

The Hornsey Vampires

(Season two of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 21 – Cherry Tree Lane

“Simon was still enjoying the morning news. He was still being described as at least a dozen heavily armed members of everything from ISIS to a newly formed Baader–Meinhof Group. No one really knew who'd attacked Belmarsh prison and so far no one had claimed responsibility.”

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Sam Isaacs was a well know trader in art and antiquities. It was rare for the insurance company to insist on the fine print in their terms and conditions, but it happened occasionally. The painting was attributed to a student of Rembrandt and, to her at least it was an ugly waste of paint. Sam had talked someone into parting with three million for it though, pounds not dollars.

“I will need to see everything in the packing procedure and accompany the couriers to the airport.” Perhaps there had been a few problems with other dealers, or it might have been a rare full inspection. The insurance company had sent a local representative and he seemed intent on being thorough.

“All packaging material meets the required standards.” She said. “We had the usual inspection last year.”

“Do you normally pack high value works of art on your own ?”

That would get a red tick on his clipboard and a letter to Sam asking him to explain. Leaving a PA to box up a multi-million pound painting on her own definitely broke the terms of their insurance.

“Not normally, but Mr Isaacs had a family emergency in England. It's never happened before and the client insisted on receiving the painting this week.”

The insurance rep wrote a few lines in red ink, Sam wasn't going to be happy when he returned. Judith didn't mind him watching as she boxed up the painting, she knew the routine by heart. The couriers were a little surprised to be told he was accompanying the picture as far as the airport, but a few phone calls and they'd agreed.

“Damn, I forgot all about Uri.” She muttered.

She'd been so busy with crating up the picture that she'd forgotten all about the carpenter on the top floor. Carpenter was probably overdoing it, Uri was an odd job man who didn't charge a fortune and had a few friends to help with anything heavy. It was Uri who'd cleared out the previous bird infestation and repaired the window shutters. She'd promised to take him coffee and something to eat from the toaster oven. She was surprised he hadn't been down to remind her.

“Cheese on toast, he liked that last time.”

Uri wasn't answering the phone on the desk on the top floor, probably up to his armpits in bird droppings. She put the cheese on toast on a plate and put the coffee into a mug with a top that sealed up. It was still awkward to use the lift buttons, but Uri needed his refreshments.

“Uri..... Sorry I'm late, you must be dying of thirst.” She yelled.

No answer, she left his late breakfast on the desk and went looking for him. Even seeing him lying on the ground near the wall didn't worry her, he had his own way of working. The expression on his face told her Uri was dead, before she knelt down to check for a pulse.

“Come on Uri, stop playing tricks on me.”

His eyes were looking across the room, his face fixed in an expression of horror. No pulse and his skin was starting to cool. Judith looked towards the last place in the room his dying eyes had been

looking. Something flickered right at the edge of her vision, but no matter how hard she tried, her eyes refused to bring the shimmer into focus.

"I'm sorry Uri, but you can't be found looking like that."

She'd quite liked the old man, but the ambulance crew couldn't be allowed to see the expression on his face and she had to look for blood stains. If his death had been too violent there was a doctor Sam knew who'd take care of the formalities. Uri wasn't a big man, but still too heavy for her to drag about that much. If the ambulance people asked, of course she'd moved him, but only to try and help the old man

"Yes, that looks much more natural."

A little push on his jaw and that awful look of fear and horror was gone. Judith pushed and pulled, looking Uri over for any external wounds or cause of death. There were none, he really did seem to have died of shock.

"Who are you ? What do you want ?"

The shimmer at the edge of her vision again, maybe she was hallucinating ? Judith checked poor Uri and was happy that he looked like a handyman who'd died of natural causes. She used her own phone to call for an ambulance. The sound of shock in her voice and the tears surprised even her.

"We've known him for years..... Such a sweet man, please hurry."

Tell them he was dead and they'd turn up when they pleased. She'd leave it to them to discover that Uri was already dead, his body cooling.

