

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 13 - Nineveh

"Just enough moonlight to see they were looking at where Simon and Patsy shared a cabin. For quite a while Simon had expected some kind of vengeance being sought by Benghazi. They had killed the Governor of Benghazi and his administration wouldn't care that he'd been a crook. There were numerous other key officers in the local guard killed too. Karkengara tended to agree with Simon, though two assassins in the dark didn't suit Benghazi. They'd want their vengeance to be public, noisy and very bloody."

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As she followed Machiavelli through the dusty streets of Nineveh, Juliana noticed that everywhere was beginning to sparkle with power. Perfectly preserved buildings to those damaged by the weather; they all sparkled. Only the few buildings reduced to dust and rubble seemed to have lost something magical; none of them sparkled at all.

"I can feel the power in this ancient city." Said Machiavelli. "Six thousand years it's been waiting for Simon, though I'm still not sure why."

Two buildings seemed momentarily joined by a huge arc of energy. The air seemed to buzz and the sound produced hurt Juliana's ears. Patsy mentioned it resembling an electrical discharge; but Patsy often used terms Juliana didn't understand.

"Is this city safe?" Asked Patsy.

"No, definitely not." Said Machiavelli. "We must be very careful where we go and what we touch."

Lucia had read the cards for Juliana one evening, after a meal and a glass of wine had mellowed the now dead Maltese witch. Normally she refused to read fortunes, stating that she was no fake witch in a tent at the town fayre. No details about lovers, children and the other things most want to know. In a way Lucia had told her something important and reassuring. Juliana would live to an old age, a really impressive number of years, though once again; there was no detail, no exact number.

"I won't die in Nineveh." Said Juliana. "Lucia told me I'll live to be old, very old."

"I'd still be careful." Said Machiavelli. "Fate has been known to be overwritten by free will, if you're daft enough to try really hard."

Juliana had trusted Lucia, but Machiavelli was right; they needed to be very careful. Niccolò took them along wide streets and narrow alleys. Several times the energy arcs caused rubble to fall from above, which they had to avoid. It wasn't fun; it wasn't what Juliana had hoped for when they explored the ancient city of Nineveh. Their path crossed that of Giovanni and Agata, who seemed less than thrilled with rubble falling from above.

"Can we join you?" Asked Giovanni. "Numbers might matter if we need to dig someone out of the rubble."

"You're a cheerful soul." Said Patsy.

"A forty foot high statue of a deity fell and nearly crushed me." Said Agata.

"Come with us, the more the merrier." Said Niccolò. "I don't think the Council of the Holy is far now. The great Chamber of the Holy is inside that building."

"I believe in following the man who knows where he's going." Said Giovanni.

The city looked beautiful, but there was no denying it was dangerous. The crash of power arcs were becoming more frequent, as were the falls of rubble from above. Juliana felt relieved when Niccolò pointed at a building with a roof that looked to have been made out of gold.

"There, that's where we need to go." Said Niccolò. "We'll be reasonably safe once we're inside. Do you still have the scrolls in that leather bag of yours, Patsy?"

"Yes, I carry them everywhere." Said Patsy. "I guessed they'd be needed in Nineveh."

"We need to find a sentient Hassuna." Said Niccolò. "They'll know how the scrolls fit in with the ultimate secret."

Juliana wondered what happened if Niccolò said the right words and no Hassuna showed up. They had been around for thousands of years. Being alive had to be a challenge, but being sentient? That seemed to be asking for the impossible. Not that she was going to mention it.

"How have the Hassuna fed themselves for all those years?" Asked Patsy.

"Such powerful creatures can survive without food." Said Niccolò. "Maybe even water too.....Much in the same way that Simon and Giovanni can survive on only blood. The Hassuna may survive on the energy which glitters above their city."

"Vampires can survive on just blood, but it would be a pretty boring diet." Said Giovanni.

They entered the building with the gold roof, with Niccolò leading. He looked so happy, as if he'd just won some sort of prestigious award, or been given a grand title by the Medici.

"Here we are.....We'll soon know if any of the Hassuna still live." Said Niccolò.

"And what happens if none of them are alive?" Asked Agata.

"Ahhhh, the question that might mean Simon finding another outlet for his energies" Said Niccolò.

