

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 13 - Syracuse

"Maybe it was seeing his warriors being killed again and again, or perhaps he'd become bored with the battle ? For some reason Karkengara decided to show them why his name meant bringer of fire."

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Simon had sent word that he was going to be arriving in Syracuse. Not always a wise move, some regions of Italy were ruled by rival families to the Medici. Alberti had also sent word to the local priest, asking for assistance in the name of the Brotherhood. That had obviously worked as intended, judging by the carriage sent to meet them, once The Mermaid was moored at the docks. Simon had noticed that twenty first century priests were often as poor as church mice, surviving on a stipend. Renaissance Italy was different, the clergy were wealthy, often flaunting that wealth.

"My master has sent me to bring you to his villa."

Said the smiling servant, as he and another man lashed their luggage to the carriage roof. Simon had hired a dig foreman in Florence and two diggers. It seemed they were going to travel in an open cart. He'd need other strong backs, but those could be hired locally.

As far as Simon was aware, Giuseppe Puglisi was just a simple priest, though he did have a senior role in the local Brotherhood. The coach sent for them looked expensive and the inside was lavish.

"Oh, this is the way to travel." Said Niña. "Will it take us a while to get where we're going ?"

"Syracuse is a small city, so I doubt it." Said Simon. "A city with a lot of history though, there are even catacombs, which is where we'll begin our search. Have you felt anything since we docked ? You might not recognise it as something pointing us in the right direction."

"Nothing, Simon....Nothing at all. I am tired though." Said Niña.

"Yes, don't worry about it. If it comes, it comes." Said Simon. "Otherwise, we can search the catacombs. One way or another, we will find what I'm looking for."

"What are you looking for ?" Asked Donna.

"That's confidential." Said Niña.

Simon had forgotten Niña's female companion wasn't really one of their circle. He smiled at her rather than scowling. Poor Donna was likely to see and hear some extraordinary things, before they returned to Livorno. The coach driver took them south out of the city, through an area of farms and vineyards. About half an hour after picking them up, the coach came to a halt outside a large, two floor villa. For a clergyman Giuseppe was obviously doing well, a cloud of servants appeared, all eager to carry their luggage inside.

"Oh, Simon.....This house is so beautiful." Said Niña. "I'm going to enjoy Sicily, I know it.

"I hope you do."

The man coming to greet them was Giuseppe Puglisi, the owner of the villa, there could be no doubt of it. His clothing reminded Simon of the wealthy merchants in Florence. There were gold rings on his fingers and a gold cross hanging on a chain around the priest's neck. Giuseppe greeted Niña first, giving her a gentle hug, while kissing her cheek. If the girl disliked being that close to a cross, she never showed it. When it was Simon's turn, he received a kiss on both cheeks.

"I received a message by courier." Said Giuseppe. "Brother Alberti told me you were arriving. Please.....While you are here, treat my home as though it was your own."

"Your home is so beautiful." Said Niña. "I like to draw where I go. May I draw your home and the gardens?"

"Of course.....Of course dear Niña. Draw anything you wish."

Simon liked Alberti, but knew the elderly cleric had a reputation for being both ruthless and dangerous. Whatever was in the note brought by the courier, it had probably included a few threats. Simon was sure they'd be treated like royalty during their time in Syracuse.

"I'm tired and.....A little thirsty." Said Donna.

"Where are my manners.... Come inside." Said Giuseppe. "A meal is being prepared and there are some fruit juices. Wine too, if you'd prefer."

"I'll settle for fruit juice." Said Simon.

There were ice cold beverages in Florence, a new invention using salt and ice transported into the city. Hugely expensive, though unlikely to be available in Sicily. Simon had become used to room temperature fruit juice. The dining room was airy and spacious, with a cool breeze coming in through a few open windows. There was a wonderful smell of something being cooked, presumably their meal.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Giuseppe." Said Simon. "I'm certain we're all going to enjoy staying here."

"Can I see my room?" Asked Niña.

"Of course, I'm not used to house guests." Said Giuseppe. "Rosa.....Show our guest the room we selected for her."