"What ?..... Talk to me, show yourself."

It was impossible to be a member of the Psochic Order and still be afraid of ghosts and apparitions, Plus Sam had always told her that nothing dangerous could enter the top floor of the building. It had called her name before vanishing, the shimmer had called her Judith.

"Either talk to me or leave me alone." She yelled.

No response, no shimmer or the sound of her name being whispered. There was a slight aroma in the air, not unpleasant, she just couldn't place it. Judith picked up her phone from the desk and began to compose the email to Sam in her head. She was already thinking of suggesting a full ritual cleansing of the top floor.

"Too much bad mojo, too much bad shit happening." She muttered.

The shimmer moved from right to left, before stopping for a fraction of a second in front of her eyes. That one look made her fall to her knees. It wasn't that the face was horrific, though it hadn't been the face of a man. There was something about the face, something that told Judith the apparition was a creature of pure evil.

"Leave me alone." She said, while keeping her eyes on the floor.

The feet appeared as the shimmer became a solid corporeal creature. Feet with a big toe and three ordinary toes, all with sharp claws on the end. Strange skin too, skin the colour and texture of old brown boots.

"Judith..... Look at me."

She didn't have the courage to look up. She had a fear she'd go insane if she looked straight into the face of the beast, or die of shock like poor dead Uri.

"Forgive me.....I'm too scared." She said.

A hand touched her hair and stroked her, from forehead to the tip of her hair. The feet vanished. Judith stood up and looked around, but the top floor felt different, she was sure she was now alone. Three men arrived with the ambulance, one a paramedic and another two who seemed to be there to carry various bits of equipment. No doubt they'd bring in some kind of stretcher or trolley once

they realised Uri was beyond saving by even the best machines they had. The paramedic called someone quite quickly.

“Not breathing and he’s quite cold……. Alright…….I’ll do that.”

They’d all been looking at her strangely, she definitely wasn’t imagining it. The paramedic even stared at her head as she signed a form he’d given her. It appeared she’d now agreed to pay any fees that might be due for the ambulance. She was even given a receipt for the body.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” He said as they left.

What had happened to condolences, or understanding how people felt. Judith wasn’t even his family, yet sorry for your loss had all the genuine feeling of have a nice day. Sam blamed it all on too much American TV, but he blamed everything on too much TV of one kind or another.

“Damn……. I get the job of calling his granddaughter.” She muttered.

Judith had to pee first and wash off the dust from the concrete floor on the top floor. Uri too, she’d spent far too long handling his dead body. Even though she knew it was ridiculous, she needed to wash the feel of death from her hands. After peeing she looked into the mirror while washing her hands.

“Fuck ! No wonder they were staring.”

The white hair was where the creature had stroked her head. Judith turned and managed to see the strip of pure white hair went right to the tip of her hair. It looked as though she’d bleached a strip of her own hair. Luckily Jerusalem was a city where every woman owned and carried around a few head scarves. Covering it would be easy enough, but would it grow out ?

“Damn you Sam Isaacs, you owe me for this.”

The time had come, a few other members of the order had told her it would. The point where curiosity and the lust for forbidden knowledge hit the wall of monetary gain. Sam was either going to give her a sensational pay rise or she’d find another job, a safer job.

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Laura hadn’t given any explanation for her late arrival in the Whitby area, other than saying a bit of personal business needed taking care of. She was still keen to keep her Hornsey family separated from her Psochic related acquaintances. Liz had given The Gables in Cherry Tree Lane quite a lot of attention in her absence.

“The old lady rarely goes out.” Said Liz. “A live in carer takes care of her shopping, the post office and any other chores.”

A carer hadn’t been in Sam’s notes. It made Laura wonder if there might be more errors and missing information. It was just Liz and her, hiding behind a hedge some distance from the house. Mabina was sulking, punishing her by having an invented piece of personal business of her own, that needed dealing with.

