

Quid Pro Quo

(Season three of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 20 – The Final Task

“Jack knew his mum loved him and he loved her too. As for defining love.....He wasn't sure if it was possible to define why you loved someone. Maybe if you needed to define it, the love wasn't real ?”

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It's easy to miss a wound in the heat of battle. Even at the relatively young age of twenty six, Laura considered herself to be something of an expert on wounds. She knew that people had actually been shot and not realised it until sometime later. She'd stripped naked and Tim hadn't taken much persuasion to do the same. They'd made a game of it, checking each other over for cuts, scratches, or worse.

“There was a man in the USA, Simon told me about it.” She'd told him. “He thought someone had kicked him at a firework party. But he'd been shot; the fireworks must have hidden the gunshot. A big guy the bullet lodged in a fatty area and the wound didn't bleed that much. I'm not saying he was the sharpest knife in the drawer, but it took him two days to realise he had a bullet in his beer gut.”

There had been a little blood on the clothing they'd taken off, though not enough to cause concern. They both had tiny cuts and grazes, mostly from the shrapnel created by assault rifles. Small cuts were easy to clean, with a plaster to finish the job. As Laura examined Tim's backside, she found something a little more serious.

“Stand still Tim, I'll need the tweezers for this.”

“It does feel sore there, what is it ?”

A small piece of white painted metal, probably aluminium. Tim gave a yelp as she pulled it out and showed it to him.

“High velocity bullets hit light fixings, wall sockets, you name it.” She said. “It all becomes tiny bits of shrapnel, which are mostly harmless. A piece this size though.....It can be serious if it hits somewhere critical.”

“How deep was it ?”

“About half an inch into your left cheek.”

“I didn't.....I never felt anything.”

“Looks like we'll have to do a full body inspection after every battle.” She said.

Laura cleaned the wound and his rather nice bottom was too tempting to ignore. Tim yelped again as she gently bit his right buttock.

“Hey.”

“Stop being a baby.”

She'd really wanted to take the Ankh to Horus and get her last task, her final bit of Quid Pro Quo, her something for something. Once she started touching Tim though and he started touching her. It was several hours until she was dressing, as Tim slept. She did leave him a note.

‘Gone to see a God about a job – Laura.’

Fresh jeans, T shirt and trainers... Every piece of clothing they'd worn for the heist was in a bin liner, waiting to be burned. Laura put on a leather jacket with a hoody and became what she loved to be, a

vampire stepping out into the night. If she hadn't wanted a drink of water, she might never have known the ghosts of Walter and Emily Couzinier were sat at her kitchen table.

"What the fuck are you two doing here?" She asked.

"Akiva has employed a shaman to get rid of us." Said Walter. "An exorcism, of a sorts."

"After all we've done for him." Said Emily. "The shaman is a fool and we could stay there.....It's just that we have no desire to stay where we're not wanted."

"You're not wanted here either." Said Laura.

"I was hoping for a better attitude." Said Walter. "You did summon us from the world of the dead. We're attached to you more than any specific location."

"I knew she'd be awkward." Added Emily.

"Awkward.....You tried to get me killed by Liam Gagnon."

Laura had already decided to ask Horus to do something about the two dead Canadian tomb robbers. She'd do it politely of course, once she'd carried out the final task for him. If he'd been willing to kill Akiva, getting rid of two ghosts seemed hardly likely to worry him. It was Walter who changed her plans.

"We can still be useful to you." He said. "You'll never know we're here."

"We've discussed it." Said Emily. "We'll give you privacy and never enter your bedroom. Here in the kitchen will do us nicely.....It can work."

For most of her life Laura had split the human race into what she considered to be nice people and bad people. Often a fairly arbitrary split second decision to decide who belonged in which group, but the system had worked tolerably well. Since becoming a vampire another two categories were beginning to grow in importance. Were people useful to her, or likely to be useful, as opposed to never being of any use. A shallow way of thinking about things maybe, but Walter had started the train of thought.

"How can you be useful to me Walter?" She asked.

