Simon Atherton
(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 18 – The Second Test

"There were two people lurking where the quay merged with the buildings serving the docks. An ale house still had one or two lights in its windows, but all the ships' suppliers were in darkness. Gabriel obviously knew what he was doing from his years in the city guard. He rattled his sword in a meaningful way and those lurking in the darkness, quietly went away."

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Simon had the Talisman of the Flame, which he'd given to Patsy; to keep in the same leather bag as the ancient scrolls and writings. The fire at the Red Temple had burned too much of him, a human would have died. Simon wasn't a human, but even he'd come close to death. Brother Alberti had been summoned to keep him up to date on events. Simon knew he had to look bad, when Alberti told him to rest until the worst of the burns had healed. No pushing him to decide on one of the five tests, no bullying him to get a move on. Alberti seemed genuinely concerned, which meant Patsy was worried. When Giovanni said he looked dreadful, Simon decided to keep the Mermaid anchored in the Bay of Naples, until he felt able to continue the great quest. That didn't mean he couldn't talk things over with his most trusted friends.
"Can we look in more than one place on the list ?" Asked Juliana.
"Yes, take a belt and braces approach." Said Giovanni.
It was only just after their evening meal, but Simon was still feeling deeply fatigued. He was quite happy for Patsy to answer for him. She probably knew far more details now than he did.
"No, I took notes about that when Nenzuma mentioned it." Said Patsy. "Once we actively start following a pathway, that becomes the test. We can't move onto another."
"We all know some of the five Simon can choose from." Said Niccolò. "It would be nice to hear about all five."
"Yes, I agree." Said Juliana.
Patsy gave him a sideways look and Simon realised he'd been leaning on her too much. Fatigue had to be forgotten; he needed to lead the meeting.
"Some of the places will be well known to you, others will sound like a fantasy." Said Simon.
"Nenzuma has mixed in locations from various timelines. But I know the location, even if what was there had been destroyed, or hasn't been built yet."
"Wow, I can see we're going to have to work for this one." Said Juliana.
"When don't we ?" Asked Niccolò.
"Personally I like the first on the list." Said Giovanni. "The vault below a temple that Nenzuma mentioned. Let's face it; some of us know Leptis Magna very well. Plus there's a sheltered harbour Captain Galeoto should have no problem getting into."
"We also left quite a few enemies behind us in Leptis Magna." Said Simon. "Several demons and at least one angry deity, if my memory serves me well. Besides, as Brother Alberti says, we're not taking a vote. I just value the opinion of everyone here."
Simon had struggled down to the forward hold of the Mermaid, where a very comfortable couch had put against one wall. Cook had gone into town and found the couch in a second hand furniture