Giuseppe was a pushover, Niña would have him twisted around her little finger within days, maybe a few hours. The villa would make a good base and it seemed safe. He'd lived a very long life though and wasn't silly enough to assume anywhere was totally safe.

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Liz had wanted to explore a new world, but the tall men in robes kept attacking. She'd have become fully the guardian of the last gate, if Akiva hadn't joined the battle. There were so many of the priests, their numbers made them almost impossible to deal with. The dragon's army, his myrmidons, were good fighters and there were many of them. Once killed they took a few minutes to return and to her, it felt as though they died at inconvenient moments. Not that Karkengara cared, nothing seemed to get even close to leaving a scratch on his skin. Liz didn't think there was a chance of her dying, but she might have been injured if Akiva hadn't arrived at just the right moment. He was a gift of course, from a deity, or someone with real power. Who she needed to thank, could wait for a while.

"More.....Is there no end to them?" She yelled.

A few of the priests were armed with blades, but most carried heavy staffs, made of some kind of dense hardwood. They were strong and good at using those staffs. If the myrmidons weren't effectively immortal, the battle would have been lost. In a brief gap in the fighting, Akiva yelled an obvious question.

"Who is the dragon?"

"I'll introduce him later."

Maybe it was seeing his warriors being killed again and again, or perhaps he'd become bored with the battle? For some reason Karkengara decided to show them why his name meant bringer of fire.

The dragon deity stomped about a little first, as if seized by a fit of anger. He then took a deep breath and Liz had a pretty good idea what was going to happen next.

“Keep out of his way, Akiva.” She yelled. “Don’t get in front of an angry dragon.”

Karkengara did it with more care than she’d imagined, none of his myrmidons were caught in the inferno. His open jaws belched flames and the priests in beige robes died in huge numbers. Dragon fire reduced their remains to ashes, almost as soon as their bodies hit the ground. A terrible thing to watch, even if the priests were trying to kill them.

“They don’t like that.” Said Akiva. “These priests are brave fighters, but fire terrifies them.”

Liz knew of several religions that believed in the purging flames, that incineration of the body, meant destruction of the soul. She couldn’t be certain they believed that, though they were running away.

The able bodied helped the wounded, as they ran inside the pyramid.

“Getting them out of there will be....Awkward.” Said Akiva. “Do we need to get them out ? I came a little late to this battle.”

“Who sent you ?” Asked Liz.

“Horus of course, it seems I’ll be in his debt forever. I’m to help you here and then I have to.....No insult to anyone here, but I have to stop a dragon deity from eating Laura.”

It would have been polite to introduce Akiva to the dragon, but Karkengara had a thing about giving his name to strangers, or just about anyone. Liz decided to ignore the situation, they’d get to know one another as the day progressed.

“That’ll be Q’uq’umatz, I’ve heard that legend.” Said the dragon. “Not a myth, though I doubt that this Laura fits the legend. Q’uq’umatz usually takes the form of a serpent, though some fools call him a dragon. I take no insult from your comment.”

“Horus believes Kittara does fit the legend.” Said Akiva.

“Him.....Pahhhh.” Snorted Karkengara. “Akiva is right though.....It’ll take a lot of effort to gain control of the pyramid.”

Good, they were getting along and she was sure they’d be friends by the end of the day. Liz used her guardian senses on the pyramid and found none of the creatures she was looking for.

“Damn, there are none of the creatures in there.” She said. “They must have joined the battle and been killed, their remains turned to ash. We’ll need to go to the city.”

“Where you lead.....I and my myrmidons will follow.” Said Karkengara.

Akiva was looking sideways at her and trying to roll his eyes without the dragon seeing. It was a weird situation, but one she didn’t want to spend hours explaining.

“Myrmidons ?” Asked Akiva.

“I’ve studied the history of your world.....Fascinating.” Said the dragon.

They formed up, with Liz in the lead, as she walked towards the city. Not that far away, four or five miles. To her right was Akiva, still looking a little bemused and confused. A few yards behind her was Karkengara the bringer of fire. Lined up behind him were several thousand of his warriors, his myrmidons as he liked to call them. Myrmidons, the soldiers commanded by Achilles in Greek history, though Liz doubted if they could return from the dead.