"We know Simon has used the dragon statue. He has used the mirror to step back in time....He even met himself. Not disastrous, but he has caused his name to be mentioned by those...."

"Those you want to avoid being noticed by." Added Emily. "He will need our help Laura....We can stop him getting stuck in time."

It might well all be lies and nonsense of course, the dead couple did have a history of lying to her.

"I'll talk to Simon. If what you're saying is the truth, then we might be able to work something out. I have spare space that you could use. No upsetting Tim though, ever."

"We won't." Said Walter.

They followed her, drifting through walls, as she went to the safe in the room currently home to her guns, explosives and ammunition. She covered the Sacred Ankh in a thick piece of cloth, before putting it in her pocket.

"Is that it.....The Sacred Ankh?" Asked Walter.

"Yes."

"Can I see it.....Please?"

A half mad homicidal ghost with narcissistic tendencies. There was no way she was letting him so much as get a glimpse of an artefact that granted godlike powers.

"No." She said.

Laura pressed again the metal disc under her skin and entered the realm of the Ancient Gods. It was time to give Horus the Ankh and find out about his final task.

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“Look Jack, we all love Laura.” Said Gwen

There was a huge telling off about to arrive, Jack knew his mother’s style. First a few quite tentative criticisms, then wham, in with the big stuff. All quite justified of course, he had been talking to Laura and her Gudara. Even worse, he’d kept it from his mum and Daniel. He hadn’t even told them about using his iPhone to go online.

“A lie by omission is still a lie.”

He’d heard someone say once, though he couldn’t recall where.

“Laura can be a bad influence though, we all know that.” Said his mum.

“Laura is.....Different.” He said. “Like me, but even more different.”

“Yes, yes.....We all love Laura Jack. She can do things without thinking though, which can be dangerous. Do you understand that ?”

Of course he understood. It wasn’t just Wiremi who had changed him, giving him the focus to understand things he’d never understood before. It was simply being there for so long, in the realm of dreams, where reality could actually shift from day to day. He knew what Laura was and the name his mother would use to describe her. Jack had decided to be truthful with his mum, but only to a point. Unfiltered truth could have bad effects, he knew that now. He almost had a responsibility to lie, if it meant the lie protected others.

“Yes, I understand that mum.” He said. “I do know that Laura can act without thinking....She is my friend though.”

“A very good friend, to all of us. You just need to tell us when she comes to see you. No more being taken away from your home Jack....I mean it.”

Jack knew his mum loved him and he loved her too. As for defining love.....He wasn’t sure if it was possible to define why you loved someone. Maybe if you needed to define it, the love wasn’t real ? So many ideas were running through his head now and there was one fact that made him quite sad. Jack knew he’d probably never get answers to half the questions in his mind. Truth though, he had a pretty good idea about truth being a good idea, most of the time.

“I will need to go away again mum.”

“No....No, you can’t.”

Even as his mum hugged him, he knew he was probably going to cause her untold fear and anguish. There was no way to avoid it though, none at all.

“Everything has been set in motion. It will happen mum, I will have to go.”

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Laura had done what she’d done so many times before. As she’d pressed her hand on her skin to activate the Egg, she’d pictured Horus. Usually that meant entering a world where everything had a tinge of gold. Instead she was stood on the side of a sand dune, while looking at a huge building. It looked Ancient Egyptian, it looked like a temple.

“Oh well....First task.....Find the God you came to see.” She muttered.

She walked down the dune and across the paved area in front of the temple. Everything looked and felt old, yet strangely complete. All the other Egyptian temples she’d seen had been mostly ruins. By the time she noticed there were two suns in the sky, Laura had already guessed she was no longer in her own world.

“Nothing is ever simple with Horus.” She mumbled.

Once inside the outer walls, she realised the size of the temple complex. It was huge, hundreds of square acres, perhaps even several square miles. It would take her forever to find Horus, she didn’t have a clue where he might be.

“Ok, Selway.... Let’s try this again.” She muttered.

