

Festina Lente

(Season four of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 10 - Karkengara

“Livorno wasn't a particularly large town, the road they were stood on had a view right across the docks. At least a dozen ships were there, having various cargos loaded and unloaded. Mainly goods being unloaded to be taken by carts into Florence.”

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Mabina put her phone down and looked out of the kitchen window. No work that day and her garden really did need a bit of care and attention. Gardening was enjoyable, but it wouldn't help solve the problem with the Wanderers. She'd tried to find Laura and had been unsuccessful, even Tim's phone wasn't being answered. Yes, Mabina knew they were in Sudan, but just about everywhere had some kind of phone service. Wasn't most of Africa on Twitter these days? “It's not fair of her to simply vanish.” She muttered.

She'd had no luck calling Liz, though at least Brendan had answered his phone. Not that he was any use, as he had no idea where Liz had got to. He had been surprisingly relaxed for a man whose partner had become uncontactable, vanished to parts unknown.

“Poor Brendan, he must be used to it by now.”

Anxiety had never been Mabina's thing, she considered it to be uncool. If anything bad was happening then and now, right in front of her face, she'd deal with it. Vampires tended to live in the now, comfortable in the knowledge they had the strength to deal with just about anything. Mabina had never looked over the garden fence, in case her neighbours were up to something. That made her realise her current obsession with the Wanderers mattered. Finding out their intentions was important. She picked up an address book from the table, already knowing who she was going to call.

Isaac Laquedem, he'd called himself for centuries, though he might have used a name he'd heard somewhere on his travels. Called Daniel now, he worked a small holding near Pitmedden in the Parish of Udney. A place that sounded straight out of Harry Potter, but it wasn't that far from Aberdeen. Daniel had always been immortal by some quirk in his DNA. Such deviations were rare, but Daniel claimed to have met one or two over the years. Simon and Clara had turned him into a vampire, though neither would say whose fangs had done the deed. One thing they both agreed on, was that Daniel had asked to become one of them, a Nosferatu, a drinker of blood.

“A weird vampire, but he is clever.” Mabina muttered.

Daniel had decided to only feed on those no one would miss. Mainly he lurked near bars with bad reputations, the ones that served what was known as afters. The landlords kept the doors locked and served drinks until the small hours. In amongst the clientele were probably a few who beat their wives and children. Not all of them though, some would be harmless drunks. One day Daniel was going to come across a family mourning one of his kills, a man he'd thought no one would miss. On that day he'd either change his ways, or go crazy. Laura had tried to talk him into varying those he fed on, with a little success. But the effect hadn't lasted long. Mabina dialled Daniel's number.

“Daniel, I know you're unlikely to recognise my voice, but you have been to my house....”

“Mabina Gladitch, of course I know your voice.” Said Daniel.

Clara talked to him more than any of them, he'd saved her life when she'd been little more than a human toddler. Mabina didn't know the whole story, but it sounded intense. The sort of thing to bond people for life, even vampires. Even Clara said he was impossible to read or understand. Not Mabina's first choice as a helper, but all the other choices were busy.

"We need to meet, Daniel." Said Mabina. "I can come to you, or I have a spare room. I am certain we're seeing the rise of the great feathered serpent, the God Q'uq'umatz. I'm sure you know the legend and how it applies to Laura."

"Yes, the legend.....Which might be nothing more than that. Are you sure Mabina.....Really sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then we must say no more over the phone." Said Daniel. "I will come to you; I'll break the rule of a lifetime and book an airline ticket. Hate the damn things, aircraft that is, not natural at all. Give me your address again, in case I've lost it. I'll call you when I arrive at the airport."

It was one of those things about living so long, that fear of flying. Simon was the same, Clara had to almost drug him to get him on a plane.

"I know it's the safest way to travel." He'd say. "But you never hear of a horse and cart crashing to the ground in a ball of flames."

"Call me when you're about to take off from Aberdeen and I'll pick you up at the airport at this end." Said Mabina.

