... And then Clara killed him. Do you still hold a grudge ?”

“Of course I do, they didn’t even leave me anything to bury. I won’t seek vengeance though, what’s done is done and I have to be honest.... I’m now quite fond of all three of those North London vampires. Let the concrete pour Brendan. Let it bury the past.”

“Liz is expecting me, but I could call her.” He said. “We could get a takeaway and open a bottle of wine.... If you wanted to ?”

“No, I wouldn’t hear of it.” She said. “Despite my immense age, I’m not incapable of getting through tonight on my own. How is Liz ? You must bring her over one evening.”

“Good idea.....She’s fine, discovering new facets to her identity all the time. Those are her words by the way, not mine. She still manages to scare me sometimes, which is cool and exciting.”

“I can remember when I scared you.” She said.

Oh, how he’d changed. Brendan the scared rabbit was actually grinning at her.

“You still scare me my queen.”

“Dear Brendan, always knowing just the right thing to say. Now get home to Liz..... And be sure to give her my regards.”

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~ **Akiva Yatsko** ~

They must have been seen, hurtling over roofs in Greenwich, or while fighting up high in the rigging of the Cutty Sark. Laura had a nasty cut on her left arm, but it wasn’t serious. It cheered her to see his blood, leaving drips on the ground, right up to the point where he’d decided to stand his ground.

“At least five times we’ve fought.” She yelled. “At least tell me your name.”

“They call me Akiva, the protector. My full name is Akiva Yatsko.”

So, he could actually talk. Talking was good, talking might mean finding out a few things about him, before her blade pierced his heart.

“What sort of name is Akiva Yatsko ?” She asked

“What sort of name is Laura Selway ?”

Her name didn’t sound as hokey as his, but he had a point. They’d travelled further than she thought, her mind on fighting, rather than geography. Past the entrance to Greenwich Foot Tunnel, they’d ended up on the gravel covered bank of the Thames. Laura had fought on the banks of London’s river before, she understood how everything seemed just a thin covering over the mud.

They’d fought Mabina’s husband on the river bank mud near Chelsea Harbour. An awful place to fight, she’d ended up with a mouthful of river mud, complete with wriggling worms of some kind.

“Why didn’t you kill me ?” She asked. “You had a chance that night at Clufford Hall.”

“You know why, he told you I wasn’t allowed to harm you.....I wanted to....Oh, how badly I wanted to ram my blade into your back.”

“Who told you ?” She asked.

“Come on Laura, neither of us are fools. You know who I mean, the one we both really serve. You’ll find you can’t use a killing blow on me either. We’re his toys.....Prancing about each other, slicing off bits of each other’s flesh, but ultimately getting nowhere.”

Was he right ? Laura thought killing him was the most important thing in her life right now. Yet there had been the night when he’d waited for her near her SUV. She’d had him.....All it needed was a thrust of the blue steel blade she carried. Had she hesitated, or was there something else going on ?

“Nonsense, we’ve got free will. Try to kill me now.... If you have the skill.” She shouted.

The gravel was just a thin veneer over the ever present filthy mud. Laura tried a few moves Simon had shown her and could have cut Akiva’s head from his shoulders. He had a chance of badly wounding her right side, but the blow never landed. Nearly an hour later, both covered in slimy grey mud, they sat facing each other.

“See..... Pointless.” Said Akiva. “We can’t kill each other, or even inflict serious harm.”

“If I accept that... And I’m not saying I do.” She said. “Why play this game with us ? What’s in it for Horus and the other ancient Gods ?”

“Where is the fun in ordering about their flunkies and minions ? We’re a challenge, something with a little free will left to use as we wish. Manipulating us is hardly a challenge for them, but it probably alleviates the boredom for a while.”

No, it just didn't fit with the way Horus had treated her. Of course he might be a real master of manipulation, but..... No, it just didn't feel right.

"Crap, utter crap.....Tell me the truth Akiva ?"

"There is some truth in what I said, though mostly I just think they want us to work together at some time in the future."

"When ? Why not tell us about it ?"

He was covered in mud and a cold wind was following the Thames valley, but even so.....Akiva looked deeply despondent, allowing his blade to fall into the mud.

"You really want my opinion ?" He asked.

"Yes, or I wouldn't have asked."

"Horus doesn't think we're worthy of the task....Not yet at least."

No witty reply, she didn't even stand as he picked up his sword and walked down river until he vanished into the darkness. Laura felt depressed because it sounded like the truth. She had been beaten by Akiva at Clufford Hall. Perhaps she wasn't worthy ? Perhaps she'd never be worthy ?

"Fuck it." She muttered.

The Thames was supposed to be fairly clean water now, but she doubted if many would voluntarily wash in it. Laura immersed herself fully in the slow moving water, rubbing her hair and face clean of mud. Her blade back in her belt, and she didn't feel too bad by the time she strode out of the water, drenched to the skin. An elderly looking woman was there, pushing a supermarket trolley full of grubby carrier bags.

"Are you alright dear ?" Asked the woman. "Do you want me to call someone for you ?"

There it was, Laura's low point of the day, perhaps of the year, maybe the decade.

"That's alright, I'm fine."

"If you say so dear."

Laura walked up the riverbank in the direction of Norway Street, where she'd left her SUV.

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I really should have called this chapter, 'The sequels always get tougher.' I hope you enjoy Quid Pro Quo.