“I’d like to talk to the people who live in the city.” Said Liz. “After destroying their drones though and killing their priests.....I think another fight is inevitable.”

“Definitely, no avoiding it.” Said the dragon.

“I agree.” Said Akiva. “Who are these creatures you’re looking for ?”

"In themselves, they don't matter." Said Liz. "They're just mercenaries who'll fight anyone for money. The person they work for though, he's far more interesting. I need one of these creatures alive, so he can tell me who he's working for."

Akiva turned and looked straight at the dragon, who was stomping through the sand behind them.

"So, how did you two end up fighting together?" He asked.

"It's a very long story." Said Liz.

"Liz disturbed me while using my temple, to carry out a ritual. She seemed.....Interesting. I then agreed to help her with her current problem. In return, she agreed to provide me with a few offerings. My name is Karkengara, bringer of fire."

"Maybe not that long a story after all." Said Liz.

Of course, he hadn't mentioned the offerings being sacrifices. She thought Akiva would act with hostility to that piece of information, so she wasn't going to tell him. As for the feeling the dragon was playing her in some way....She wasn't going to mention that either.

"I can see the city now." Said Akiva. "It looks impressive."

"They're sending more drones." Said the dragon.

Lots of gleaming towers, which Liz remembered seeing the last time she'd been on that world.

Above the towers was a small cloud of aircraft, all heading towards them. The thing that bothered her most was not even knowing the name of the world she was on, or the name of the city who'd obviously declared war on them.

"How do we fight flying drones?" Asked Akiva.

"The myrmidons will deal with them." Said Liz. "Just stand back and try not to get killed."

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This time Laura had more supplies in her backpack, mainly dried food and a few litres of water. Not that they expected to be in the caves and tunnels overnight, but the previous trouble had taught them the truth of the Boy Scout motto.....Be Prepared.

"The thief couldn't get it out of the dig site." She said. "It has to still be here, has to be."

"I agree, but there are miles of tunnels." Said Tim.

"I know, like hunting a needle in a huge haystack." Said Laura. "My instructions from Nathalie were to find the buddha and above all, be seen. If nothing else we're being seen."

Hassan Bashir had originally said the man who'd shot at them was unknown to him, definitely not employed at the dig. That had huge security implication, heads were likely to roll. Faced with furious security personnel and an even more furious Nathalie.....Hassan had changed his story. It seemed the dead man was a casual digger, hired because his brother worked for the Silver Dawn. Not an employee, to a casual organised by Hassan himself. All in less than two days. Things didn't look good for Hassan Bashir, as he became the prime suspect for stealing antiquities in the area. Laura stopped and examined a hole in the ground, caused by what looked to be natural erosion at some time in the past.

"We keep walking past this hole." She said. "I think it's time we had a look."

"Not that deep, I can see the bottom." Said Tim.

A drop of about five feet, maybe six. Tim's lamp was showing the floor of a tunnel just below them. It looked alright down there, no loose rubble and fairly dust free.

"Alright, we're doing it." Said Laura. "I can always use the Egg to get us out again. Sit on the edge and drop down there.....Carefully."

Tim landed on his feet and as he walked away, she dropped down behind him. They weren't the first to visit the tunnel, there was a collapsible aluminium ladder leant against a wall.

"I see foot prints in the dust." Said Tim.

"Footprints of modern trainers." Added Laura.

Less than twenty yards along the passage, it opened up on the left. They'd found someone's den, complete with a sleeping bag and several containers full of water. Lots of hammers, chisels and other digging equipment. On top of a crate, was a large Tupperware box, that caught Laura's eye. There was a glint of gold inside it, about the same size and shape as the missing gold buddha. No touching the box, she ran her lamp over the lid.

"Someone hasn't been careful; I can see a finger print." She said. "Dig out the plastic bags, we're taking this back to London, unopened."

Freezer bags rather than evidence bags, but they'd do the job. Tim wrapped up the Tupperware box, before putting it in his backpack. A cup on a shelf went too, along with an empty cola bottle. All of them went into their backpacks, to be examined by the Silver Dawn labs.

"Straight back to London, or are we staying for the grand finale?" Asked Tim.