Once the call was over, Mabina thought about her knowledge of the legend concerning Q'uq'umatz. He'd created the world, though other Gods had helped. The legend stated that he'd return one day to bring an end to the world. In between was what troubled Mabina. It was said he'd swallowed a vampire, a direct ancestor of Laura's. The God hadn't digested the girl, but had regurgitated her as a kind of egg. It sounded awful, but legends about the great feathered serpent, often were.

"And when the egg hatched, it contained the start of the modern vampire bloodline." Muttered Mabina. "A young girl vampire who would begin it all, a direct relation of Laura's.....How ludicrous."

Mabina chuckled not because she didn't believe the ludicrous legend, but because she did believe it. Details fitted in too well, stories from around the world matched too well. Worryingly the legend talked of Q'uq'umatz swallowing the vampire seed, before ending the world. Laura, the fucking insane God was going to eat Laura.

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The port of Livorno wasn't far from Florence, but going by horse drawn coach meant the distance was just about the maximum the horses could travel in a day. Once it became a three-day event, Giovanni had insisted on going. Niña had mentioned the trip to Juliana and almost overnight, Simon found himself hiring a large coach, pulled by four horses. Juliana had needed to bring a female chaperone, one of her maids. The same maid Giovanni was still seeing regularly, so Simon didn't see any problem with getting Juliana alone in the evenings. The owner of the coach had insisted on Simon taking a guard, to sit next to the coachman. Instead of a quick trip to find a ship to charter for their journey to Syracuse, Simon had ended up taking half of Florence on a trip to the coast. Or at least it had felt like that. There seemed to be more clothes packed into trunks, than any group of people could possibly need for three days. All of it lashed to the roof of the hired carriage.

"We can stop for a meal in Ponte a Egola." Juliana had said. "I have friends there I haven't seen for a while."

They'd had a wonderful meal with a nice family and despite Simon's misgivings about the wisdom of taking so many people, the journey to Livorno had been highly enjoyable. The weather had been

warm, but opening all the windows of their carriage, had cooled things down. One stretch of road had produced a cloud of flies to annoy them, but even that hadn't lasted long. By the time all their trunks were being taken into the Inn where they were staying; Simon thought it had been a good idea to bring Juliana. Inn, hostelry, or known by many other names. Simon and Giovanni had used a few while on business and none of them were exactly a home away from home. Such places were growing in number, even the clergy were hiring out rooms for the night. There'd be food though, shelter from the weather and a comfy bed.

"Oh, it's so beautiful here." Said Juliana. "Which ship have you come to look at?"

There had already been a question about how long he'd be gone. The questions would increase of course, they were in a relationship. Next, she'd ask about why he was going and why Niña needed to go with him. Syracuse could be dangerous and Simon had made up his mind; no matter what, Juliana wasn't going with them.

"I'm not sure, it's all being done through an agent, someone known to those I work for. He'll be here in the morning, to show us over the ship."

"I never ask what you do, Simon." Said Juliana. "But can you tell me a little about why you're going to Sicily? I'm just worried about you."

Livorno wasn't a particularly large town, the road they were stood on had a view right across the docks. At least a dozen ships were there, having various cargos loaded and unloaded. Mainly goods being unloaded to be taken by carts into Florence. They were far enough away to avoid the noise, but close enough to see the ships against a setting sun. It really did look idyllic. Simon steered Juliana away from the men carrying their belongings.

"Not here, later tonight." Said Simon. "We will talk properly about it, I promise. When we're alone tonight."

"You seem to be making assumptions, Simon. I have a chaperone with me."

She giggled and he laughed. Simon would have kissed her, if the road outside the hostelry hadn't been full of sweating men moving their heavy trunks. They did bump noses, which would have to do, for now. The real problem was, that after putting the questions off until they were alone; he still had no idea what he was going to tell her. Not the truth though, definitely not the truth.

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It was their second time at the dig site. Laura had offered to go on her own, but Tim had insisted on coming with her.