“What is the carer like ?” Asked Laura. “Young, old, someone likely to try and be a hero ?”

“A woman in her late twenties. I’d say she’s no hero, a really mousy individual from what I’ve seen.”

“Good, anyone else we need to worry about ?”

Sam’s notes had mentioned an agent who seemed to visit about twice a year and a few nieces who had a habit of turning up unannounced, usually looking for a handout from the old lady.

“I’ve seen no one else at her door apart from the postie.” Said Liz. “We haven’t been here long though and asking about her in the local pub seemed a bad idea.”

“You’re probably right, in case things go wrong.” Said Laura. “We’re definitely in the right place Liz, I’m already being drawn to the old house.”

“There’s a place behind the house where Mabina was nervous about walking..... She said it smelt wrong, whatever that means ? I felt nothing myself.” Said Liz.

“How is your change going, are you there yet ?”

Liz was giving her the look Mabina was so good at, mildly exasperated.

“Tell me what personal business you had that was so important and I’ll tell you about my terror at becoming.....Whatever it is I now am.”

The attack on Belmarsh had been just about the only news on her radio during her drive up to Whitby. The authorities were blaming it on an Islamic extremist group, claiming that a well-armed group of at least a dozen had attacked the prison. There had been the usual knee jerk praise of all the emergency services involved in seeing off the attackers. Laura thought Simon was probably enjoying every minute of every news broadcast. As for the death of Bill ? He’d have hated it, but his death was the third or fourth item on the news and being blamed on a probable fight with another inmate. How much to tell Liz though ? Laura decided to be honest, within limits of course.

“I will tell you Liz, but you must never tell anyone, agreed ?”

“Yes of course.”

“I mean it ! There will be consequences if you betray my trust.”

“Trust me Laura, I’ve had my fill of consequences. Tell me ?”

“I had to infiltrate Belmarsh prison and kill William Jarrold. Otherwise he was going to hurt some people who were important to Simon. Important to me too I suppose..... The security of our home would have definitely been at risk.”

“Wow, I was expecting something quite mundane..... Wow.... How hard was it to get in ?”

“Not as hard as I’d expected.” Said Laura. “Now your turn, are you fully changed ?”

For an answer Liz held up her left hand and it slowly changed into a talon like that of a huge bird. Just as quickly it became a hand again.

“It happened at the house in Tonbridge.” Said Liz. “The night you came back with the silver bowl. I have no idea what I look like fully transformed; I’ve never had the courage to look in a mirror.”

“But you can do it..... Change into something that isn’t human ?”

“Yes, though it scares me to do it..... I worry that I might not be able to change back.”

“Does Brendan know ?”

“No.”

“You should tell him and show him Liz. After his experiences with Mabina he’s tougher than you think. I’m assuming you’ll still be seeing him after all this is over ?”

“I’m not.....We should look at the place where Mabina thought something smelt wrong.”

If Liz didn’t want to talk about her future plans that was fine, Laura definitely wasn’t going to discuss Tim with her. She followed as Liz carefully took a long route around the house, always keeping trees and bushes between them and the windows.

“Millicent Spooner has a habit of sitting at a downstairs window for most of the day.” Said Liz. “She seems to be drawing in a sketch pad.”

There was a gap between three bushes that were growing quite some distance from the house, Liz and Mabina must have found the place by accident. A line of trees kept the slight indentation in the ground hidden from any window Millicent might want to sit at.

“Do you smell it Liz ? No human would pick it up, but I can.”

“No, everything smells like wet leaves to me.”

Laura knelt and placed her nose right in amongst the dead leaves. To her it was unmistakable, no wonder Mabina thought the spot was somewhere to avoid. Laura never revisited the places she'd used to dispose of her kills, it was something instinctive in vampires.

"Someone is buried here and it's not a shallow grave." She said. "Probably more than one body and they've been buried nice and deep. Do you have a name for Millicent's carer?"