".....If there are no Hassuna, the great quest to find the answer to the ultimate question might well end here in Nineveh."

"Crap, Simon will go crazy." Said Patsy.

"There may be clues on the scrolls, but let's hope for a living Hassuna." Said Niccolò.

It would have been nice if the building had been clean and free of rubble, but it was like most of the ancient buildings they'd seen across the globe. From Leptis Magna and Urbs Umbrarum and now Nineveh; everywhere was grubby and covered in dust. There might be priceless artefact under the dust, but until someone dug them out; the chamber looked filthy and neglected.

"I'll say the words." Said Niccolò. "Don't interrupt me until I've finished."

Juliana had no intention of interrupting the historian, she was just grateful to be under cover, protected from whatever might be falling from the ancient buildings. Karkengara briefly put his head through a wall, but went again after realising Niccolò needed peace and quiet to concentrate.

"C'esh Niah Forte.....Niah Ashin Forte.....Hassuna Magii Forte." Shouted Niccolò.

Machiavelli shouted many similar lines and after a while, Juliana could tell what the words were doing. They were invoking the living Hassuna to come to the council; to take part in powerful ritual magic. Strange that she grasped the meaning, without knowing the long dead language, but Juliana thought of that as good news. The bad news was that the incantation seemed to be making the entire council building shake. No one was going to interrupt Machiavelli, but Patsy gave her a shrug; which seemed to ask, what the hell will happen next?

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Simon saw it come to life, from what looked like an old and battered statue. A creature on four legs, far larger than him or Vittoria. He'd have assumed the large beast was some sort of local fauna, if the witch hadn't been so excited.

"Machiavelli did it, the Hassuna are waking from their long slumber." Said Vittoria.

"But.....It's walking on four legs." Said Simon.

"So does the bringer of fire." Said Vittoria. "I dare you to tell him he's not one of the Old Gods."

"I take your point." Said Simon.

It looked a little like a horse, until it began to stamp on the ground; then it reminded Simon of the huge cattle so beloved of farmers on the Scottish borders. The Hassuna was quite hairy and it had small horns. As for the stamping ? Probably something to do with getting its circulation flowing after centuries of sleep.

"Be careful, it may be dangerous." Said Vittoria.

"It seems fairly harmless." Said Simon.

Simon had been around for over seven hundred and forty years and Giovanni had been around for a lot longer. Vittoria had only lived through part of a normal human lifespan; she obviously hadn't learned not to tempt fate. The harmless looking Hassuna looked at him with fierce eyes and what sounded like angry breathing.

"Crap.....If it starts eating me, run !" Said Simon.

It didn't make the slightest attempt to eat him, but it didn't look totally aware of the situation.

Niccolò said they needed a living Hassuna, but what did he mean by living ? Simon was wondering if countless years effectively turned to a statue, had left most of the Hassuna in a vegetative state. The one looking at him a little strangely, definitely wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. After all, the Hassuna had built the city of Nineveh and had once used their own language. The beast snorted at him, covering Simon's face in creature snot.

"Damn.....I wasn't expecting that." Yelled Simon.

"It's on the move." Said Vittoria.

It galloped away at speed, with Simon and Vittoria trying to keep up with it. They passed several of the Mermaid's crew, who decided to join the chase. They probably had no idea why Simon was chasing the four legged beast, but that didn't stop them enjoying chasing the creature.

"What have you got here ?" Yelled Cook.

"One of the Hassuna." Shouted Simon. "It'll be heading for Machiavelli at the Council of the Holy."

"Fine.....We'll follow the beast too." Shouted Cook.

The Hassuna might not be what Niccolò would call sentient, but it seemed to know where it was going. Centuries of walking the streets of Nineveh had to have formed patterns in its memory, which had become reflexes. It even seemed to want to be followed, judging by the leisurely pace it was setting.

"Look.....Look, three more of them." Said Vittoria.

Coming down from a road higher than the one Simon was on. The three Hassuna were joining up with the one Simon was chasing after, with no real intention of catching. As they approached the building with a gold roof, there were more of the four legged beasts, all entering the building. Most of Simon's group were there now and many of Galeoto's crew.

"No one mentioned them having four legs." Said Mia Cassar.

"Don't worry, these are the Hassuna." Said Machiavelli. "Now I have to find one of them who is sentient and fully alive."

