

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 6 – City Of Shadows

“There was a look about men who spent most of their lives at sea. Not just clothing that seemed to scream ship’s crew, but also the way they moved. Juliana had put the recognisable walk down to keeping their balance on decks moving around in a storm.”

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Simon hadn't fed on blood in Malta; there simply hadn't been the opportunity. When the pirate ship appeared to be heading for them near the coast of Spain, he didn't know whether to be alarmed, or happy. A battle with the pirates would almost certainly give him the opportunity to feed, but the Mermaid might be harmed in the fighting.

“It's only a small ship, we can probably beat them.” Said Giovanni.

“We've the new deck cannons, two vampires and Karkengara.” Said Simon. “If we can't beat them it'll be through incompetence.”

It seemed pretty good manners of the pirates to have a flag with a skull above two crossed swords. There was no mistaking who they were, they were ocean going bandits; come to steal anything worth having. In the process, they were likely to slaughter everyone on the Mermaid.

“They're turning with the wind, straight at us.” Yelled Galeoto. “To the cannons.....Everyone get ready to fight.”

Simon and Giovanni were together near the prow, a rare moment of privacy. Simon suspected the crew had an inkling about what he and Giovanni were; but an inkling is a million miles away from knowing.

“I need to feed on these pirates.” Said Simon. “Their ship can go up in flames, it can sink; it can explode. But not until after I've fed on at least one of the crew.”

“Now you mention it, I wouldn't mind feeding on one of them.” Said Giovanni.

“You're just greedy.” Said Simon.

“Hey, Benghazi was a while ago now.” Said Giovanni. “So, do you have a plan?”

Did he have a plan? Simon had one basic plan, which had actually served him pretty well for the seven hundred or so years he'd been a vampire. Details changed, but mainly it meant hacking away at the enemy with a really good quality blade.

“Wait for them to come in close to board us, then we go across to their ship.” Said Simon.

“Karkengara can.....Where is Karkengara? Bringer of fire, where are you?”

The head of the bringer of fire appeared to rise up out of the deck. He made Simon jump, so he should scare the crap out of the approaching pirates.

“I'm here, listening to your masterplan?” Said Karkengara.

“Ahhhh, Sarcasm.” Said Giovanni. “I don't think he respects our battle plans, Simon.”

“You'll just get onto the pirate ship and hack them all to pieces.” Said Karkengara.

“Well, yes.....But it has always worked well for us.” Said Simon.

“Very well.” Added Giovanni.

“What do you see as my part in the plan?” Asked the bringer of fire.

“Set light to the sails and rigging of the pirate vessel.” Said Simon. “Fear and panic will spread with the fire. Burn what you like, but give Giovanni and I long enough to feed; before the ship sinks. Do you like the sound of that ?”

Simon was ready for more sarcasm, but Karkengara was making the deep sound in his throat, which sounded almost like the purring of a truly enormous tomcat.

“Simple, destructive and best of all.....Likely to work.” Said Karkengara. “I like that plan, I like it a lot.”

“Good.....I think Galeoto is about to use the deck cannons.” Said Giovanni.

Not that they were going to have it all their own way, the pirates had snipers up in the rigging and several cannons of their own. While Galeoto was yelling to his crew to begin firing the cannons, a musket ball killed the crewman on the Mermaid’s wheel.

“Fire.....Fire the cannons now.” Shouted Galeoto.

Two of the new deck cannons were aiming in the right direction, while the crew began tugging and pulling at the others. Not exactly high tech, but Simon was beginning to get a relaxed attitude to the way Galeoto ran the Mermaid. Sometimes it looked a shambles, but it worked. As the pirate ship came closer, both of the cannons pointing that way fired. Huge amounts of black and white smoke, coupled with a bang loud enough to hurt the ears.

“Wow.....Fuck you pirates.” Yelled Giovanni. “Galeoto’s gunners just broke one of their masts.”

“Not just the mast, there’s a fire over there.” Said Simon. “Just a small one, but we need to get over there as quickly as we can.”

The pirate ship was leaning over to one side and the rigging from the broken mast was getting caught up in everything. Probably unintended, the ship hit the Mermaid side on; enough of a bump to send a few of Galeoto’s crew stumbling. There were another two loud bangs and yet more smoke, as two more deck cannons fired at the pirate ship. The cannon shot ripped through the decks, the wheel housing and caused another small fire.