"No, we haven't been here that long, only a day or two longer than you."

"I'm not criticising Liz, but she wasn't in Sam's notes and I can't see an artist in her eighties burying bodies in the woods."

"I did hear the old lady call out to her as they left the house. I think she called her Gabby."

Mabina would want to simply arrive at the house, take it over and begin looking for the last artefact on the list. For once Laura thought that sounded a pretty good plan.

"We could spend months investigating the going on at The Gables." She said. "It could be that Sam hasn't told us the whole story, but the sooner we get the Circle the sooner we'll be finished with collecting trinkets for the Psochics. Do you still have the gun I gave you?"

"Yes, of course. It's in my bag all the time, why?"

"We're going to take over the house tonight. Bring the gun with you, I suspect Gabby isn't the harmless mousy person you think."

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Simon was still enjoying the morning news. He was still being described as at least a dozen heavily armed members of everything from ISIS to a newly formed Baader–Meinhof Group. No one really knew who'd attacked Belmarsh prison and so far no one had claimed responsibility. Left wing nutters were incarcerated with right wing nutters in Belmarsh and then there was a good contingent of various foreign crazies. Someone might have been trying to break out their buddies or trying to slaughter someone else's friends. Uncertainty mean the news media was full of conjecture and plain old fashioned nonsense.

'Several members of the UN are demanding full clarity from the UK government.'

Said the lady reading the news on Radio 4.

"Good luck with that." Muttered Simon.

He'd had his breakfast, usually just toast if he had a few chores before heading for the office. His third mug of coffee still hadn't properly woken him up when the doorbell rang. It was about the right time for the postie to deliver something Clara or Laura had ordered online. To his surprise there was a Bentley parked outside the house and a well-dressed middle aged man stood on the doorstep. Not really the sort of street for Bentleys, but there was a driver sat behind the wheel.

"You must be Simon, Cyril described you to me."

An affluent stranger mentioning Cyril. Simon decided he was unlikely to be dangerous.

"Come in, there's still some coffee in the pot. Are you hungry? I'm looking for an excuse to cook a bacon sandwich."

"I wouldn't mind that sandwich..... It's my wife. Bacon is worse than eating cyanide according to her. I blame the bloody Guardian."

Coffee poured and bacon under the grill, Simon had a chance to look at the business card his visitor had given him. Harry Beck was sat at their kitchen table, a senior member of the Metropolitan Police with a rank so high he probably got a Christmas card from the Queen. Cyril had kept his police connections fairly secret, but as there weren't half a dozen uniformed coppers with Harry....

"I'm assuming you're Cyril's.....What is the word? Inside man at the Met?"

"I prefer to think of Cyril as my inside man in the criminal fraternity." Said Harry.

They both chuckled as Simon turned over the bacon.

"I can put sliced tomatoes in with the bacon if you like, and brown sauce?"

"Perfect! My wife is a good lady, but she seems to think anything that tastes good is the work of Satan."

Once his guest was biting into the sandwich and looking happy, Simon had to ask.

"So, what brings you all the way to Hornsey Mr Beck?"

"Harry, please call me Harry. This is a sort of official unofficial meeting. William Jarrold is gone, the King is dead and good riddance to him. Did he ever tell you the story about the young man who was killed in the old Woolwich Arsenal site?"

"No, but Tom mentioned it once, when we'd both drunk far too much."

"Oh, Tom Ives from Erith.... Yes, he'd know about it. Bill always makes it sound as though Steve Gorman killed the young man, but it was Bill who did the deed. The man was really a fifteen year old and Bill killed him with a straight blade razor. William was always twisted inside, but we only realised when he was too powerful to stop."

"Paranoia and a bit of brutality probably comes with the territory." Said Simon.

"I hope not Simon, Cyril told me you're different."

"Me.... I'm not taking over from Bill."