"By all that's holy.....I hope one of them is sentient." Said Simon. "Or all those years exploring so many ancient places, will have been for nothing."

"Forget holy, I'm saying a silent prayer to the Dark Lords." Said Giovanni.

The Hassuna kept arriving, until Simon had lost count of them. Niccolò was moving among them, armed with just a pot of paint used to waterproof the Mermaid and a medium sized brush. Simon noticed that after muttering to one of the beasts, Niccolò was painting a large X on their rump.

"No luck ?" Asked Patsy.

"Not yet." Said Niccolò.

The Hassuna weren't keeping in any kind of order, which had to be making the job harder for Niccolò. Eventually the famous historian let out a yell of delight and muttered for a while at the Hassuna he was talking to. Yes talking, Simon could hear definite words, even if he had no idea of their meaning.

"Is this.....Have you found a sentient Hassuna ?" Asked Patsy.

"I have.....Now I need that leather bag of yours and the scrolls it contains." Said Niccolò.

"Machiavelli found a live one." Shouted Cook.

Just one out of a chamber full of them, Simon began to realise how close his quest had come to failure. He also understood why Brother Alberti had sent so many on the same quest and so far at least; every one of them had failed. Most of them had died. Old age had killed the most; you needed to be immortal to be able to spend countless years visiting so many obscure places.

"Patsy.....I need those scrolls." Shouted Machiavelli.

"On my way.....The Hassuna keep getting in the way."

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Which seemed to sum up a lot of the difficulty for Niccolò Machiavelli. Everyone who travelled there following Simon was now in the building and they all seemed very excited. There had to be at least fifty Hassuna in a kind of semi-vegetative state. They seemed harmless and friendly, but very excited. Simon's group might well be the first humans they'd seen since becoming what Patsy referred to as fossilised. Niccolò decided that if he'd become a rock out in the streets of Nineveh for several thousand years, he'd be a bit over excited too.

"I need peace for this." Yelled Niccolò. "I'll take our new friend up a couple of floors."

Niccolò was actually stroking the neck of the Hassuna, as he took the creature up several sets of stairs. Stairs that seemed designed to fit the stride of Hassunas, rather than humans. His new friend probably had a name; all sentient beings had a name of some kind. There'd be time to learn what it was, when they were clear of the noise and stress caused by fifty non-sentient Hassuna and the team from the Mermaid. Three floors it took, to lose everyone following them apart from Simon and Patsy. Mind you, Niccolò had been scowling a lot at nosey humans. The Hassuna seemed to lose interest of their own accord.

"Perfect, we seem to have peace at last." Said Niccolò.

"The door can be sealed." Said the Hassuna.

Said in perfect Italian, probably self-taught from listening to Simon's group and the crew of the Mermaid. Had he learned other languages too ? It might not mean the scrolls were now redundant, but it might speed things up. Niccolò began to take more interest in their new and very clever friend. The Hassuna was obviously male, though its genitals were different to anything mammalian Niccolò had ever studied.

"You know our language." Said Patsy.

"I do now.....I didn't when I was woken by the summoning."

The Hassuna touched the door with its right hoof and there was a click. It seemed they now had peace and quiet to talk to their new friend.

"I am Niccolò and my friends are Patsy and Simon." Said Niccolò. "What do we call you ?"

"My name is long and complex, but Emshara will do." Said Emshara. "I have a royal title and several senior positions in the religion of Nineveh. All that seems pointless now I seem to be the last of my kind.....So, Emshara will do."

"Can you bring your people back ?" Asked Simon.

"Everything has its time and my people had theirs." Said Emshara.

Niccolò had heard similar things before, an acceptance that whole civilisations could and had; vanished in almost the blink of an eye. Emshara would never use the words, but he was really saying that sometimes; shit happens.

"There's a work bench.....I'll lay out the scrolls on it." Said Patsy.

Like everything in the city, the workshop was crumbling; falling apart. Whatever Niccolò had done to waken the last living Hassuna, had caused some of the decay to become faster; he realised that. Outside rubble was falling and energy arcs from one building, were tearing into others. It was all dreadful chaos, but as Emshara had sort of said.....Shit happens. The trick was to get the required information from Emshara, before Nineveh became a total ruin.