"I suspect Hassan tried to have us killed, so we'll stay in Sudan until things are sorted out. I'll take the evidence back to Nathalie this evening, complete with her missing buddha. I'll then get us a decent Thai takeaway in Hornsey, before I return."

"Oh, did I tell you I loved you today?" Asked Tim.

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Niña was sure Giuseppe hadn't been told much about Simon and her. To him they were just visiting VIPs and buttering them up was his way of pleasing the Brotherhood. For her part, she'd assumed he was a fool, easy to control and manipulate. Niña was beginning to realise they'd both underestimated one another.

"No, no Simon, there's more than just catacombs under the cathedral." Said Giuseppe. "There's a complete necropolis, a city of the dead."

After dinner drinks and her attendance had obviously surprised their host. Simon had insisted though and soon all three of them, were looking at a set of plans for the area beneath the Cathedral of Syracuse.

"Brother Alberti told me the cathedral was once a pagan site." Said Simon.

"A Temple to Athena." Added Niña. "Built over of course, the location converted to a christian cathedral."

"You're very well informed, Niña." Said Giuseppe.

"I read as much as I could find on Syracuse, before we left Florence." She replied.

There was always a slightly condescending tone in the priest's voice. She'd have loved to have bitten him. Nothing dangerous, just a playful nip to his neck. Simon would sulk though.

"A question for both of you." Said Giuseppe. "Are you believers? Do you think there's more than the ordinary world we see around us?"

Simon smiled at her and it was hard not to chuckle.

"Niña is a seer, a powerful one." Said Simon. "I myself have seen evidence of the darkness that surrounds us. I can't give details, but we're both aware of a reality, which most are unaware of."

"We've seen things you wouldn't believe." Added Niña.

Easy to convince the priest, by simply lifting him above her head and spinning him around for a while. Then show him her fangs, before running one of them across his cheek. He might call out the guard though and there was the Simon sulking business to consider.

"That is encouraging to hear." Said Giuseppe. "I've seen things in the catacombs, so have my servants. Seen and heard, one man heard the voice of his long dead mother. She was begging him to

leave the tunnels and never to back. Others have received warnings from phantom voices. I hate to think of one so young as Niña going through that.”

“I’m tougher than I look, much tougher.” She said.

A tension was building, which Simon obviously wanted to reduce.

“Look at the plans for the necropolis, Niña.” Said Simon. “See if they show you anything beyond just drawn lines on parchment.”

“I’ll try.”

Nothing, she’d been looking at the various maps all evening. It was as if placing her hands on the parchment helped, an area was calling out to her. Niña didn’t understand how, but a solid area of hatched lines, wanted to get her attention. She prodded the plans with her finger.

“Here.....What is here ?” She asked.

“Nothing, just an area of solid rock.” Said Giuseppe. “Now I look though, it is close to where Lorenzo said he heard the voice of his mother, God rest her soul.”

“What do you feel in there, Niña.” Asked Simon.

She wanted to tell Simon, but not the priest. If Simon was willing to ask the question in front of Giuseppe.....

“There’s something in that part of the catacombs, something.....Dangerous.” She said. “It wants us to discover it. Actually, it wants to see you Simon, it has a gift for you. I can feel it, clawing at the walls, trying to get it out.”

“Is it safe to free this.....Dangerous being ?” Asked the priest.

“Oh, if you could feel its anguish.” Said Niña. “It’s not safe to free it, of course it isn’t. We must though.....We must, it’s been waiting for a very long time.”

“Can you describe this being ?” Asked the priest. “Is it human ?”

“It’s been imprisoned since the minions of Thoth dropped it in there, many centuries ago, so it’s angry.” Said Niña. “They used sorcery to fuse the rocks, intending it to be trapped until the world ended. It has survived twenty centuries with no food, air or water. Of course it’s not human, though I have no idea what we’ll be setting free.”

She kept underestimating the priest. She’d expected Giuseppe to beg them to leave well alone, to forbid the release of the angry entity. He didn’t though, he actually seemed excited by the prospect of digging it out.

“Do you know how to release it ?” Asked Giuseppe.

“Hard work, pick axes and strong backs.” Said Niña. “We’ll have to dig it out.”