Laura closed her eyes and thought about Horus in the way she’d have thought about a lover, one she was actually into quite a lot. She remembered the feel of his face against hers, the way his warm skin had smelled. She even concentrated on the sound of his voice. Once she was certain Horus had most of her thoughts, he was a God after all, she pressed the Egg again.

“I told you she was clever.....Here she is.” Said Horus.

None of the golden tinge, or the fading in and out of the other people in the chamber. They were Gods, she somehow knew that, lots of Ancient Gods. How many Gods had the Egyptians worshipped ? Laura didn’t really know. Her research had always been specific and usually there’d been someone else who knew the book stuff better than her. There looked to be over a hundred of them, all clustered around Horus, sat on his throne. She stood where she was, hesitant to move closer.

“Come here Laura Selway.” Shouted Horus. “You have done very well. I know you carry the Sacred Ankh.”

As she walked towards Horus, the other Gods began to vanish. Some almost human, some looking like wild creature, some looking like monsters the most feverish imagination could never devise. By the time she was stood in front of his throne, they were alone. Again, a chair appeared in front of him.

“You are a rarity Laura, a mortal I allow to sit in my presence.....Sit.”

Laura sat and did nothing, she knew simply giving him the Ankh would conflict with his weird version of etiquette. She did think a response of some kind was called for.

“Thank you.” She said.

“Did you touch the Sacred Ankh ?” He asked.

“Yes, though only briefly.”

“Why did you touch it Laura ?”

“One touch and I knew I had the right artefact, though honestly.....I was curious.”

His face moved several times from bird to man and back again. His features eventually remained those of a handsome man, who was smiling at her.

“To hold the Ankh, but not be its slave, that is rare. Hold it Laura, let me see you hold it in your hand.....Indulge my curiosity.”

Far from being its slave, one touch had made her loathe to even having the thing in her pocket. It seemed to exude a malignant power. Laura took the cloth out of her pocket. There was no refusing Horus anything, Gods could never be refused anything. She unwrapped the Ankh and held it in her left hand.

“What do you feel ?” He asked.

“An ageless power, trying to tempt me. I feel in no need of what it offers.”

“Amazing.....I can see having a vampire among my champions will be very useful. No ordinary mortal could hold the Ankh without being changed, even if just a little.”

“The man who helped me get into the British Museum talked of rumours....It appears the Ankh was put in long term storage because of incidents among the staff who touched it. No fatalities, but there was violence.” She said.

“Interesting..... You may put it back in your pocket.”

He didn’t want it !? After all that he didn’t want the damn thing. Laura knew the rules of their meetings though. Any direct questions to the God had to be rare and fairly innocuous. She sat back in her chair and let him tell her what he wanted her to know, at his own pace.

"I know vampires always have their secret places, even from each other. Keep the Ankh for now, hide it for me in such a place. One day I may have need of it.....For now though, there is the final favour you owe me, the last task. For now.....As for the future ? You will always be one of my champions."

"Always happy to be of service."

She'd said it again, did she never learn ? Horus was smiling at her, probably thinking she never learned from past errors.

"That is nice to know Laura. Do this one last task for me and I will try to leave it a century or so before I call upon your services again. Another advantage of vampires is your longevity. All too often humans die just before a situation occurs where they might be useful. Come closer, move your chair closer."

She had to get up and push the heavy chair closer to his throne.

"Closer Laura, we're friends now."

By the time she was sat down again, their knees were touching.

"I have allowed you to keep powerful artefacts Laura, like the metal disc that sits under your flesh. In return you have found objects that.....May be of use to me. I also gave you the life of Brendan Roche, whose essence should now be in the land of the dead. I want a life in return for his life. I want you to kill someone for me."

Laura actually felt relieved. Killing people put her firmly back in her comfort zone. She a vampire after all, with skills in every type of weapon, even guns. If the target was human, she was confident she could kill them. Of course knowing Horus, the target might well be an indestructible legendary beast.

"Who am I killing ?" She asked.