“We can get across now.” Said Simon. “Time we were leaving.”

“Galeoto.....Give us a moment to get across to the pirate ship.” Yelled Giovanni.

“Don’t be too long, I don’t want their vessel dragging us down when it sinks.”

Galeoto called a temporary halt to using the very effective desk cannons, which left a curious crew to watch Giovanni and Simon; as they scrambled across to the pirate vessel. The broken mast made a good bridge for part of the way. After that they leapt across all sorts of broken deck planking and assorted shattered pieces of lumber. Simon actually enjoyed it, but dreaded their exploits being the talk of Livorno when they returned home. A musket ball going past his face brought Simon out of his daydreaming.

“Bastards.....They firing at us.” Said Simon.

“Move quicker, become a harder target.” Said Giovanni.

There was a broken deck cover and they were below decks; where the pirates slept by the look of it. Lots of hammocks strung between upright posts, with a few bedrolls on the floor. Simon’s mind went into fighting mode, with the world becoming much more monochrome. The sounds of battle became quieter too, with sounds where they were being amplified.

“Judging by the number of hammocks, there’s a large crew.” Said Simon.

“A grubby crew, it smells a bit rank in here.” Said Giovanni.

“I don’t care if they never wash; their blood will still taste good.” Said Simon.

The ceiling was low and it was easy to see what had caused a small, but growing fire. There were oil lamps, a real danger on a wooden ship during rough weather, or a battle. As they were coughing on

smoke from the fire, two pirates came down steps from above. They were carrying another injured pirate and not doing a very good job of it. Their injured friend had a bad wound in his right leg. He was screaming out and the screams got louder every time his friends bumped into something in the dark. It was too good an opportunity to miss.

“Who are you two ?” Asked one of the pirates.

“Two vampires hungry for blood.” Said Simon.

“Very hungry.” Added Giovanni.

They dropped their friend to the floor and quickly had blades in their hands. The dropped man began yelling again, which Simon’s mind filtered out until he hardly heard it. Simon easily knocked away the blade of the closest pirate and sunk his fangs into his neck. It was wonderful, better than any feeling Simon had ever experienced, apart maybe from sex with Patsy on a warm summer night. Simon actually groaned with pleasure. He didn’t even know that Giovanni had fed on the other pirate, until Giovanni dropped his nearly dead body on the floor.

“Oh, I really needed that.” Said Giovanni.

Simon thanked his pirate for his blood, in much the same way that Clara did. Even if the blood was only average, his victim had provided him with a really good feed. Simon dropped him to the ground and felt a little euphoric. It had been a while since he’d had a decent feed.

“That just leaves him, the noisy one.” Said Simon. “Do we toss a coin for his blood ?”

“No, you can have him, Simon.” Said Giovanni. “Call it a mercy; you’ll be taking him away from all the pain he’s in.”

Simon filled his belly with the man’s blood and began to feel as though he’d drunk far too much ale. Galeoto had obviously managed to get the pirate ship free of the Mermaid. The cannons began firing again, as the pirate ship began to lean quite severely to the left. Simon began to get worried about being trapped in a sinking ship.

“This is like my dreams of falling to the bottom of the ocean.” Said Simon. “Let’s get up on deck.....At least if I need to go overboard, I can swim back to the Mermaid.”

“Are you alright ?” Asked Giovanni. “You seem drunk on fresh warm blood.”

“I am.....Let’s get up on deck.” Said Simon. “At least if I get shot by a musket ball, I probably won’t feel it.”

The smoke was building between decks, as they found a proper set of stairs leading up. From a quiet, smoke filled place for the crew to sleep; they were on the deck close to what was probably the captain’s quarters. It had that feel to it, the feel of somewhere more important than where the crew hung their hammocks. Simon heard the crack as a musket ball hit a doorframe, only an inch away from his head.

“Fuck.....The snipers are too damned good.” Said Simon.

“We need to get under cover.” Said Giovanni. “Let’s see if the captain is in his cabin.”