"Come on..... Cyril may officially be running the show, but even he knows that's only because you gave him the crown. He told me you're not the sort to fill the streets with dead mobsters. That's what I want..... Do whatever you want, just don't scare the general public, bless em."

Was that all Harry Beck wanted? He hadn't asked for money, but Simon really didn't believe his interest was totally altruistic. If he expected the occasional gift, he was sure Cyril was quite capable of dealing with it.

"Is this arrangement two way Harry? I will try not to get caught, but if I do. Can I hope for a little help from your direction?"

"That depends on how things work out. Go about your business without upsetting the apple cart and I will certainly look favourably upon any request for help. Not that I can promise anything of course."

"No I understand that. I'm still hungry, do you fancy another bacon sandwich?" Asked Simon.

"I think I will have another. I'm sure my wife will get me eating grasshoppers if the bloody Guardian says it's good for the planet."

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Liz Grant probably had some kind of fighting skills associated with whatever she now was. She might even be more powerful than a vampire, there was just no way of knowing. There would be a moment when events had her fighting for her life. That was the moment she'd know if all the pain of transformation had been worth it. Until then she was grateful for the protection of two vampires. It was dark but not that late, the residents of The Gables in Cherry Tree Lane were likely to settle down early for the evening.

"Laura and I will deal with the carer, you're really there to hold the old lady's hand and keep her calm." Said Mabina.

"We don't want her having a heart attack or anything." Added Laura.

It was insulting really, being given the role of nursemaid to Millicent Spooner. She should have told them she was capable of doing more. She should have become quite angry and assertive.

"I can do that." She said.

Ridiculously easy for them to open a door and get inside the house, especially for women with vampire strength. They'd been studying the floor plans quite a bit, it was assumed Millicent would

have the largest bedroom. Flashlight on, Liz walked into the bedroom and saw the mop of grey hair on the pillow.

"Mrs Spooner.....Don't be alarmed, you're quite safe."

The old lady woke up quite quickly, but her mind hadn't woken up as quickly as her body.

"Is that you Penny?" She asked. "Is the house on fire again?"

Probably the residue of a dream, or at least she hoped it was. Liz had no idea who Penny was and Laura was becoming a little touchy about the number of buildings she'd caused to burn down.

"It's not Penny..... You're safe, no one will hurt you."

The noises from along the upstairs hallway were calling her a liar. Shouting from Laura, though she couldn't make out the words. Obvious violence going on by the sounds of hard blows and someone colliding with a wall. Millicent Spooner was waking up and she wasn't happy.

"What is happening in my house?"

"There were burglars Mrs Spooner. Don't worry the police are dealing with them."

The noise became worse as the fight seemed to get closer. The sound of hard blows again and people breathing hard. Voices too, now quite easy to hear.

"Damn, she's tougher than she looks." Yelled Laura.

"Hit her, bite the bitch if you have to." Shouted Mabina.

Millicent was eighty seven but she wasn't stupid. She was now wide awake and unhappy about the fight going on near her bedroom.

"I demand to know who you are?"

"I'm with the police." Said Liz.

"Nonsense, I know all the local police."

Liz was seriously considering aiming her gun at the old lady and telling her to keep quiet, or else. Luckily the fight saved her from having to threaten violence, or invent any more implausible lies.

"You managed to kill me, but you can't knock out a female human." Yelled Mabina.

"Perhaps if you'd stop getting in my way." Shouted Laura.

There wasn't much light in the hallway, just her flashlight and a little moonlight coming through a window. The face that appeared in the bedroom door was just about recognisable as the woman she'd heard called Gabby. Gone was the sweet harmless face, the young woman was baring her teeth and flaring her nostrils. It was the look of a wild thing, a person gone mad.

"Hit her, for fuck sake hit her." Shouted Mabina.