"Ah, a rare direct question Laura, but you are forgiven. The target, as I believe you would refer to him, is a dealer in rugs of all things. He has an emporium in the city of Amman in Jordan. Akiva will know the exact address, he's been keeping an eye on Yosef Khatib. You'll find Yosef very hard to kill.....Very hard. Akiva can tell you more."

He was going to be almost unkillable, like the minion of Thoth she'd found in the caverns deep below Luxor. That seemed to be the way it was with working for Gods, nothing was ever easy or straightforward.

"Before you kill Yosef Laura." Said Horus. "You must get him to tell you a name that only he knows. It will be very hard to get him to talk, but I'm sure you can be persuasive. I need to know the real name of Samnuha."

"How will I know if he's given me the right name for this Samnuha ?" She asked.

"You will know when you hear the correct name.....You will know."

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The strange thing about it was that Clara normally hated exercise. The idea of jogging for pleasure seemed insane and her body didn't require exercise to keep it fit. She could, and had, run for miles, but only when it was necessary. Now she found herself actually enjoying trudging along the royal road, heading towards the last gate to Duat, the Underworld.

"Halfway to the sixteenth gate." Said Liz. "About fourteen miles to go."

"Look....I know this is going to sound crazy...." Began Clara.

"You're enjoying it...Yes, we had noticed that." Said Mabina.

"It's just that.....We could try jogging rather than walking." Said Clara. "Up the pace a bit, just to vary things a little."

"No." Snapped Mabina.

"Run ahead if you like Clara, we'll catch up." Said Liz.

"Oh, and now our followers are back." Said Mabina.

"We'll start using the salt after the next break." Said Liz. "They're not totally harmless and need to be discouraged."

The followers had begun to appear just after Liz had announced they'd covered five miles since breakfast. Liz had used the term followers to describe the creatures that looked to be half smoke and half flesh and bone. Human in appearance, though as usual, Liz had holes in her knowledge until she'd visited the final gate.

"The damned who betrayed Osiris, condemned to being half in and half out of our world for eternity."

That was it, the total sum of Liz's knowledge though she did know that just a small amount of salt in their path was enough to deter them from following. Why they followed them? What was meant by not quite harmless? Like so many other things, they'd find that out later. Curiosity for its own sake was a rare thing for a vampire, but Clara hated all the gaps in what Liz could tell them.

"How did the pharaohs travel along this road Liz?" She asked. "Did they have the ghosts of dozens of dead minions to pull them along it in spectral coaches?"

"Personally, I think the road is symbolic." Said Mabina. "They probably went straight to the underworld like all the other dead."

"No, that's not true." Said Liz. "No ornate carriages and they sort of hovered rather than walked.

They were escorted by servants of Osiris, thousands of them, all the way to the final gate."

Clara hadn't meant to stare, but the sudden rush of solid information....It was rare.

"Sorry, I keep get extra pieces of information turning up in my mind." Said Liz. "I tend to assume you both know these things too."

"Never assume anything." Said Mabina.

"Old memories, new memories, or old memories that arrive as new memories." Said Liz. "It all gets really confusing."

Clara didn't know whether to get angry at Liz or hug her. Luckily the arrival of the hounds took the day in another direction.

"Our beasts have wet noses and I can smell water." Said Clara. "It seems an ideal time to take a break."

"I second that." Said Mabina.

"I could do with a rest." Added Liz.

No waterfall, the spring came straight up out of the ground. As their hounds were happy to drink the water, they trusted it to be drinkable. Not a long break, but it gave Clara a chance to do something she'd been wanting to do since they'd left the world of the living. She put her head in the water and rubbed her fingers through her long hair. Not Mabina, she wasn't patient enough and might mess things up deliberately and think it was amusing. Clara looked straight at Liz.

"Will you cut my hair for me Liz?" She asked. "I want it really short...I'm fed up with it feeling grubby and full of grit."

"Of course I will, I'd like mine cut short too." Said Liz. "How though, we didn't bring anything to cut hair properly."

"Yes we did." Said Clara.

Clara pulled her favourite weapon out of its sheaf, her Yemeni Janbiya. The blue steel glinted at her as it reflected their lights.