Two solid wooden door that could have resisted a dozen men, but didn’t manage to keep out two vampires; especially as one of them was intoxicated by a recent feed on far too much blood. The doors burst inwards, to reveal an opulent looking room, with three men stood in it. The men yelled something in a language Simon didn’t know, there were quite a few of those. One of the men lifted a large sword off a bed in the corner.

“Get them.....Kill them all.” Said Simon.

One looked like the captain, with lots of gold rings and thick gold chain around his neck. Simon became so fixated with the chain that it nearly cost him an ear, maybe his entire head.

“Wake up.....Simon !!” Yelled Giovanni. “I don’t want to have to tell Patsy you’re gone.”

No time to use his own blade, Simon relied on a vampire's favourite weapons; strength and fangs. No more feeding, he ripped out the captain's throat with his fangs, while snapping his neck. There wasn't even a temptation to taste the captain's blood; the blood of the dead tasted bitter and disgusting. Giovanni had killed the other two men, which he was sure to never let him forget. There was a huge explosion from somewhere below decks and the vessel began to sink. Maybe not instantly, but Simon could feel it sinking into the warm waters of the Spanish Mediterranean. "Oh, she's sinking." Said Simon. "I bet there's a King's ransom in gold and jewels in this room, if we had the time to look."

"I've always had a thing about gold chains." Said Giovanni. "It isn't that much, but it will do." With that, Giovanni removed the heavy gold chain from the dead captain's neck and placed it on his own. Simon removed four expensive looking rings from the captain's fingers.

"And I've always had a thing about chunky looking rings." Said Simon, as he put the rings on his fingers.

They both ducked as they left the captain's cabin, but the pirate ship looked deserted. The boats that were probably used to get from ship to shore had gone; probably being used as lifeboats by the few remaining crew. The ship was leaning at such an angle, that walking across the deck was impossible.

"Got another plan, boss?" Asked Giovanni.

"Slide.....Slide down the deck into the ocean." Said Simon. "Then we simply swim back to the Mermaid."

"Stop saying simply.....Nothing ever ends up being simple." Said Giovanni.

Simon slid down the deck, with Giovanni just behind him. Contrary to Giovanni's cynicism, it was all easy from there. They saw the pirate ship sink, when they were almost back at the Mermaid. Cheering crew let down rope ladders for them to get back on-board again. Simon had the feeling they were getting credit for something they hadn't done, though he wasn't going to make a thing about it. Patsy looked relieved as she hugged him.

"When we saw their ship starting to sink.....Don't do that to me again Simon." Said Patsy.

"How did it go on the pirate ship?" Asked Mia.

"Simple.....All very simple." Said Giovanni.

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Lućija the witch was known as Lucia to just about everyone on the Mermaid. A few knew how to pronounce Lućija, but most didn't. Not that it worried her, as she went from crew member to crew member, doing her best to heal the injured. She put one man with truly horrific injuries into a long deep sleep, but she was honest with Galeoto.

"Debris from an explosion ripped open his chest." She told Galeoto. "His wounds are beyond my skill to heal. I can keep him in a pain free sleep until he passes away."

"Just do what you can for those hurt in battle." Said Galeoto. "We don't expect miracles, but no one should go through unnecessary pain and suffering."

Every morning Lucia went through a list she'd scribbled on a blank page of her notebook. They were a long way from the coast of Spain and the fight with the pirates, yet she still had a lot of wounded to look after every morning. In theory only she and Captain Galeoto knew the numbers of dead and badly injured, but people talk and the Mermaid was more like an extended family than a ship's crew. There had been far too many burials at sea to keep the numbers private. As Casablanca's harbour came into view, everyone knew that besides fresh water and supplies, they'd be looking to hire at least five or six new members of the crew.

“Casablanca.” Yelled one of the crew from high up in the rigging.

The crew were happy to be in Casablanca for a while; it had a reputation for being friendly and safe, usually. Nowhere was guaranteed to be safe, but Casablanca had a good reputation. There was a lot of influence from Portugal and Spain in Casablanca, which meant there’d be experienced crew looking for work. As the crew of the Mermaid was a pretty mixed bag, there’d be no real language problems. The Mermaid tied up on a jetty at just after two in the afternoon and Lucia was walking around the town by about two thirty. Not on her own of course, she was accompanied by Cosimo, Patsy and Simon, who was sneezing in the bright sunshine.