"Ahhh, the scrolls.....I have heard of these mystical scrolls." Said Emshara. "Show them to me.....Tell me what hidden knowledge you seek ?"

"I have been tasked with finding the ultimate answer to the ultimate question." Said Simon. "Festina Lente.....Make Haste Slowly. It sounds so absurd, yet there is a solution that will unleash great power. I've been told that you will know where I need to go next."

"Let's get it done.....Show me the scrolls." Said Emshara.

How did a creature with hooves move scrolls around a workbench ? Niccolò watched and came to the conclusion that the Hassuna used some kind of telepathic skill. The scrolls moved, were smoothed out and obviously read; yet Emshara never actually touched them. There were six scrolls Alberti had told Simon were particularly relevant to Simon's great quest. Niccolò was more than happy for Emshara to read them all. Patsy voiced a concern that all of them must have shared.

"It's very noisy outside." Said Patsy. "Is your beautiful city pulling itself apart ?"

"The energy will dissipate into the ground." Said Emshara. "A few buildings will collapse, but most will survive as beautiful ruins. Not a bad fate for my city I think, to become miles of beautiful ruins."

"I'm glad that something of the beauty of Nineveh will survive." Said Patsy.

"Come the final days of this world.....Something of Nineveh will survive." Said Emshara.

A scroll floated through the air and ended up just inches from Simon's face. Patsy recognised it as one of the scrolls Brother Alberti had said was vital to the great quest.

"Do you write, Simon ?" Asked Emshara. "Failing that I think Niccolò must have nice and tidy handwriting. I'll tell you everything to move the quest on, but I'm not going to be your clerk."

"I'll write what you say.....I've been told my writing is tidy and legible." Said Patsy.

"I was rather hoping that you'd join me on my quest." Said Simon.

It was strange to hear the last living Hassuna laugh.

"No, I can imagine how badly I'd fit into your world." Said Emshara. "Walking on four legs and the horns, you'd need to keep me well hidden all the time. No, I'll spend what time I have left in the city I helped to design and build."

"You'd be surprised; we have a deity with us who looks like a dragon." Said Simon.

"And being a deity they can be invisible to avoid the curious gaze of the public.....Tell me if I'm wrong ?"

"Karkengara can make himself invisible." Said Patsy.

"Karkengara.....We were friends for many years." Said Emshara. "Give him my regards.....As for the writing down of notes. I suggest Patsy writes them and I then edit her written notes. You should then get an accurate set of notes and where to go on your quest and who to see. Are we agreed ?"

"Yes, that seems sensible." Said Simon. "And Patsy has offered to write the notes."

"Maximum verbosity, Emshara." Said Niccolò. "As you won't be coming with us."

There was a tremendous crash outside and the building they were in shuddered. Niccolò hoped the last of the Hassuna was right and Nineveh wasn't about to become nothing but a pile of dust and rubble. Patsy and Simon didn't look concerned, so Hassuna began to ask questions about the ultimate question. Some said the question could reveal the meaning of life itself.

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Simon had left Nineveh with a look on his face, as if he'd spent close to a day with a holy man, a guru. They'd camped on the hillside overlooking the gradually disintegrating city on the same spot they'd camped on before. There were still the sounds of Nineveh pulling itself apart, though Simon insisted that many of the buildings would remain as beautiful ruins. Cook relit the campfire and made everyone a meal, almost a guarantee to focus their team on the real world.

"Nothing quite like freshly caught rock hopper." Agata said to her.

"I just wish Simon had brought him with us; the last of the Hassuna." Said Vittoria.

"From what I heard, Simon begged him to come with us." Said Agata.

Bellies full and everyone seemed happy to ignore the flashes of power in the sky and the sound of the most ancient city in the world; ripping itself apart. Vittoria claimed a gap in nearby rocks and borrowed the notes Patsy had written. Notes on a conversation with the last of the Hassuna, they had to be priceless to the right person; or institution. No lamp or anything else that gave light from a hot flame, Vittoria had sent a witch light orb up to the top of the very narrow fissure in the rocks. A face appeared before Vittoria had a chance to read the pages of clearly written notes.

"Can I join you ?" Asked Patsy. "Or would you prefer to be alone ?"

"Yes, join me.....I might need your help with the notes." Said Vittoria. "You can also help me beat off anyone just being annoyingly curious."