"It has an edge like a razor." She said. "The cut might end up looking more like a prison movie than your usual hair salon, but it'll get the job done."

"When you two have done yours, I want my hair cut short too." Said Mabina.

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"It's only relatively recently that I got into drugs in a big way." Said Tom. "The profit margins were too good to ignore, even if there is more risk involved than with my....Traditional areas of expertise." Ronnie just smiled and listened, as she drank a cup of tea made by Beetle. He made bad tea, there was no denying it. Nothing was going to puncture her feeling of wellbeing though, nothing. She had it down to an art form.... She obeyed orders, did as she was told and never asked too many questions. In return, Tom paid her truly huge amounts of cash. Nothing was going to puncture her happiness bubble, nothing.

"As you're now with us full time, I can see you being useful in what used to be our core business."

"No problem Tom, happy to turn my hand to anything." She said.

Money worked better than Prozac. Ronnie only had to imagine her kitchen table covered in twenty pound notes and she felt happy, very happy. She'd already found out that most deliveries did in fact occur during daylight hours. As for getting involved in what Tom called his core business...They were unlikely to ask her to break someone's legs. Mind you, if the pile of cash was big enough....

"I need a driver for Noah and Alex today, their usual guy is off sick."

"Happy to run them around Tom."

"Good, you get to drive a decent car today Ronnie, you'll love it. Noah will tell you where to go....Everywhere is on SatNav these days. Just get them where they need to go and drop them off at home afterwards. Job and finish today Ronnie, you'll likely to be home with a cup of tea before the six o'clock news."

"Brilliant."

Beetle gave her the keys to the car, a series five BMW with all the extras. Noah was about six foot six tall and built like the proverbial brick outhouse. Alex was a woman and had much the same build. Ronnie was beginning to realise they probably weren't going to be spending the day doing charitable deeds and collecting for good causes.

"So you're driving us today." Said Alex.

"Yep, you've got me all day. I heard your usual driver is sick."

Alex was next to her in the passenger seat, with Noah in the back. It meant Alex had to turn to give Noah a meaningful look.

"Yes, Ray isn't doing too good." Said Noah.

"If things really kick off, just use the central locking and stay in the car." Added Alex.

Nothing was going to puncture her feeling of wellbeing, nothing. Not even the news that her predecessor in the job might well have been a victim of things kicking off.

"Alright....Where to first?" She asked. "Got a postcode I can plug into the SatNav?"

Noah gave her an E1 postcode that the SatNav recognised.

"Some railway arches Tom rents." Said Noah. "There's somewhere to park, I'll point you in the right direction when we're in Leman Street."

Not that long a journey, just enough time for her passengers to talk about the upcoming football that weekend. They seemed nice, like many other fellow workers she'd known. They even included her in the conversation. By the time she was driving past Aldgate Station, Ronnie was actually getting to like Noah.

“Down Lemman Street Ronnie.” Said Noah. “It’s a small entrance on the right, just before the railway bridge over the road. You should be able to park unless some jerk has parked in our bay again.” There were three railway arches with the same nameplates over the doors. It appeared Tom owned a company that hired out portable generators, or of course, the name and business might be fake. No jerk had taken the bay, so Ronnie parked the BMW.

“No kicking off here, unless it’s by us.” Said Alex. “You can come inside.”

“Nice looking place.” Said Ronnie, just to make conversation.

“Yeah, useful.....” Said Noah. “A cable TV company rented the arches for years, until they went bust.” Ronnie had no idea what to expect, though she suspected that Tom’s core business was likely to be mainly violence, mayhem and even more violence. They rang a bell and someone eventually opened a door.

“Has he said where he is ?” Asked Alex.

“No, he’s been unconscious for a couple of hours.”

“Crap.....I hope you haven’t killed him.” Said Noah.

The brief conversation with the man who’d opened the door over, they walked through a doorway and into a partitioned off section of the arch. To Ronnie it felt as though she’d entered the set of a gangster movie. The floor had nothing to cover the original cobblestones and there were the distinct smells of blood and urine. A naked man with Asian features, had been duct taped to a chair in the centre of the room. A leather office chair on wheels, the sort Anthony had liked to spin around on.