vendor's shop. The others had nice chairs, but Simon was the one sitting in genuine comfort. There was a knock on the door of the hold, which meant Patsy having to unlock the door. There was muttering and Simon recognised the voice of Mia Cassar.
"I know she's late, Patsy." Said Simon. "Let her in though……The more the merrier at times like this."
"Thank you Simon." Said Mia.
She had to sit on the floor, they'd run out of chairs; comfortable or otherwise. Simon nodded at Patsy to continue, in the absolute certainty that there'd be more interruptions.
"The second place Simon could choose is the Valley of Shazoman." Said Patsy. "A fairly barren place according to Nenzuma, in Northern Ethiopia. The ancient Egyptians buried a dead pharaoh there, so you can probably guess where we'll be digging."
"A difficult journey, we'd have to sail right round the southern tip of Africa." Said Mia.
"The big question is……Is the buried pharaoh anyone famous ?" Asked Giovanni. "Are we talking about a mass of priceless grave goods ?"
"Oh, trust you, Giovanni." Said Patsy.
"I must admit to being a little curious myself." Said Niccolò.
"No name, I don't want you to be swayed one way or another, by the fame of a dead pharaoh." Said Simon.
That started an argument, of course it did. Nothing could cause heated words better than a hint of treasure and the burial site of someone famous. Patsy stopped the rows by banging the metal handle of her dagger, against the wooden arm of her chair.
"Please everyone, please." She yelled. "We still have so much to get through."
"I vote for Northern Ethiopia and the buried Pharaoh." Said Mia.
"We are not going to have a vote." Said Simon.
Actually Simon had already decided against Northern Ethiopia. It didn't feel right and he was sure that if they talked about all five options, one would feel like the perfect choice. Failing that, there was always tossing a coin to decide.
"Moving onto the third option." Said Patsy. "It's the Circle of the Stars in Roman Verulamium, better known to myself and Simon as St Albans in Britain. In many ways we'd be going back home, at least for a while. It would be a deep dig to find a particular artefact."
"Going home…….Even though the year would be wrong, you must be tempted." Said Giovanni.
"I am, but I'm still weighing all the options." Said Simon.
"Hmmmmm, you go home at the end of the quest, not halfway through it." Said Mia. "It sounds all wrong to me……In my opinion, you should forget all about Roman Verulamium."
Which was much the same opinion as Simon, thought he just smiled and said nothing. Patsy was very keen on setting foot on British soil again, even if it was the wrong time zone. He'd have a long talk with Patsy when they were alone and the time felt right.
"Let's put a pin in Verulamium and move on." Said Simon.
"Option four is in the new world." Said Patsy. "I'm not sure what Captain Galeoto would think of being asked to take the Mermaid right across the Atlantic."
"We need a few more details, Patsy." Said Mia.
"Chichén Itzá is where Simon might take us, if he likes the idea." Said Patsy. "One of the largest Mayan cities; we'd be digging deep again to find what needs to be found. Good news for those not fond of long trudges across unknown terrain. Chichén Itzá is quite close to the sea on the Yucatán Peninsula."

“Sounds fun, but it is a hell of a way from the Bay of Naples.” Said Giovanni.
“Too far, is my opinion.” Said Niccolò.
Simon had no intention of committing himself to a destination then and there, for a start his mind was still a bit agitated and confused by his recent injuries. He liked the sound of Chichén Itzá though, it seemed right, even if he had no clear idea why.
“And I believe Patsy still has the fifth option to tell us about.” Said Simon.
“Fifth and final.” Said Patsy. “We might be heading back to Crete, which has the advantage of being close to home. Sadly it has the disadvantage of being home to many of our enemies, mostly the friends and hired assassins of the late Esmé Duarty.”
“Going to Crete so soon…….It would be suicide.” Said Mia.
“I tend to agree with Mia.” Said Juliana.
“Details……We need the details, Patsy.” Said Simon.
It was nice of her to run through the list, but she did have a habit of skipping some essential details; like where they’d be heading for on Crete.
“A Minoan palace could be our destination.” Said Patsy. “Zakros, or rather below the ruins of Zakros Palace. We’d need to find a way into the chambers below the surface. The palace is right on the Mediterranean sea, so there’d be no long overland journey from the Mermaid.”
“Sounds wonderful if we didn’t have so many enemies on the island.” Said Giovanni.
Simon would talk over the logistics with Galeoto, but he’d already made his mind up. He’d leave it until his burns felt mostly healed to tell everyone they were returning to Crete. It sounded a dangerous destination, but it was as if some mystical presence had heard Patsy mention Zakros Palace; and they’d let him know it was the right choice. Simon even seemed to know a saying from somewhere, though he’d have sworn to never hearing it before.
“Below……Below….Far below Zakros Palace it lies;
The brave will find the staff of Dikta there;
Unlucky are those who find death waiting for them;
Below……Below….Far below Zakros Palace it lies.”
Dikta was a bit of a mystery, but Brother Alberti could probably find some information on the name and the staff. I was ridiculous really, after all the far more exotic places they’d visited; but Simon was quite excited about going to Zakros Palace.