Mabina was bleeding, a nasty looking scratch across her cheek, just below her eye. Laura must have decided keeping the carer alive was a luxury they could no longer afford. She grabbed Gabby's head and rammed it into the door frame. She must have used all her strength, the doorframe actually cracked from the force of the blow. Gabby wasn't struggling anymore, the blood from her broken head was beginning to spread across the floor.

"That is the last time we try to subdue someone without hurting them." Said Mabina.

All far too much for Millicent, she screamed once and fainted, falling back onto her pillows. Liz felt for a pulse and was relieved to find one.

"Is she alright?" Asked Laura.

"I doubt if she's alright after seeing that, but she's alive. How about Gabby?"

Laura shook her head and began to roll the body up in the bedroom rug. Liz shuddered at how expertly it was done, she must have used a lot of bedroom rugs to dispose of a lot of bodies. One of Millicent's blankets to cover the bits the rug wasn't quite big enough to hide. It reminded Liz of watching a spider wrap up its victims in layers of silk.

"I'll look through Gabby's things." Said Mabina. "Can you carry the old lady downstairs ? The kitchen is best, the windows face away from the road."

"We definitely need her; I'm not picking up anything from the Circle of Arcadis." Said Laura. Definitely more strength than she was used to having, Millicent felt like carrying next to nothing. Liz risked the light switch for the stairs. There could no dropping the old lady, the knowledge in her head was now their last hope of finding what they sought.

"I'll put Gabby near the back door for now."

Liz was quite envious of vampire night vision as Laura easily passed her at the bottom of the stairs, vanishing down a corridor with the rug wrapped body of Millicent's dead carer over her shoulder. Liz found the kitchen and switched on the lights.

"Don't die on me Millicent." She muttered.

Tight fitting blinds on the windows, little if any light was going to be seen outside. A chair full of comfy cushions looked to be the elderly artist's usual throne when she was in the kitchen. Liz put her in the chair, adjusting the cushions to hold her upright. It was a question of waiting now, for Millicent to wake up.

"Coffee I think, maybe something to nibble."

A well-equipped kitchen with an almost industrial sized coffee maker. Liz found the coffee in a cupboard and filled the machine. It was just making the usual spluttering sounds when Laura entered the room.

"How is she ?" She asked.

"Still sleeping like a baby."

Laura found the bread and they were both nibbling toast when Mabina arrived and emptied the contents of a carrier bag onto the kitchen table.

"Passport, credit cards..... Gabby really was Gabby, but why does a carer need this ?"

She was holding the gun between her thumb and index finger, as though it might bite. Laura dug through the pile of personal items Mabina had found in Gabby's room.

"Even a student railcard in the name of Gabriella Norman." Said Laura. "If it's a fake ID, they certainly went to a lot of trouble. Do we really care though ? We're here to find the artefact."

Mabina dropped the gun on the table and nodded in the direction of Millicent Spooner.

"Has she shown any signs of waking up ?" She asked.

"No, I could try rubbing her face with a wet flannel." Said Liz.

Laura actually snorted at her, before opening the cupboard under the sink and looking at the various bottles and sprays.

"People think smells have to be unpleasant to wake people up." She said. "That's a fallacy, they just have to be strong and unusual. Let's see..... Yes, window cleaner with vinegar."

She sprayed a lot of the window cleaner onto a pan scourer and held it under the old lady's nose.

Millicent began to cough and splutter, putting her hand up to cover her nose.

"Oh, dreadful....."

Liz went back into carer mode, putting her hand on Millicent's arm.

"Are you feeling better now Mrs Spooner ?" She asked.

"Yes I am though....."

She looked at the pile of Gabby's bits and pieces on the table and the gun. It was the first time she'd seen Laura and Mabina, she seemed to study their faces for a while.

"I'd say that you're definitely not with the police." She said.

"No, we're not, but we really don't mean you any harm." Said Laura.

“What did you do with Gabby ?”

“We did try our best not to hurt her.” Said Mabina.

Millicent put her hand out towards the gun and Laura moved it away from her.