“Fine, I can find you a dozen diggers.” Said the priest. “Just one thing, who is Thoth ?”

“Thoth, God of the Moon, Magic and Writing.” Said Simon. “Some say Thoth is the wisest of all the ancient Gods. Also known as Djhuty, Djehuty, Tehuty. Usually manifests in the form of a baboon, or sometimes an Ibis. I’ve known friends have trouble with him before, he can be very dangerous. We will need to be careful.”

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Mabina had paid off the helpers arranged by Brendan. She’d also insisted on giving Brendan payment for his time and trouble.

“There will be a next time, I can guarantee it. I don’t want you to think I expect these things for free.” She’d told Brendan.

The hired security people had arrived like the fifth cavalry, complete with bags of food for the missing and those who were simply hungry. An impromptu feast had been held to celebrate her return, the lady who’d never really been missing. Brendan had come up with an excuse. It seemed

she had left a note about looking at a few local neolithic sites, but Daniel hadn't noticed the note. A daft excuse made up on the fly, but everyone seemed happy to believe it.

"No harm done." Said an ex-soldier, who Brendan knew.

When someone had suggested a trip to a nearby pub, Mabina had decided it was time to head for home. Daniel with her of course, though she'd insisted on not discussing the Gods from another world, until they were back in the house in Chelsea. They'd both had a couple of large cheeseburgers and fries, thanks to Brendan's hired cavalry. Despite that, as it began to get dark outside, they'd ordered an Indian meal to be delivered.

"We did both miss having breakfast." Daniel said, as he pressed send on the order.

"It's been a very.....Strange day." Said Mabina.

Once the food was on the kitchen table and a decent bottle of wine had been opened, Daniel seemed to sense it was the right time to ask about the hours she'd been missing.

"These Gods from somewhere else. Did they move the car?" Asked Daniel.

"No, I did that." Said Mabina. "There were several of them, but only one of them actually talked to me. I drove, while he sat in the passenger seat, directing me. I'm assuming his gender by his general physical appearance, but they might not have a gender. His name was a double barrel affair, which I might be remembering wrongly. It sounded to me like Monazin-Nerish."

"Where was I when this was going on?" Asked Daniel.

"You were unconscious on the back seat." Said Mabina. "No good sugar coating it, you touched one of the Gods and became very excited. You then passed out.....I'm assuming it was all too much for you."

"You make me sound like a toddler with attention deficit disorder." Said Daniel.

"What can I say.....We made you comfortable and I put your clothes where you'd find them."

"A note would have been nice." Said Daniel.

He was right of course, but Monazin had kept rushing her to get to the mound. Mabina had already decided to sleep with Daniel, if he tried again. Partly because she felt a need to make it up to him, the whole vanishing for hours business. Mainly though because he was a fellow vampire, with those strong muscles in his lower back. Sex with another vampire was always ten times better than sex with a human.

"You're right, Daniel. I'm sorry for worrying you." She said.

"Fine, you're forgiven. I'm assuming there was a reason for you being at the mound?"

"There are places of power, Daniel. Like Coldrum and they know where they are. All these places are linked in a kind of huge power grid. It seems that Ley Lines aren't a piece of nonsense after all. Monazin showed me things, worlds impossible for us to properly comprehend. My head is still spinning from some of it."

"Pity I missed it." Muttered Daniel.

"I can only apologise so many times." Said Mabina.

She moved her chair around the table, before circling his shoulder with her arms. A gentle hug and her lips were against his. He responded, so she used her tongue in a manner that was totally instinctive. She liked kissing him, pulling away wasn't fun.

"Now, no more feeling sorry for yourself." Said Mabina. "Later, if you wish.....We can share a bed."

"There is Meg in my life."

"Well....I've no intention of telling her."

It was the shy smile he gave her; they'd definitely be sleeping together. There was something still to tell him though, something important. There was also still half a bottle of wine left on the table.

“The Gods from another world are scared, Daniel.” She said. “All worlds are connected in some way and if Q'uiq'umatz swallows our world, there will be consequences. We're talking major, world destroying consequences. For now, they just want to be kept informed, but later.....They will need our help.”