"I can see you being there a lot and I will become acclimatised to the heat." He'd said.

He had a point about going there quite often. The Buddha had been stolen from the dig, so whoever had stolen it, probably worked there. Not a large object, but all workers were searched when leaving the site. Quite a thorough search, so the artefact might still be hidden somewhere in the many tunnels and chambers. The thief might wait for the heat to die down before trying to recover it. It was what she'd have done.

"How are you handling the heat?" She asked Tim.

"Not too bad, but I could do without the dust."

They were both covered in fine dry dust, the colour of crushed nutmeg. The huge fan picked it up and coated everything with it. They were using Hassan's desk as he wasn't at the site. Dinner at the Bashir's house had been pleasant, but no more than that. It felt as though Hassan and Leila were trying to be cordial, but not over friendly. The low point of the night had been discovering there was no pool.

"Pools are considered a bit bourgeois in Sudan." Hassan had told them.

It had probably been rude to ask, Leila hadn't smiled at them much after that. The children had been sent to bed the instant they'd arrived and all in all, Laura wished they'd gone out to a burger place instead.

"So, where do we trudge off to next?" Asked Tim.

They'd already searched two tunnels and a large chamber. Laura was doing what Nathalie Aurigny had asked her to do, she was being seen. There was very little chance of stumbling over the lost Buddha, but the workers would see her there all day. Some already looked nervous and at least one of them was likely to be the thief. Others would have their suspicions, but no one wants to inform on a fellow worker. Laura looked at a plan of the dig she'd been given. The areas already explored were accurate, but some places were still a mystery, even to Hassan. To Laura those areas were a challenge, like part of the map with here be dragons written on it.

"Here, section GE Seventeen." She said. "There's a large chamber even the archaeology team haven't looked at."

"Great, I'd rather explore than trudge about." Said Tim.

New areas, old well-trodden areas. It would all get her seen and deter any further thievery. Plus, Tim was right, it was more fun to explore new ground. It was hotter away from the fan, but there was less dust in the air.

"Ok, GE Seventeen it is." She said.

They had rechargeable lights and face masks now, their first time at the dig had been a learning exercise. The lighting was good close to the main chamber, but almost non-existent in some of the tunnels. By the time they'd been walking for ten minutes, they'd have been in darkness without their own lights.

"This place is huge." Said Tim. "Are they going to dig everywhere?"

"That's the plan, though uncovering a temple this size.....It'll take years, maybe decades."

Not just a temple, Hassan thought there'd once been underground dwellings for those who'd served whatever Gods had been worshipped. There must have been better ventilation then, or they'd have all died from the heat.

"Here we are, the largely unexplored chamber." Said Laura.

"It doesn't look that exciting." Said Tim. "You never know though; we might find something important...Or just more dust."

Someone found them, someone obviously angered by her presence. A shot rang out, a rifle shot. Laura knew the difference between hand guns being fired and rifles. Someone had definitely fired a rifle in their direction. The bullet hit the wall some distance from them. The gunman was either a bad shot, or a very good one.

"Turn off your light." Said Laura, as she turned off her own.

It was beyond what most people think of as dark. No glimmer of light from outside, no flickering lamp in the distance. The darkness was total, but it made them an impossible target.

"I hear him.....I can hear him walking." Laura whispered.

"Go and get the bastard." Muttered Tim.

"Really? You don't mind?"

"I'll be fine.....Get him, Laura. Bash him once for me."

Vampire eyes were good, far better than an ordinary human. She couldn't see in the total dark though, running would mean bumping into walls and bruises, a lot of bruises. Her ears were incredible though and she could hear their attacker walking. No running, just a fast walk and she did

bump into a few walls. She was gaining on him though; the footsteps were getting closer. When she saw the glow from his light, Laura knew she had him.

"Hey.....You....Stop." She yelled.