“I’ve used up many of the ingredients of my healing unguents.” Said Lucia. “There will be somewhere to replace my stock and I guarantee it’ll be in the docks area.”

“Fruit.....I remember from school.” Said Patsy. “We need fresh fruit to keep scurvy at bay. I seem to recall oranges and lemons were best.”

“We’ll find plenty of fruit in the market.” Said Cosimo.

“You went to a very advanced school.” Said Lucia.

“It was a comprehensive.” Said Patsy.

Patsy had a look on her face, as if she was keeping back a joke. Lucia had no idea what it was, but she began to think there was more to Patsy than met the eye.

“First my ingredients, then we’ll look for food and general supplies.” Said Lucia.

Cosimo saw it first, the herbalist’s shop with a sign for an apothecary outside. You had to know where to look for the symbol on the sign; Cosimo must have known other witches. There is was at the bottom of the wooden sign hanging outside the shop, an innocent looking sign with a picture of several coloured bottles on it. Not a pentagram or anything likely to get the attention of a local witch hunter, it was a tiny symbol of two crossed flames. That symbol meant witches welcome, if you were knowledgeable in such things.

“I hope it’s clean.....I see no reason why such places need to be.....Messy.” Said Lucia.

“The place has a nice feel to it.” Said Patsy.

Lucia opened the door and went inside, just as the last customer was taking away a bunch of leaves wrapped up in paper. The shop did have a nice feel to it and the floor was clean; the shelves tidy. Much to Lucia’s relief, when she introduced herself in the language of Spain, the woman at the counter responded with her own name in the same tongue.

“I am Haniyeh.....Welcome to my shop.” Said the woman.

Lucia had her list of requirements, but the last customer with her bunch of leaves was a concern.

Lucia kept hold of her list, at least until she was certain Haniyeh could provide the amounts needed of certain ingredients.

“I need quite a lot of ingredients.” Said Lucia. “I will require them packed in wooden cases, or barrels and delivered within three day to our ship, the Mermaid.”

“Ahhh, so you’re the people from the Mermaid.” Said Haniyeh. “You’re causing quite a stir in our usually quiet town.”

“I didn’t think we’d get much attention at all.” Said Simon.

“Your ship shows signs of a recent sea battle and you’re hiring for your crew.” Said Haniyeh. “That is enough to make you the main curiosity in Casablanca, at least for a while. Now.....Will you give me your list so that I can give you a price ?”

Lucia gave her the list, complete with her own estimated prices. That had probably been a mistake, but she wasn’t used to buying herbs and magical ingredients in bulk. Haniyeh looked at her list and muttered a few times, before adding her own scribbles with a pencil.

"I can supply everything you require in the time scale mentioned." Said Haniyeh. "Let me give you a total.....I will need half of that in advance I'm afraid. I will need to use my own suppliers and this is quite a large order. They will need paying before delivery."

Haniyeh wrote a total in gold, everyone wanted gold; no one trusted any other means of payment. There was battering, but that tended to be for relatively small amounts with people you knew well. The amount in gold looked huge, but not as bad as Lucia had expected. Before she said yes though, she wanted a commitment from the witch apothecary.

"I need to be sure.....These goods are being bought for another." Said Lucia. "Please give me the comfort of hearing you say you can deliver them to the Mermaid in three days. No excuses, the supplies will get to us."

"I give you my word; the supplies will reach you within three days." Said Haniyeh.

No one could make that kind of guarantee; life had too many obstacles waiting to be thrown in your way. The promise showed good intent though and Lucia knew that Haniyeh would work round the clock to keep her promise. Cosimo had the gold, he was there as paymaster.

"Cosimo, please give Haniyeh half the amount being charged for our supplies." Said Lucia.

Patsy was handing a corn dolly, or the local equivalent. A figure made of straw, said to ensure a good harvest next autumn. Due to the amount being spent in her shop, Haniyeh gave Patsy the corn dolly. Patsy seemed genuinely pleased with the gift.