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Mia Cassar knew she was good at admin, even though she’d have preferred to be organising an attack on their enemies in Crete. Yes, Simon had eventually told everyone their destination for the second test of the great quest; was Zakros Palace in Crete. Some had moaned and Vittoria the witch had looked terrified, but as Simon had often said; the decision was his. Mia had found herself being the admin person who helped Captain Galeoto sources cargo to deliver in and around Southern Italy, while Simon took time to heal. It seemed he wasn’t healing as fast as expected. Karkengara was still using his healing cool breath on Simon, while blaming dark fire for Simon being burned so badly. Mia had no idea what dark fire was, but it sounded like something best avoided. The Mermaid was currently in Malta, delivering metal hinges and other essential metal fittings for some building work being carried out on the island. After Malta ? No one knew until another cargo came their way. They weren’t penniless, so Mia and Galeoto were being a little fussy about what the Mermaid transported around the Mediterranean Sea.
“A query came in from a local apothecary.” Said Mia. “They have barrels of wood alcohol they’d like us to deliver, a lot of barrels. It’s a job but that will pay well, but it’s delivering to Crete.”

About the middle of the afternoon on a dry sunny day in Malta. The only slight complaint was a wind which was a little stronger than Mia would have liked. The Mermaid was against the quayside, while the crates of metal fittings were shifted onto horse drawn waggons. Galeoto and her were making sure the crates left the Mermaid undamaged. Galeoto looked surprised at the suggestion of delivering goods to Crete, but then he smiled.
“Well, I suppose it’ll be good to get any trouble out of the way.” Said Galeoto. “I’m sure we can handle a few angry unemployed assassins. We have Karkengara to guard the Mermaid. If Crete looks reasonably safe, I’d like to finally put the Mermaid into dry dock. The hull is well overdue for quite a few routine repairs.”
“Giovanni mentioned Crete as the best place to buy shot and powder for the deck cannons.” Said Mia.
“There you go, Mia.” Said Galeoto. “It seems Crete is the answer to quite a few of our problems. We can ever have a good look around the Zakros Palace, before we’re there with Simon.”
“So I can accept the consignment of wood alcohol ?” Asked Mia.
“Yes, I’ll trust you that they’re paying us well.” Said Galeoto.
While Galeoto remained to keep an eye on the goods leaving the Mermaid, Mia went to visit an apothecary she knew; which tended to mean witch on Malta. The particular witch she had in mind, might well know the meaning of Dikta, as in Simon’s saying about a Staff of Dikta. It seemed that even Brother Alberti’s huge archive of knowledge, had nothing solid on the Staff of Dikta. Dikta might be a place, a name, or perhaps even an ancient deity.
“If you want a clever witch, come to Malta.” Muttered Mia.
Karkengara had said that Dikta sounded like a place name; a truly ancient name for the Zakros Palace. He wasn’t sure though, which seemed to be so rare that something needed to be done to investigate Dikta as an incredibly old name for Zakros Palace. The apothecary knew a lot of people, but Mia wasn’t totally sold on her expertise.
“Everyone knows lots of people.” Muttered Mia.
Normally Mia was happy to walk the streets of Malta on her own. There was a feeling about the docks area though, things felt a little too lively. She was beginning to wish she’d brought someone with her; despite the witch telling her to come alone.
“Rule one you fool.” Mia muttered at herself. “If they tell you to come alone; never go alone.”
Too late to rearrange things now, the apothecary shop was there, on the other side of the street. Roża was the name of the witch. No second name, no idea if she was married, but there had been mention of two children. The shop door was locked and as Mia thumped on it, she hoped she wasn’t making the biggest mistake of her life. The door opened, but only a little.
“My name is Mia.....I am expected.”
The door opened a little further and an arm was beckoning her inside, a female arm. Still not too late to change her mind and run all the way back to the Mermaid. Mia walked into the apothecary shop, which smelled of the usual kinds of herbs and ingredients for spells.
“Is Roża here ? She is expecting me.” Said Mia.
There was a giggle and something hard and heavy hit Mia across the back of her head. Mia tumbled unconscious to the floor of the shop.