Laura could run now she had a light to aim for. Vampires could run fast, easily as fast as a big cat. By the time he was raising his rifle, she was on him. She grabbed him by the throat, but he was gone, falling backwards and away from her. The rubble covering an entrance in the wall, could have remained undisturbed for another thousand years. Laura had collided with the man at speed, sending him through the rubble. There were stairs beyond the hole in the wall, steep steps leading down. She found the man at the first turn in the stairs, his neck snapped when he'd hit the wall.

"Who the hell are you ?" She muttered.

He looked local, though there was nothing in his pocket to confirm it. Laura took his lamp and put the rifle's webbing sling over her shoulder. The stairs went on, turning to the right at the edge of where the lamp would reach. Curiosity was pulling at her, but there was Tim to think about. She found him not that far away, following her footsteps in the ever-present dust. He'd put his lamp on, which was dangerous, though she wasn't going to moan at him. Laura hugged him as though they'd been apart for days.

"He's dead, it was an accident." She said.

"Good, what happened ?"

"He fell down some stairs.....Come on, Tim. You have to see what I discovered."

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Patricia Millicent Smart, Patsy, had gone back to being a law-abiding citizen. She enjoyed her job at Hayle's Motor Factors and could afford a mortgage on her pay. No one was likely to ask where the deposit on a two up, two down had come from. If they did, she'd claim it had all been saved, cash going into a jar since she'd started work. She was management now, officially manager of the sales counter and all the staff who sold car spares. No worrying about friends walking through the door, not now. Her day was hers to organise, within reason.

"No Tom, the air filter for Tony's car is the GH473, not the 470." She said.

"Oh damn, sorry." Said Tom.

It wasn't serious, Tony would have noticed before leaving. She was training staff, on top of trying to manage the counter at a busy motor factors. The new people would learn, eventually. Patsy had started off far greener than them, though she didn't feel a need to tell them that. Sales were up, the boss was pleased and everything seemed to be going smoothly. Apart from Simon still being missing for close to a year. Patsy had dated a neighbour's son, Andrew. Was that it ? Was dating someone else an admission that no miracle was going to bring Simon back ? The thing was, he'd never really been hers to begin with.

Despite being management, Patsy still cringed when Liz walked through the door. Her friend looked as though she'd been sleeping rough for a while. Liz was muttering too and looking behind her all the time. Patsy quickly steered Liz into her office, which was really a partitioned off section of the stores.

"Crap, Liz....Are you alright ?" She asked.

"Yes, I've been somewhere you wouldn't believe and I'm about to go somewhere even stranger."

Liz looked behind her again and seemed to be listening for something.

"Did you hear that ?" Asked Liz.

"Hear what ? There was no sound."

"Good, so others really can't hear him. Good, that's wonderful."

“Have you spoken to Brendan ?” Asked Patsy. “I know he’s a little worried about where you are.”
“If I call him, I will want to go home, but I can’t. Call him Patsy, say you’ve seen me and I’m fine. I’ll be home soon; can you tell him that for me ? Please tell him I’m fine.”

Her friend didn’t look fine, there were dark areas around her eyes. No sleep by the look of it, no change of clothing and Liz looked thinner. Strangest of all in many ways was the slight musty smell. Liz was, or had been, just about the cleanest person Patsy knew.

“I’ll tell him, but you look awful.” Said Patsy. “Do you need money ? At least come home with me and get a meal. A shower too and a change of clothes. I’m sure some of my jeans will fit you.”

“No time Patsy, no time.”

Liz hugged her and Patsy wasn’t sure if it was real, or something she’d imagined. There was the definite sound of something heavy thumping against the floor.

“You heard that too, didn’t you ?” Asked Liz.

“Maybe.....I thought I heard something.”

“He’s impatient. Here, this is why I came. The crystal is tougher than diamond, I have tested it. You can still enjoy looking at the snake in your knicker drawer, but it’s now harmless.”

Liz produced it from a pocket, her wonderful golden snake, deep inside a piece of solid crystal. For a second or so, the snake was the only thing on Patsy’s mind.