Vittoria had read a few lines, but there were a lot of pages in Patsy's wonderfully tidy handwriting. Having Patsy with her changed Vittoria's approach to understanding the way the last Hassuna had explained the scrolls Patsy had been carrying in a leather bag, since finding them in a wooden chest. As for the true origin of the ancient scrolls ? No one was sure, even Brother Alberti.

"Fire and ice are mentioned quite a lot." Said Vittoria. "These destinations are not strictly of our world and we only need to visit one of them. Choice seems to be a big thing in the scrolls. I'm curious to learn more about the destinations in the unrelenting cold, and the dreadful heat."

"Fire and Ice are common ideas that run through many philosophies." Said Patsy. "As for not strictly of our world.....I need you to keep our conversation secret. Can you do that for me ? You are our witch after all and I need to be able to trust you."

Vittoria had a bit of a thing about being asked to keep a secret. No matter what that secret might be, no matter how dangerous it might be to keep it. She had to agree to never disclose it and for good or evil, she'd take the secret to the grave.

"You have my word." Said Vittoria. "I will never tell a living soul about our conversation, or a dead one for that matter."

The last part seemed essential, as they seemed to come across some in their travels; those who were difficult to categorise as living or dead. Even vampires were considered as undead by some and she was travelling with two of them.

"I travelled back to this time from the future, so did Simon." Said Patsy. "We were in the twenty first century and many things were different then."

If she didn't know and trust Patsy, Vittoria would have considered her to be mad. When she thought about it though, it did explain so many things. There was Patsy's rather clipped way of talking for one thing.

"Are you ever going back to your own time ?" Asked Vittoria. "Or is that forward ? I've already got a headache about all this."

"Back will do and no, Simon and I are here forever." Said Patsy. "Please don't ask me why, the reasons are very complicated and personal."

When Vittoria thought about it, her headache began to develop a headache. Somewhere deep in her mind she could appreciate that Patsy and Simon visiting an ancient site in the future, might well alter things in the past, the age of the Medici. As for Fire and Ice ? She was still none the wiser.

"Forgive me if I seem slow, I'm not used to moving through time." Said Vittoria. "You're saying that by visiting an ancient site now, we've changed how you saw in say twenty fifty ? Which brings us into the whole strictly not of our world business."

"Exactly." Said Patsy.

Vittoria had a moment of clarity, which sadly flew away with her next headache. With the help of Patsy though and Niccolò Machiavelli; she was confident the clarity would return.

"You look tired; do you want to carry this on tomorrow ?" Asked Patsy.

"No, take me through Fire and Ice and then I'll sleep." Said Vittoria. "I'll probably sleep like a baby tonight."

"Long version, or short ?" Asked Patsy.

So tempting to ask for the long version, but Vittoria thought her head might explode. Explorers travelling through time indeed; it wasn't natural.

"For now.....Let's go through the short version." Said Vittoria.

"Many have used fire and ice to describe the universe." Said Patsy. "From poets to Brother Alberti and numerous other institutions. Into fire and into ice, it means entering intolerable freezing conditions and then un-survivable fire. In our case it means a place, actually two places and Simon can decide which to visit. Ice is an ancient temple that was once in a jungle near the South Pole. The world changed and it's now deep under the ice of Antarctica."

"More change, more not strictly of my world; the world of the Medici." Said Vittoria.

"Exactly.....And into fire doesn't mean wading through molten lava." Said Patsy. "If Simon chose fire, it would mean searching an old temple near the base of Mount Vesuvius. It's his choice and the next choice will be his choice, and the next. There is no one correct path to the ultimate answer and all paths are valid."

Vittoria understood, which really surprised her. The problem was that that the headaches were back, accompanied by a slight feeling of confusion.

"Do you have spare blanket's Patsy ?" Asked Vittoria. "My head is spinning and now that I'm comfortable.....I'd like to sleep here, if I may ?"

"You may, but on your own." Said Patsy. "I intend cuddling up next to Simon tonight."

"You're a lucky woman."

"I know I am, Vittoria.....I know I am." Said Patsy.

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Karkengara knew the two spies were on the way, almost as soon as their rowing boat had moved away from the quayside stairs at Latakia. It was dark, the middle of the night and a perfect hour for

spies to look over the Mermaid and its crew. They had to be spies of some kind, two men couldn't successfully attack the ship; no matter how tough they might be. They might attack it with incendiary bombs of course, but the bringer of fire had decided against that.