“Ronnie.....Meet Raoul.” Said Noah. “Raoul is being difficult.”

There was blood on the floor, right under where Raoul’s head was hanging over the side of the chair. Right in the centre of the blood were three teeth. Ronnie wanted to run, to get away. She didn’t though..... Nothing was going to puncture her happiness bubble, nothing.

“What did he do ?” She asked.

Alex and Noah exchanged another of their meaningful looks.

“She’s alright.....Used to work for Simon.” Said Alex.

“Simon.....He doesn’t piss about.” Said Noah. “Alright.....Raoul here has a boss called Imran. Imran has been opening his mouth about things he shouldn’t. We find out from Raoul where we can find Imran. Then we scoop him up and deliver him to.....The people who want him. With luck it’ll all be just a one day job.”

“They were supposed to soften him up for us.” Added Alex. “Not leave him half dead.”

“Will they kill Imran ?” Asked Ronnie.

“Probably.....Up to them, we’re just being paid to deliver him.” Said Alex.

“Time to earn our money.....Wake him up Alex.” Said Noah.

She was actually quite gentle with Raoul. She rubbed his cheeks and talked to him quite softly, until the naked man opened his eyes.

“Morning sunshine, we’re the dayshift.” Said Noah. “We’re not as nice and cosy as the people who looked after you last night.”

Raoul looked terrified and Ronnie didn’t blame him. Alex took a knife out of her jacket pocket.

Nothing huge and impressive, it was a red Swiss Army knife, the sort with lots of different blades, a real instant tool box. She pulled at and extended the smallest blade, it was barely two or three inches long. She placed a knee on Raoul’s lap and got a good hold on his throat, before running the blade over the back of his hand. Raoul yelled of course, he yelled loud enough to wake the dead.

Alex just squeezed his throat until he stopped yelling.

“That is just to prove I’m not messing about.” She said. “If I say I’m going to cut you, I will cut you.”

Alex had to be a body builder, her muscles stretched the fabric of her jacket, as she pushed Raoul right back in the chair.

“Fuck..... Get on with it Alex.” Said Noah.

Raoul stopped squirming, when Alex pushed the blade as far into his left nostril as it would go. He was suddenly very still.

“No surgeon can get rid of the scars.” Said Alex. “If I slit your nostril, you’re marked for life. Everyone you meet until the day you die, will know you pissed off the wrong people. You can talk now of course.....If not I’ll give you another chance before I slit the other nostril. Then, if you’re still refusing to tell us where Imran is.....I’ll see what my knife can do to what you’ve got between your legs.”

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Laura wanted to see Akiva fairly quickly, but he wasn’t at his borrowed apartment in Jerusalem. Someone had been cleaning the place though, it even smelled quite nice. She’d have thought Tim had been borrowed to do it, if she hadn’t left him sleeping in the Silver Dawn building in Brittany.

“Wow, someone has turned over a new leaf.” She muttered.

The rows of plastic bags in the lounge had gone, as had the physical remains of Walter and Emily. She couldn’t resist looking in Akiva’s bedroom and that too had a definite freshness to it. Some of his clothes were still thrown over a chair, so he hadn’t left town for good. No sign of the wicked looking blade that was usually leaning against the wall somewhere in the apartment.

“So.... You’re either practising or fighting. Let’s see if this works with you.”

Laura wasn’t totally immune to Akiva’s charms, especially since he’d expressed a desire to sleep with her. It had caused her to look at her own feelings towards him and the realisation that she wouldn’t have thrown him out on a cold night. One of Simon’s sayings of course. Thinking about the smell of his skin and the way his eyes crinkled up when he grinned at her.....It all came to her very easily, too easily for comfort.

“Not while I’m with Tim.” She muttered. “I think Akiva might prove to be too addictive to sleep with only once.”

When she had his essence in her mind, she pressed against the Egg. The room around her almost fluttered out of her reality, like a butterfly’s wings.