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Clara liked Tom Ives, ever since she'd taken in her first blood splattered car to be crushed. Cleaning out a car or van wasn't guaranteed to remove forensic evidence. Even torching a car on a country lane somewhere, wasn't certain to remove everything. Tom's people took a car apart and then crushed the shell into a cube of recyclable steel. It appealed to Clara in a way leaving a burning car in Epping Forest never had, plus it was eco-friendly.

“These people were Simon's suppliers.” Tom had told her. “I've dealt with them a couple of times, but a large buy like this.....I'd like to take a little backup. Bring Noah and one other. I like Noah on these kinds of thing, the size of him deters any trouble. I'll leave the other person to you.”

Ronnie had been a natural choice, mainly because Laura seemed to think highly of her. Clara needed someone who, if it came to it, wouldn't freeze or panic. Ronnie Neophytou had been tested under fire. If the situation went bad, she'd aim a gun in the right direction and pull the trigger. Plus, Ronnie was always pestering her for extra work.

“What vehicles are we using?” Ronnie had asked her.

“Two new SUVs from the dealership in Rochester.” Clara had replied. “Tom will be in the front with two of his usual hard characters. We'll be the backup in the rear SUV.”

The use of vehicles never used by Tom before, had obviously pleased Ronnie. There was no proof that the police were routinely tracking any vehicles used by them, but there were rumours. Clara thought it was likely to be crap, but for such a large purchase of designer drugs....It made sense to be extra careful.

With Noah driving, they were currently following Tom in the other SUV. At just below the speed limit of course. No one wanted a pull by traffic cops, with over a million in cash onboard.

“I went to the location chosen by the seller yesterday, as you asked.” Said Noah. “It's very private and in the middle of nowhere. Shopping centre car parks are my personal choice, lots of shoppers coming back with their bags of crap.”

“Simon dealt with them a few times, with no trouble.” Said Clara. “Things change of course. I heard the old boss was killed by their new boss. So, we have to be careful.”

“Extra fucking careful.” Added Ronnie.

Officially the sellers were Koreans with contacts in Hong Kong. That translated to factories in China, churning out pills around the clock. Simon had trusted them, but Clara knew things had a habit of changing with a new boss. There was no such thing as total trust in the world of designer drugs. You turned up with enough firepower to offer mutually assured destruction, should the other side try anything.

“Do they still have that huge Korean guy, the ex-mixed martial arts champ?” Asked Noah.

“Yes, I'm sure he'll be there.” Said Clara.

“I've always wondered how tough he really is.” Said Noah.

Near Faversham, Tom's vehicle left the A2 and headed north, with them following. Flat countryside on the whole with narrow lanes without signposts. A dreadful area to carry out a drug buy, but they were committed. Tom's driver obviously knew where he was going. No hesitation as he turned left down yet another narrow lane. Probably wet lands once, there were a lot of tiny streams near the lane.

“Not far now, we’re meeting in that wood in the distance.” Said Noah.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Said Ronnie.

“Simon used these people, lots of times.” Said Clara. “We’ll soon be on our way with boxes of pills. So, be alert, but don’t get trigger happy.”

A small car park for a nature sanctuary, that probably only saw the public on hot, sunny days during the school holidays. Tom’s SUV was about ten yards away from a Mercedes four door saloon and a small white van. Behind them at a distance of about fifty yards, was a line of trees, evergreens by the look of it. Clara did a quick look for heartbeats and found two that shouldn’t have been there. Two beating human hearts, close together in amongst the line of trees. Maybe the police, which was bad but not fatal. More likely though, they were snipers, which might be fatal.

“I’m going to look in the woods.” Said Clara. “Make a noise, rattle the boxes with the cash in, as though they’re jammed. If the Koreans look puzzled, smile and rattle stuff again. I just need a few minutes to check something.”

“Fine, we’ll rattle boxes for a while.” Said Ronnie.

Clara rolled out of the SUV as it stopped, getting mud on her nice new suit. There was a slight drop in the ground, just enough to hide her from the sellers. There was a chance that the two extra humans were bird twitchers, or dog walkers, though Clara doubted it. When she reached some low bushes, she crouched and ran. When she reached the far edge of the trees, she stopped and carried on at a slow creep through the undergrowth. There they were, both lying on the ground, with sniper rifles on tripods.