"Too illogical.....They're definitely spies." Karkengara mumbled.

No waking anyone, even the watch who were having one of their usual long naps. Two men in a rowing boat ! If Karkengara was sure of one thing that night, it was his ability to deal with the two spies. They were good rowers though, their small boat had already halved the distance from the quayside to the Mermaid.

"Nice to get a little action." He mumbled. "It's been a while."

The crew hadn't seen the sparkling power over Nineveh; it was over five hundred miles away. Karkengara had seen it though and he'd felt the last of the Hassuna wake from his very long slumber. Karkengara longed to be there, but Simon would call out if he needed him. The bringer of fire had been tasked with looking after the Mermaid and he'd do a good job of it. Even if it meant eviscerating every spy and petty thief in Latakia. The rowing boat was almost at the side of the Mermaid, quite close to the rope ladder left there in case of an emergency.

"Fit for spies.....They might be assassins." He muttered. "But who would they be here to kill ?"

The two men might be petty thieves, spies, or assassins; but the bringer of fire still thought spies was their most likely occupation. They were dressed well as they came up the rope ladder; almost a uniform of grey trousers and dark red jacket. Their boots were good quality, as were the blades they had tucked down their belts. Karkengara remained invisible, as he moved close enough to smell their bad breath. One of them was looking at a hand drawn map of the Mermaid.

"Here, he sleeps here." One whispered to the other.

Just enough moonlight to see they were looking at where Simon and Patsy shared a cabin. For quite a while Simon had expected some kind of vengeance being sought by Benghazi. They had killed the Governor of Benghazi and his administration wouldn't care that he'd been a crook. There were numerous other key officers in the local guard killed too. Karkengara tended to agree with Simon, though two assassins in the dark didn't suit Benghazi. They'd want their vengeance to be public, noisy and very bloody.

"These idiots are all wrong for Benghazi." Mumbled Karkengara.

"What did you say ?" One man asked the other.

"Nothing, I didn't say anything." Said the other. "We can't have you hearing things.....I remember Crete."

"Crete was different."

Wonderful, the fools were already doubting one another. Karkengara decided to follow them to Simon and Patsy's cabin, which was empty. The target to be killed wasn't there, the proverbial bird had flown. The two men muttered at each other and Crete was mentioned more than once.

Karkengara decided to see how deep their animosity ran for one another.

"Just like Crete again." Karkengara muttered, though he had no idea what had occurred in Crete.

"What did you say to me ? It was Duarty who got it wrong."

"I never spoke, you did.....Come on, we might as well leave. Atherton is obviously not here."

"I'll let the boss know it was your fault." Mumbled Karkengara.

"What did you....."

"Bastard....."

They went at each other and Karkengara was impressed at their skill with a short assassin's blade. One was stabbed in the heart and probably died before hitting the floor. The other one had been

stabbed in the abdomen a few times and would probably bleed to death quite quickly. Karkengara made himself visible, though only two thirds of his head fitted into the cabin. The dying assassin gasped, of course he did.

“You’re dying, but I can save you.” Said Karkengara. “Tell me who sent you to kill Atherton ?”

“Demon !” Yelled the man. “I’ll have nothing to do with your kind.”

“I’m not a demon, or a dragon.” Said Karkengara. “Last chance.....I can save you. Who is your employer ?”

The man never did tell and he died a few minutes later. There were two bodies on the floor and a lot of blood. The blood could be washed away by the crew, but the bodies needed to be dropped into the sea a long way from the Mermaid.

“I wish he’d spoken, but I do have the name of Duarty.” Muttered Karkengara.

Duarty sounded like a second name and might be someone senior in the assassin’s organisation. On the other hand, they might be no higher up than the two dead assassins Karkengara had tucked under his arms. Or, Duarty might be a woman, the wife of an assassin who’d got something wrong. The bringer of fire would hide in the homes of the great and good in Latakia, whenever he got the opportunity. He’d keep listening for any mention of Duarty.

“Here will do.....May their God not look too long at their sins.” Said Karkengara.

He dropped the two dead assassins into the Mediterranean Sea, about thirty miles away from Latakia.

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