“Oh, thank you, Liz.” She said. “I’d almost given up on seeing it again.”

“Take it anywhere you like, it will no longer disrupt other enchanted artefacts.” Said Liz. “I must go now.....Please call Brendan.”

“I will Liz, I promise.”

No oozing through the floor, Liz simply vanished. There one moment, gone the next. For a few minutes Patsy looked at her snake, safely inside its new crystal cover. Her feelings for it weren’t natural, she knew that. As long as it couldn’t hurt anyone, she could live with being overly attached to it. Patsy put the snake in her desk and for the first time ever, she locked the drawer. There was the sound of a row outside at the counter.

“Tom.....He will insist or arguing with the customers.” She muttered.

Patsy would smooth it all over and Tom had the makings of being a good addition to the counter staff. On her way out of the stores, Patsy saw an indentation in the concrete floor. A deep indentation at least two feet across, a paw print of some kind; a paw with large claws.

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The stairs leading down seemed to go on forever. Tim had lost count of the number of flights of stairs. Occasionally there was a small landing built into the wall. As they stopped for a while on one landing, he realised the dust had gone from the air and he felt cooler. He instantly reached up and pulled off his mask. It had been essential to keep the dust out of his lungs, but it made his whole face wet with sweat. Laura removed hers too.

“The sad thing is, we’ll need them again on the way back.” Said Laura.

Tim ran a couple of tissues over his face and they were thick with brown dust.

“I dread to think what’s in this stuff.” Said Tim.

“David Huynh is thorough; he included a dust analysis in the file I received.” Said Laura. “The dust is primarily rock dust, with quite a lot of wood debris. Best guess was what’s left of the furniture they had down here.”

“No super bugs ?”

“No, or much in the way of bacteria.” Said Laura. “This place was sealed up for over a thousand years. Even bacteria can’t survive that long without something to feed on.”

Tim felt better, it was the kind of dark and nasty environment that breeds unpleasant fears. The stairs eventually ended at a solid looking wall. Solid until Laura gave it a hefty kick. The wall had been stacked up rubble, covered in the ubiquitous brown dust. Someone had placed the rubble there in a poor attempt to hide the stairs. The rubble was now spread out over the floor.

"Be careful, Tim." Said Laura. "I don't think anyone has been here for a very long time. There could be all sorts of things waiting to collapse or fall over."

"Or make us rich and famous, the Howard Carters of Sudan. Without the curse of course."

They were in a chamber that didn't look natural. The walls were too smooth, the floor too clear of the usual rubble they'd seen in the tunnels.

"That's an altar stone, rare for this part of the world." Said Laura.

Laura knew altars, so when she said there was an altar stone, Tim was willing to accept it as a fact. A long flat stone with carvings on the side. Tim had an advantage over archaeologists, he knew many of the Old Gods were still alive. He was more interested in who had been worshipped there, rather than knowing its age, or who had built the temple.

"Do you know who was worshipped here?" Tim asked.

Meaning were they compatible with Laura being a signed-up member of team Horus? It mattered; the Ancient Gods could be jealous to the point of being infantile.

"Stay back, I'll have a look at the altar." Said Laura.

Laura walked slowly, as if testing the ground for traps. It took her a while to reach the altar. Once there, she knelt on the ground to examine the carvings.

"I know this language Tim, it's the....."

Laura had gone. There had been a blue flash, like an electrical discharge. Then Laura simply wasn't there. Safety forgotten, Tim ran up to the altar stone and looked it over. Nothing strange, no Laura hiding on the other side, waiting to yell got you. Tim knelt where Laura had knelt and ran his hand over the carved letters of a language he couldn't read. Nothing, whatever had happened to Laura, didn't appear to have been triggered by her actions.

"Laura.....Laura." He yelled.

Yelling someone's name wildly looked weird in movies and felt even weirder in real life. Tim could find his way back to the main chamber of the dig site, he was sure of it. Not for a while though, he'd seen Laura vanish before. She might have activated the Egg for some reason.....