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Juliana knew that Mia had gone around on her own in Malta; after all it was her home. In Casablanca Juliana always took Hassan with her, or Gabriel; sometimes both of them. Not that she doubted those who said Casablanca was safe, she just didn't know the place. For her own peace of mind she had added Patsy to her group after sunset that night and a bored looking Giovanni. Not just for protection, Galeoto had entrusted her with hiring two good crewmen he'd heard were in need of a new job. Her companions were also there to ask any questions they thought were appropriate.

"Why did they want to talk to us at night?" Asked Hassan. "That already has me worried.....Sounds like they may try and rob us."

"Yeah.....You're just being paranoid." Said Patsy.

Juliana didn't say so, but she'd had similar worries to Hassan. It was odd to ask to see a prospective employer after dark. The reason given was that the captain of their last ship might see them during the day. It seemed he was a possessive man when it came to his crew and he had a terrible bad temper. Galeoto had made a few inquiries and verified that their existing captain was someone you didn't want as an enemy.

"Here we are, this is the place they picked to meet us." Said Juliana.

"It looks a bit of a dump." Said Giovanni.

"Just the usual kind of place where ships' crews go to drink." Said Hassan.

A wooden building that looked like a shack, but there was a sign outside with the proprietors name on it. No mention of it being somewhere to enjoy a quiet drink, Juliana assumed the locals knew that. The shack was owned by someone who went by the name of One Arm and there was a pleasant smell of ale coming from the open door.

"I'm sure it'll be fine.....Let's go inside." Said Patsy.

Gabriel was having a night when he was being quiet, bordering on taciturn. When he nodded his agreement with Patsy, Juliana walked into what she was already thinking of as One Arm's Shack. It looked bigger on the inside; there were quite a few empty tables to sit at. Once they were settled at

a table, there was even a serving girl to take their order. The list of drinks that could be ordered seemed to just be a few different types of ale.

“Well.....It feels comfortable in here.” Said Juliana.

“I think they’ve noticed us.” Said Hassan. “The two men coming our way.”

There was a look about men who spent most of their lives at sea. Not just clothing that seemed to scream ship’s crew, but also the way they moved. Juliana had put the recognisable walk down to keeping their balance on decks moving around in a storm. The two men sat with them.

“I am João and my friend here is Francisco.” Said one of the men. “We’re both originally from Portugal, but that was many years ago.”

Close up they looked close to being middle aged, but Galeoto had said he preferred older, more experienced crew. How had João known who they were ? Juliana assumed there weren’t that many hiring at the moment, especially with women in their group. Their potential new crew ordered ale and there was an etiquette to hiring, which Galeoto had instructed her in.

“Small talk, Juliana.” Galeoto had told her. “Let them talk about where they were born; their wife if they have one. Get to know them, it’s expected. Then and only if you like the sound of them, ask them questions about their experience at sea. Finally, you can either walk away, or make them an offer to join the Mermaid.”

Both João and Francisco were as taciturn as Gabriel could be on one of his quiet days. More ale was drunk and it still seemed to take a while to hear about the experience of their potential recruits. They’d actually been on a whaler once, but hadn’t really taken to it. Too smelly seemed to be their verdict on harpooning and cutting up whales. Juliana liked them; they reminded her of an uncle who still sent her presents at Christmas. Her decision was really made by João once serving on a trading vessel, which had traded up and down the Ivory Coast. A while ago, but that kind of experience made him the perfect choice; and he and Francisco seemed to come together.

“We’re like brothers.” Said João. “You want one of us.....You have to take both.”

“I think we’ve found two new crew members for the Mermaid family.” Said Juliana. “Do you all agree with me ?”

She looked at Giovanni, who nodded at her, as did Hassan and Patsy. Gabriel had obviously taken to Francisco and was smiling furiously at her. Their new crew had no current ship and were sleeping in a room at the rear of One Arm’s shack. They had no problem with arriving at the Mermaid early in the morning; wide awake and ready to work.