Laura found herself on a roof, looking down into an alley somewhere. Her feet were right at the edge of the roof, the ends of her shoes were hanging over a good fifty foot drop. Not enough of a fall to kill her of course, though it did make her realise that using the Egg did come with risks. Below her was Akiva and he was alone. He was using his blade to attack several mounds of old truck tyres. She applauded to get his attention.

“Well done.....You’ve definitely got those tyres worried.” She yelled.

Akiva looked up, using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

“Laura..... How did you.....Never mind, come down.”

Clambering down the outside of the building was the safe option, but she usually hated safe options. Besides, if what she was thinking actually worked, it would look so cool. Laura looked at Akiva and imagined him naked. She pressed the Egg and was instantly stood right next to him.

“Where are we ?” She asked.

“You don’t know ?”

“No.”

“We’re in Jerusalem, not far from my apartment. Kids come and watch me sometimes, but none of the locals has ever taken a shot at me.”

“What would you do if they did ?” She asked.

"I'd run away of course."

There was that grin again, though she was now in control of her feelings. The alley looked quite grubby now that she was closer to it. There had been a fire against a wall and two wrecked scooters had been left to rust in a corner. It was a grim place that most definitely wasn't on the tourist routes.

"Why here?" She asked.

"Why not?"

He fitted the place, she could see that. A crazy guy swinging a sword about might cause a call to the cops in most places. There though, in that alley.....He fitted in. She watched him use the blade for a while, hacking off huge pieces of grey rubber.

"I need your help on my last bit of quid pro quo." She said.

"And I will keep my pledge to help you."

"I believe you've been keeping an eye on a rug dealer called Yosef Khatib for Horus."

He actually stopped attacking the tyres and put his sword over his shoulder.

"Him.....But it wasn't for.....Oh yes, I see now. We don't all get regular invites to see the Gods Laura. As far as I knew, I was doing the job for the Silver Dawn. They have men in robes who seem to do nothing but read old books. Curators they're called, or some other fancy title. Most seem harmless, but others.....Let's just say you need to be careful. One of the dangerous ones asked me to keep an eye on the Rug Emporium owner. Twice a year, more often if required. He just wanted to make sure he wasn't planning to move house, or leave the country."

"So you know his regular movements?" She asked.

"Yes, what are you planning to do to Yosef Khatib? When you spend hours watching someone, you get a little fond of them."

"I'm to get a name from him and then kill him."

It wasn't exactly encouraging when Akiva burst out laughing, though not unexpected. Of course Khatib was some sort of non-human killing machine, or even a legendary beast of enormous strength. He had to be, work for the Gods was never easy.

"Don't tell me, he's unkillable?" She asked.

"Well..... No one really knows, but it'll be interesting to find out."

"I thought you'd grown fond of him?"

"Not so fond that I'd miss the opportunity to face him in a fair fight....You have to let me challenge him Laura."

Gods were hard to work for and overzealous warriors didn't help.

"It can't go down like that Akiva. I need a name from him and I think getting it out of him won't leave Yosef in a condition to meet you in a fair fight."

"Disappointing, very disappointing.....But I can see your point. We'll need to go to Amman of course, so you can observe Yosef for a while. No storming in blind with this one. When do you want to go to Jordan?"

"Soon.....But what is he? What kind of beast will we be fighting?"

"He's your kin, a vampire Laura. He's been around for a very long time and become staggeringly tough and hard to kill. There are rumours that his skin is hard enough to resist gunfire. Some stories about him are so famous.....I'm surprised you've never heard of him."

"Vampires aren't social creatures, we tend to fight other vampires until one of us is dead. How old is Yosef Khatib? Do you know?"

"Pick a number Laura and it might all be nonsense. I've heard some say he arrived in Asia from Africa half a million years ago. Some say he's even older than that, a one off, the last survivor of the truly

ancient vampires. Pick a story Laura, though they might all be crap. One thing I do know is that he's tough and hard to kill. I helped to bury two skilled assassins who went after him."

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