"And if she did, she'll be coming back." He muttered.

He sat, leaning on the altar stone. He even turned his lamp off and slept for a while. By the time he was lying on the stone and looking at his watch, close to fifteen hours had passed since Laura had vanished. He had a little water and a few things to nibble, but not much. They never had intended to explore the caves for close to an entire day.

"I'll wait for another hour, maybe two." He muttered. "Then I'll be back with help and supplies."

Forty minutes later a scratching sound had him looking at the altar stone. Another blue flash and Laura was back with him. She was holding a sword she hadn't been carrying when she'd vanished. There was also blood on her arms and clothing that he was sure wasn't hers.

"How long was I gone?" She asked.

"About fifteen hours, where were you?"

"The deepest temple, Tim. All the time I was away, I was about another thousand feet below where you've been waiting."

There was a kiss, a brief one.

"I need to go back and you need to come with me, this chamber might not be safe. Here, take this."

Tim took the sword off her, even though he had no idea what enemies he might have to face. It sounded lame, but he had to ask.

“What’s it like down there ?”

“Incredible....You’ll be amazed. I’ll use the Egg, it’ll be safer.”

Tim held her, as Laura pressed her left elbow against the lower part of her chest. The air was cooler wherever they were and the ever-present dust was no longer ever-present. There had been a slight smell in the tunnels, something so slight he’d ceased to smell it. Tim only realised how unpleasant it was, now it was gone.

“We’re safe here, for a while.” Said Laura. “Once your eyes are used to the light, I’ll show you the problem.”

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Simon hadn’t told Juliana the truth about himself. It had taken him a long time to tell Patsy and that had been out of necessity. If Juliana saw him injured or bloody, his job explained it. It wasn’t something he wanted her to dwell on, but she knew he worked for the Medici. Did she know his duties sometimes included being an assassin ? Probably. He’d told her a story close to the truth, knowing that was the best way to lie. There was information his employers wanted in Syracuse, maybe treasure too. Explaining Niña going with him hadn’t been easy, the idea had come to him as he’d undressed to join Juliana in bed.

“.....Yes, so everything arranged about chartering a ship, has to remain a secret.” He’d said.

“Yes, I understand, Simon.”

“Niña will be needed as she’s a natural seer. Having her with me will make it far easier to find what my employers are looking for. Again, no one must know about Niña.”

“Yes, with witchcraft madness infecting the country.” Said Juliana. “I will tell no one about her.”

It meant telling Niña she was a seer, which probably wasn’t far from the truth. The girl was clever, seeing the need for his lies. She’d promised to confirm his story should Juliana mention it.

“I’d bet you anything she won’t ask me.” Niña had said. “Juliana loves you and believes every word you say. That places quite a burden on you, Simon.”

“I know.....I know.”

Everyone was currently stood on a jetty in Livorno harbour, looking at a ship Simon had already decided to charter. La Sirena, The Mermaid wasn’t the newest ship for hire, or the cleanest. It didn’t even have the most impressive captain. The agent sent by the Brotherhood had a name so long, that Simon had tuned out halfway through listening to it. The Mermaid was captained by Galeoto, a native of Genoa who seemed known by just his first name.

“I like your ship captain.” Said Simon.

“She’s been in port too long.” Said Galeoto. “A ship like Mermaid needs to feel the ocean beneath her keel.”

“I’d feel safe on her.” Said Niña.

Giovanni had already made a few noises about the age of the vessel, but that didn’t worry Simon. The Mermaid looked right; all the ropes had been neatly rolled up after being oiled to prevent rot. Not an immaculately clean ship, but it looked ready for anything. Mainly though, Simon was working with his instincts and they were telling him to charter Galeoto’s ship.

“Are you happy with where you’d be sleeping, Niña ?” He asked.

“Yes..... I think we should hire the Mermaid.”

“Oh, hang on.....There is the age of the ship.” Said Giovanni. “Its timbers have seen a hell of a lot of winters.”