“No I..... that was hers.” Said Millicent. “Did you kill her ? Please tell me you killed her.”

“I killed her.” Said Laura.

“Oh, thank God for that.” Said Millicent Spooner.

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Patsy Smart still enjoyed her job behind the counter at Hayle’s Motor Factors. The hours could be a bit weird, they’d begun staying open until nine thirty two evenings a week. There was time off in lieu though and a little extra money, which always came in handy.

“Patsy you’re a genius..... That’s the bit I needed.”

The customer had hands covered in grime and so were hers. At one time she’d hated getting her hands covered in grease and grime, now she accepted it as part of the job. She’d even become an expert on the best way to use the special hand cleaner the boss bought in five gallon drums. There were days when the customers were fussing over her, when she really thought she had the perfect job. On days when everyone seemed to be moaning because she’d sold them the wrong part for their ten year old Skoda..... Those days weren’t so good. Fifteen minutes until closing and there was still quite a queue of men needing parts for their cars.

“Next !” She yelled.

So busy she hadn’t noticed him in the queue.

“Sorry sir, but you have been warned before. Harassing the female staff will get you banned from the shop.” She told him.

“But I need a grondle sprocket for my van.”

“Oh.... That old thing. You need to send it to the crushers and buy something decent.”

The counter was deliberately wide enough to stop any disgruntled customer from getting at the staff. Too much of a stretch for her to be able to kiss him, she’d tried several times in the past.

“Do you fancy a Chinese and a bottle of wine ?” Asked Simon.

“Sounds great, we close in about ten minutes.”

“I’ll wait.”

There were chairs, but no one with any sense and wearing decent clothes was stupid enough to sit on them. Simon stood and waited as she cleared the queue. She even took him into the washroom when she cleaned up and changed into clothing that didn’t smell of engine oil. The boss wouldn’t mind, he knew Simon and seemed to think he was North London’s equivalent of Vito Corleone.

“I’ll need to phone my mum.” She said. “She misses you by the way, always saying we don’t see as much of you these days.”

“There’s been a lot going on, I told you about the Psochics and the problems we’ve had with them.”

“I know, I’m not complaining. Is it all over ?” She asked.

He kissed her and if there’d been a working lock on the door she might have slid her hand down the front of his trousers.

“Why don’t we get a takeaway.” She said. “Take it back to my place and you can talk to mum for a bit and then we can..... You know.”

“Oh yes, I’m really fond of..... You know. I promised once to tell you everything and quite a bit has happened. We can talk over a takeaway and a bottle of prosecco.”

“Do you have to rush off afterwards.” She asked

“No, I’m yours for the night, or at least until about three am.”

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Millicent had become quite animated after hearing about Gabby's death. She didn't believe them though, insisting on seeing the body.

"It's not a nice thing to see, her head hit the doorframe quite hard." Said Laura.

"I'm not squeamish. I was only a child during the war, but I saw some things. I've seen sights that would make your hair curl."

Laura doubted it, but as the old lady was insisting, she took her to where she'd dropped the rolled up rug with Gabby's corpse inside. Laura folded back the blanket, revealing a blood soaked face and hair.

"Unroll it, or whatever you need to do." Said Millicent. "That could be anyone. The bitch made my life hell and I think she killed my cousin Gillian. I need to see her, I need to be certain."

"Not a good idea." Said Liz. "You might think you've seen some awful things, but that much blood..... Not a good idea."

It was easy to see who the old lady trusted. She moved away from her and Mabina, but Liz was allowed to hold her arm. The relationship was too trusting, Laura thought things needed shaking up.

"There isn't time to indulge your foibles Millicent." She said. "We're looking for something in your house and you'll be put in the kitchen until we find it."

"I know what you're looking for..... The magical object left here by Andrew Mordaunt. You're not the first, I'm sure that is what Gabby was sent to find."