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Giovanni couldn’t sleep anyway, not that unusual for a vampire. He may not have hunted by walking the dark night time streets like the vampires of old, but that didn’t mean he always slept. Simon was the same before being hurt, often going days on just two or three hours sleep a night. Now he was

sleeping a solid nine hours, as his body healed. Giovanni liked the company of women and much to his amazement Vittoria Bianchi had invited herself into his bed. They were like chalk and cheese and he seemed to remember her having a family back home in Florence. Well, if that didn't seem to bother her, it definitely didn't bother him. Giovanni's cabin was at the stern of the Mermaid, with a view right along the quay and into the docks.
"Oh, Mia has been hurt…….I felt it." Said Vittoria.
There was just enough light to see her lying on his bed, with a sheet wrapped around her. She seemed so perturbed, he had to lean towards her and kiss her cheek.
"Do you think she had an accident somewhere ?" Asked Giovanni.
"No, she was hurt by the violence of another." Said Vittoria.
She had a way of talking which could be a little strange, but he was getting used to it. Would their fling last long enough for him to get really fluent in Vittoria speak ? Giovanni hoped so.
"Can you find her ?" He asked.
"Hmmmmm, I can get us close to where she was hurt." Said Vittoria.
"Get dressed……On the way, we'll pick up anyone else who doesn't seem sleepy."
Gabriel was leaning on the guard rail, looking down at the docks. Fully dressed and a blade on his hip, the one time member of the Florentine city guard was perfect to take along with them.
"We need you…….Mia has been hurt." Said Giovanni.
"I felt it happen." Said Vittoria.
"I'm sort of on guard, watching the quayside." Said Gabriel.
"If anyone unpleasant tries to get onto the Mermaid, Karkengara will incinerate them. You're coming with us Gabriel." Said Giovanni.
"Please……..We need you." Said Vittoria.
It was being ex-city guard, they always followed orders. Gabriel still didn't move, until Vittoria held his hand and pleaded with him. Was there magic in that hand holding ? Giovanni thought there probably was.
"Please, Gabriel…….They may still be hurting her." Said Vittoria.
"Fine……But I must be crazy to leave my post." Said Gabriel.
Along the quay they went, with its multitude of different trading ships. Giovanni looked back and everything appeared different at night. The Mermaid had brighter lights than some; he could have spotted her anywhere. Vittoria had obviously seen him looking at the ship that had been their home for quite some time.
"I heard Galeoto is putting her in dry dock when we get to Crete." Said Vittoria.
"The hull needs attention…….You don't ignore that." Said Giovanni. "Or so Galeoto says and he is the expert."
There were two people lurking where the quay merged with the buildings serving the docks. An ale house still had one or two lights in its windows, but all the ships' suppliers were in darkness. Gabriel obviously knew what he was doing from his years in the city guard. He rattled his sword in a meaningful way and those lurking in the darkness, quietly went away.
"I knew you'd be useful, Gabriel." Said Vittoria.
Vittoria took them right through most of the usual dockside services and beyond. Giovanni recognised a few places, but it had been a while since they'd visited Malta; and even his eyes couldn't see in total darkness.
"Mia is around here, the apothecaries' quarter." Said Vittoria. "Even in dark windows, I can see their signs. Witches most of them, we need to be careful."