‘.....wait for my signal. The arseholes are having trouble with something.’

Clara heard from one of the men’s walkie-talkies. Laura would have known all about the weapons they had. The power and size of the rounds they used, the maximum effective range and what company sold such weapons. Clara just knew sniper rifles weren’t appropriate for a routine drug buy. No killing though, dead men caused grudges. Clara just needed to leave a signal, something to put the Korean gang in their place, just a little. Even when he knew the truth, Tom was likely to still buy from them. Their prices were good, very competitive.

‘.....here we go.....When I slap the big guy.....’

No need to hurt them badly, Clara had her fangs and that neurotoxin that was so good at making humans.....Manageable. She was on them, holding one down while running a fang over the face of the other. Not a deep wound, just a scratch would do the trick. The second man was just beginning to seriously struggle, when she sank her fangs into his neck. That would leave a nasty scar, but it was his own fault for resisting. Once Clara had two unconscious men at her feet, she picked up their rifles and ran.

“Oh, how I love this job.” She muttered to herself.

The sniper rifles were dropped in the bushes, to be recovered later. By the time Clara was back with Ronnie and Noah, they were finally lifting the boxes of cash out of the SUV. Perfect timing, she joined them as though she’d been there all the time.

“Sorry Tom.” She said.

Tom didn’t know she’d probably saved his life, as he scowled at her. Clara managed to get close to Noah, while they were still out of eavesdropping range of the Koreans.

“Their boss will slap you.....Don’t react.” She whispered.

Noah was big, but he wasn’t stupid, far from it. He just nodded and carried on helping Ronnie carry the box of cash. Paper money is heavy, about the same weight per sheet as photocopy paper. Carry a box of copy paper from the stationery room and you could appreciate how heavy close to a million

pounds in a box can be. They placed the box on the floor of the white van, before backing away a few paces.

“Bring the merchandise.” Said a Korean looking man in an expensive looking suit.

Millions of tiny pills, film coated and packed in the kind of containers you’d see in your local pharmacy. Six boxes were dragged out of the van and placed on the ground. One of Tom’s guys began opening a few boxes to get samples. Clara had no idea what they were testing for and how, that wasn’t her area of expertise. She had a pretty good idea; the fun would start when the Koreans had checked the cash as the agreed amount and genuine. No point killing a customer for their cash, only to find out it was counterfeit. They ran ultraviolet light over the money and weighed several bundles of notes. In the end it was the boss in the fancy suit, who announced it.

“The money is good.” He said.

“We’re still testing.” Said Tom.

It came suddenly, as the Korean boss walked past Noah.

“Keep your hands off me.” The boss shouted.

It must have hurt, the sound of the slap seemed to echo across the car park. Clara had to give it to Noah, he took it all in his stride.

“Sorry, I apologise.” Said Noah.

The shots from the trees never came and the Koreans looked confused. Tom had no idea what was going on, so his tester carried on testing pills. The tension was almost visible, but nothing happened. It took a while, to sample millions of pills. Clara saw the huge Korean, the martial arts guy, look towards the trees. Nothing happened though and eventually Tom said it.

“The pills are as agreed....The deal is good.”

The Korean gang left with their cash, while Noah and the others were still loading boxes of pills into their SUVs.

“Now.....What the hell was that slap all about ?” Asked Tom.

“Easier to show you.” Said Clara.

Clara went into the bushes and came back with the two sniper rifles. They looked impressive, now she had time to look at them properly. Lots of matt black metal and expensive looking scopes for sights.

“Probably prints on them, if you know a tame copper.” Said Clara. “The slap was a signal to kill you all. The men who were to do the deed are asleep in the trees. They’ll be asleep for hours.”

“Fuck.” Said Tom. “I guessed something was wrong.....All that fuss with the boxes of money.”

“We should kill the men in the woods.” Said Ronnie.

“No, the Koreans sell the best and we get a good deal.” Said Tom.

That was how it was in the drug game. No real trust, everyone relied on threats and violence to maintain order and demand a little respect. Price ruled though and an enemy with a good price, could still be useful.

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