“And they’ll see many more.” Said Galeoto. “The best cork-oak and pine went into her. She may be old, but the Mermaid can get you safely to Sicily, or anywhere else you need to go.”

“I like her.” Said Juliana.

That did it, even Giovanni knew he was outvoted and stopped arguing. The agent with the long name that gave his lineage for several generations, would deal with paying the captain. Simon took him to one side hoping the charter wouldn’t entirely empty his purse.

“How much is this going to cost me?” He asked.

“Nothing, the Brotherhood are covering everything, even my commission.”

It was a shock, but a nice shock. Alberti had redeemed himself, though Niña had removed something of the darkness that had grabbed hold of him. Simon would never have told Alberti he owed them a huge favour, but Alberto had obviously realised that. There’s be supplies to buy, but vampires weren’t huge eater....At least not in that way. Simon shook Galeoto’s hand, which seemed to surprise him. The part of him that had been Piero was fading and he was no longer sure about local customs.

“We’re chartering your ship captain.” Said Simon. “Can you be ready to sail in three days?”

“The Mermaid could leave port at the next tide.”

“Three days will do; we’ll be back then.” Said Simon.

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Mabina still had a thing for big chunky cars. She’d picked up Daniel in a Lexus saloon car, the size of a small van. It was her one guilty pleasure, but she could afford it. He’d made a few nice comments about her car and her punctuality.

“Never nice to be kept waiting at airports.” He’d told her. “Total strangers feel it’s appropriate to start conversations with you, or try to get you to join something.”

“Ahh, the have you found Jesus brigade.” She’d muttered.

Mabina had been warned about Daniel, before she’d met him for the first time. Laura had told her he looked a bit of a throwback, her words. Daniel was old, almost unimaginably old. He probably wasn’t with the first humans to spread out from the Rift Valley, but he was old enough to see the Roman Empire grow to rule twenty percent of the world’s population. Clara claimed he was extremely old even then. Daniel didn’t look like a neanderthal, but Laura’s throwback description suited him well. Stocky and muscular, with pronounced brow ridges and a fierce expression. He looked like the sort of man you’d want on your side in a fight.

“Here we are, home sweet home.” She said. “I’ll show you where I’ve put you, it’s quite a nice room. Then I’ll leave you to unpack. The fridge is full of breakfast type things, but I thought we could order in for our evening meals. If there’s a nation’s cuisine you can’t order in Fulham and Chelsea, I haven’t heard of it.”

“Laura fed me Thai food once.” Said Daniel. “Really rather nice, I could eat that again.”

“I have the menu for a Thai place in the kitchen.”

A couple of windows had been broken after she’d died, damp had got into the walls of her kitchen. That had been a few years ago and Mabina was now proud of her kitchen. It didn’t have quite the same feel as the kitchen of the house in Hornsey, but she was working on it. She helped Daniel get his things out of the boot of the Lexus. He hadn’t brought much, just one small case on wheels and a shoulder bag.

“It’s easiest to go in through the kitchen door.” She said.

Through the kitchen and up to the second floor. Mabina had put Daniel in the room opposite hers. Liz's Brendan had helped her redecorate and refurbish the house, for his usual rate of pay of course. He'd made a really good job of the bedroom, with its new ensuite facilities.

"Wow, this is nice." Said Daniel.

He didn't have much to unpack. By the time she'd found a menu for the Thai place, he was back in the kitchen.

"Too early for wine?" She asked.

"Never too early."

Wine turned a potentially awkward moment with someone she didn't know that well, into a few shared anecdotes with an old friend. By the time the guy on a scooter arrived with the Thai food, Mabina was glad she'd invited Daniel to come to London.

"Alright, down to business." Said Daniel. "Where do we start investigating these Wanderers?"

"If you're not too tired, we can take a look at them after we've eaten."

"I'm feeling fine." Said Daniel.

"Then after dinner, I'll take you to a few places where they congregate. If you're really lucky, you might get to hear them sing."

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