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Simon quite liked the small forward hold of the Mermaid; it was beginning to feel like somewhere he could get help when it was needed. True, Brother Alberti tended to treat their updates as a bit of an interrogation, but it was still nice to get news from Florence. Patsy had obtained a few nicer lamps from somewhere and a long comfortable couch. There was even a table with a bottle of water and a couple of glasses. It tended to be just them there, the people from the twenty first century; when Simon activated the link. It was nice to be able to speak freely about matters that would have confused the others at best. At worst they’d have thought Simon and Patsy were going insane. Brother Alberti had a way of finding out how well Arsenal were doing in the FA cup. Simon pretended to be really interested. In truth, he disliked football with some passion.

“One minute to go.” Said Simon.

“I dread these things, like reporting to teacher.” Said Patsy.

“I’ve known Alberti for years now.” Said Simon. “I can honestly say his heart is in the right place, most of the time.”

They took it in turn, or at least it seemed that way. Sometimes Alberti activated the link to the power vortex at a certain time, at other times Simon did it. All prearranged at the end of their last link and their greatest enemy was still the difference in time between Florence and wherever they happened to be. Looking up local time was damned difficult in the fifteenth century.

"I can feel him." Said Simon.

There was a sudden blueish tinge in the air, which was often mauve. Alberti seemed to have no idea why it changed colour, so Simon had ceased asking him about it. Suddenly Alberti was there, as if he and his huge chair and desk, were being suspended in space.

"Simon.....Patsy, I do believe we're getting better at this." Said Alberti.

"It's always good to see you." Said Patsy.

"There's not much to report since the sea battle with pirates." Said Simon. "We've been restocking on water and supplies."

"And magical ingredients." Said Patsy. "I think Lucia has bought every herb in Casablanca that is favoured by witches."

Alberti went quiet; Simon was learning to often understand what Alberti didn't say, rather than what he did say. Were they spending Brotherhood gold too fast? There was always a summary of their budget as the final item before the link was broken.

"I've some bad news about Lucia, very bad news." Said Alberti.

All sorts of things went through Simon's mind. Was their witch a traitor, or a thief? They had been entrusting her with spending a lot of Brotherhood gold.

"I like Lucia." Said Patsy. "Please don't tell me she's about to turn on us."

"You have to keep this to yourselves." Said Alberti. "Lucia is important to you quest, Simon. You can't afford to have her wander off. Lucia is cursed, a very strong and unbreakable curse."

"Are you sure?" Asked Simon.

"I might make mistakes, but the Vortex never does." Said Alberti. "Lucia is the target of a curse that will soon kill her. She'll get you where you need go and then meet her fate. There is nothing to be done; the curse was placed by something far older and wiser than me."

"She has a right to know." Said Patsy.

"Then she'll leave the Mermaid and seek a way to remove the curse, which as I've said; cannot be removed." Said Alberti. "Not having her with you at the City of Shadows may end the quest. All that work, Simon.....All those times you nearly died; all for nothing. You simply can't tell her."

Patsy continued to argue and eventually burst into tears. She wore her heart on her sleeve, which was part of the reason he loved her. He held her as she cried, them both knowing that Alberti was right. Telling Lucia she was fated to die from a curse, was likely to end his quest. That might affect a lot more than just an academic exercise to understand the true meaning of Festina Lente.

"I'm sorry to get us back onto the mundane." Said Alberti. "Do you still have plenty of gold? The Brotherhood coffers aren't bottomless, but they are pretty deep."

"We'll be fine for gold." Said Simon. "The pirates we fought had a few items of gold jewellery. I've managed to sell them for a surprisingly large sum of money."

"Notoriety I expect.....Everyone wants something worn by a notorious pirate." Said Alberti.

"The pirate captain had an antique gold chain." Said Simon. "It will just about finance the quest for several years.....And we've still much of Mia's money left unspent."

"Simon the careful spender.....I never thought I'd see that." Said Alberti. "I know you both must be upset, but can we talk about a couple of small items? I promise to keep it short."

"Yes, of course." Said Patsy.

“What can we help you with ?” Asked Simon.

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Cosimo was beginning to relax in Casablanca, which was a shame as it was their last full day there. He’d accepted that trouble was unlikely, to the point where he went out and about with Lucia as her sole bodyguard. Their witch had forgotten an ingredient needed for something he didn’t understand. A herb whose name ended in wort, or something similar. He’d given up trying to understand such things. In his mind he was just walking beside Lucia to discourage anyone from hurting her, or trying to grab her purse with several gold coins in it.