Laura wasn't surprised the old lady knew there was a hidden artefact somewhere in the house, she had lived there for quite a few years. Mabina seemed shocked by the news.

"You know about the Circle of Arcadis?" She asked.

"I didn't have a name for it, but quite a few people have come here looking for something. Luckily most weren't as persistent and violent as Gabby, or you for that matter. One young man claimed to be writing a book on the area, but I knew what he was after."

"Do you know where it is?" Asked Laura.

"Hm... not exactly, but I'm sure the key to finding it is in the cellar." Said Millicent.

"But there is no cellar, we've seen the plans for the house." Said Mabina.

The elderly artist was laughing at them. Eighty seven and she was laughing so hard that Liz was having to support her.

"Oh my dear girls..... If you can't even find the cellar..... You know my price. Unwrap that dreadful woman and let me make sure it's her. I will then show you the cellar. No guarantees you'll find the magic thingamabob, but if it's anywhere, it'll be down there."

It wasn't a hard decision to make, Laura unwrapped Gabby's corpse and Millicent moved forward to get a proper look. The old lady kicked the body twice and after a pause, she kicked it again.

"Burn her body please." She said. "Someone like her doesn't deserve a christian burial."

"Now show us the cellar." Said Mabina.

"Patience my dear..... If I have a minute to spare at my age, I'm sure you have."

Millicent glared at the body, as if daring it to come back to life. Eventually she leant on Liz and walked towards the large lounge at the front of the house. Laura had already decided to tell the old lady where her cousin was likely to be buried. Not yet though, it would only complicate things that really didn't need any further complications.

"The fireplace is where we need to be. I only found it by accident.... Fell against it and there it was, a stairway to a cellar that wasn't supposed to exist."

Laura found herself being pointed at.

“You..... Laura. The yellow stone between two grey stones. Press it back and push down at the same time.”

She pushed and pressed and there was an audible click. A rug in the centre of the room vanished, as a trap door opened beneath it.

“Simple when you know how.” Said Millicent. “Gabby searched for months without finding it. You’ll need to carry me down there. I usually crawl up and down the stairs. Not today though, I demand a little dignity.... One of you can carry me.”

“Alright, stop making a fuss.” Said Liz. “I’ll carry you down.”

“There’s a candle and matches on the top step.”

The cellar wasn’t that large, probably only ten feet by about twelve feet. The candle revealed words scratched deep into the stone wall.

‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here.’

“A little Dante, I’m sure Andrew Mordaunt must have cut that into the stones.” Said Millicent.

“But enter where ?” Asked Mabina.

The cellar was featureless with almost uniformly grey stone walls. At one end a patch of the wall looked burned, as if someone had lit a bonfire up against it.

“I’ve pressed and pulled at every stone, it became a bit of an obsession once. Nothing, not the slightest sound or movement anywhere.”

“Did you burn the wall ?” Asked Liz.

“No, that must have been done by Mordaunt.”

Laura walked up to touch the soot on the wall and it vanished. An area of the wall about three feet wide began to glow. She stepped back and the glowing stopped.

“It’s never done that before.” Said Millicent.

“You try it Mabina.”

Nothing, even when Mabina hit the wall with her fist.

“Now you try Liz.”

“Me ?”

“Yes, you’re a little more than human these days.” Said Laura.

Liz got to within a foot of the wall and the glowing started again. A rich orange colour that rippled slightly and filled the cellar with light.

“It looks like we’re both going.” Said Laura. “Mabina can stay and babysit the old lady.”

“I’m quite capable of looking after myself.” Said Millicent.

“Go where ?” Asked Liz.

“It’s a doorway Liz, though one that doesn’t like me for some reason.” Said Mabina.

“We’ll need to prepare.” Said Liz. “Where do you think it leads to ?”

“Take time to prepare and we’ll think of a hundred things we might need, then a thousand reasons why we shouldn’t go.”

Laura grabbed Liz’s hand and stepped through the glowing doorway.

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