“I thought Haniyeh would have some tucked away somewhere.” Said Lucia. “I didn’t need much.....But if we’d needed it and didn’t have it.”

She’d already shown him the green powder in a jar. Something to do with helping the body heal wounds faster. Cosimo was glad they had the powder, even if he had no idea how it worked.

“That must be the last item.....We’ll soon be heading south.” Said Cosimo.

“Yes, I checked my stocks.....Everything we might need, we have.” Said Lucia.

Lucia was short, with dark hair and an intense look in her brown eyes. She didn’t look like his idea of a witch, which was just as well. The inquisition had executed a lot of harmless women who looked like witches. It wasn’t a good time to be an eccentric old lady living on her own on the edge of town. Cosimo noticed a group of women coming towards them, making straight for Lucia. His first instinct was to get between them and Lucia.

“It’s alright Cosimo.” Said Lucia. “They’re talking about a sick child. I may not be able to help, but feel I should try.”

For the first time, Cosimo wished he had Simon by his side, maybe Giovanni too. A crowd of women meant a crowd of husband somewhere, probably more than he could deal with.

“I’m worried about your safety, Lucia.” Said Cosimo. “I think we should go straight back to the Mermaid.”

“I think these women mean us no harm.” Said Lucia. “It won’t take that long.....I will go with them and help the sick child, if I can.”

And if she couldn’t ? Would there be some kind of punishment for failing ? Cosimo kept quiet and followed Lucia, as the women took her along several streets of houses. There were open shutters in the house they entered and a few lamps, but it still felt dark compared to outside. Cosimo tried not to keep gripping his sword, but it was hard. It was an unknown part of Casablanca; with people he didn’t know.

“Relax, Cosimo.” Said Lucia. “You’re making everyone nervous, including me.”

“Sorry, Lucia.....Trusting strangers doesn’t come easy to me.” Said Cosimo.

Lucia left her shoes at the door of the house, so he did too. He even leant his sword against the wall as a sign of good faith. He had a small blade inside his jacket, but no one would be able to see that. They were sat down on cushions on the floor and the child was brought to them. A girl of no more than eight or nine; Cosimo had never seen anyone look that poorly who wasn’t already dead. From what he heard of the conversation, the child had eaten something at a friend’s house, something bad. The friend had been ill and survived, but one of her grandparents had died.

“Do you need me to see Haniyeh for some medicine for her ?” Asked Cosimo.

“No, the child is beyond the help of medicines.” Said Lucia. “Only my witch powers can save her.....But I need the permission of her mother.”

There was an argument, quite a heated argument among the women of the sick child’s family. Lucia just sat back and waited for a definite yes or no, to what she had planned. And if the child died ?

Cosimo worked out the number of steps to retrieve his sword, should the angry men of the family arrive; seeking vengeance.

“The mother has agreed, but it was a close thing.” Lucia told him.

The woman he assumed was the girl’s mother, started making a keening noise; as she stroked her child’s hair. Lucia looked around the room full of the girl’s relatives, as if saying, ‘here we go.’

Cosimo had seen witches do wonders with a few herbs and potions, but he’d never see one who seemed to pour healing power from her bare hands.

“Child of sorrow, I will heal you.” Said Lucia, over and over again; until Cosimo was fed up with hearing it repeated. All the time, Lucia was pouring out a bright red power from her fingertips.

“Child who walks the way of death, I will heal you.” Screeched Lucia.

Again the repetitions, until Cosimo found himself rocking back and forward with the women. There were three other repeated chants, but Cosimo was unable to recall them later. There came a point where he was lost in a trance. When he came out of it, Lucia was holding the child. The girl looked well; there was even colour back in her cheeks.

“Ahhh, Cosimo.....This is Amina.” Said Lucia. “She is now free of death’s grip.”

There was a restrained joy in the room, as if too much joy was unseemly with strangers in the house. Amina followed them into the road, bouncing with health and happiness. All the women came and waved them goodbye.

“That was amazing.” Said Cosimo.

“I will need to sleep for several days when we set sail for the Ivory Coast.” Said Lucia. “Worth it though, to see Amina looking so fit and well.”

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