Giovanni had nothing against witches; he was sleeping with one after all. Witches who were enemies though, they were a different thing. At the first sign of trouble he intended to use his blade to good effect.
“Are we where Mia was hurt ?” Asked Giovanni.
“Close……Very close.” Said Vittoria.
No more than another three shops along the street, and Vittoria was looking through a window with some intensity. She actually made a few hand gestures, which were a mystery to him. She muttered and bobbed her head about before speaking.
“Mia is in there and she’s been injured.” Said Vittoria. “We should go in there now, right away.”
Giovanni carefully tried to open the door, but it was locked and bolted. In his experience if someone locked the front door so efficiently, the back door was even worse. He looked at Vittoria, who nodded at him.
“I can get us in……..Be ready to fight.” Said Vittoria.
Right hand with palm towards the door, Vittoria muttered something as she walked towards the shop door. To Giovanni it sounded as though she was intoning Latin, but he might have been wrong.
“……..And open.” Said Vittoria.
The door opened inwards, crashing against a shelf full of various powders in boxes. Vittoria ran in with a blade in her hand, with Giovanni following her. Gabriel was at the back, with one eye on the street behind them.
“Straight through the shop…….Hurry.” Said Vittoria. “The bastards are hurting her again.”
When a man came at Giovanni with an oil lamp in one hand and a blade in the other, he didn’t mess around. Giovanni ripped out the man’s throat with his bare left hand and left him writhing and dying on the floor.
“How many more of them are there ?” He asked.
“Not quite sure……..At least four.” Said Vittoria.
No one had picked up the oil lamp dropped by the ruffian Giovanni had killed. By the time they were in the backroom of the shop, there was the beginnings of a blaze at the front. Vittoria’s estimate had been slightly off, there was one woman and two men stood over Mia; as the men kicked her.
Giovanni tried to keep an open mind, but when the woman began making hand gestures at him, he assumed she was the witch. He also assumed he wouldn’t like the spell if she finished it. The front of the shop was giving him a hurry up command, by the fire beginning to spread towards them.
“Kill them all……No mercy.” Said Giovanni. “I can carry Mia out of this hell hole.”
He drove his blade deep into the woman’s throat, mainly to stop her finishing the spell. Giovanni twisted his blade a few times and the witch was probably dead before she could even cry out.
Giovanni threw Mia over his shoulder and she groaned, which was good news. Fatally wounded people rarely had the strength to make any noise at all.
“I have Mia……..We’re leaving here.” Yelled Giovanni.
“Thank you……..Than you so much.” Muttered Mia.
Gabriel took care of his opponent and judging by the gurgling noises just behind him, Vittoria had put her blade to good use. Never once did it cross Giovanni’s mind that his people would lose the fight and they didn’t let him down. The back door needed a hefty boot against it, which was handled by Gabriel, as Giovanni had his hands full. Mia was moving about and sounded as though she was having trouble breathing. At the far end of the street from the apothecary shop, Giovanni gently put her down where Mia could lean on the wall.
“I think those bastards broke a rib, maybe two.” Said Mia. “I might be more comfortable walking.”

“Not with broken ribs, Mia.” Said Vittoria, while shaking her head.
“Wait here, I’ll find some transport for her.” Said Gabriel.
Mia was making gasping sounds with every breath, but Giovanni had to ask about her now deceased captors. Mainly if another two dozen of them were likely to attack the Mermaid while she was tied up at the quayside. Giovanni was still looking over his shoulder for angry friends of Esmé Duarty.
“Who were those people, Mia ?” He asked. “Do we need to worry about whoever sent them ?”
Every word she spoke seemed to hurt her somewhere, but he had to know. It meant the difference between leaving Malta to their timetable, or running away from yet another enemy.
“They weren’t like that, nothing like Esmé and her assassins.” Said Mia. “They’d heard rumours about us looking for treasure in one of the palaces of Crete. I was lured to that shop by a false offer of information.”
Mia coughed a few times and was obviously in pain.
“We need Gabriel and that transport.” Said Vittoria.
“The docks in the middle of the night……..He’ll be lucky to find a fish sellers cart.” Said Giovanni.
“Anything will do.” Said Mia. “Anyway, they were so bad at the whole kidnapping business, that I learned more from them; than they did from me.”
More coughing from Mia and she coughed up some fluid, that sounded as though it had come up from deep in her lungs.
“Karkengara will heal you, Mia.” Said Vittoria. We just need to get you back to the Mermaid.”
Gabriel turned up with the transport, which looked like the kind of cart used by house repairers and decorators. Quite large, enough space for Mia to stretch out and go to sleep; if she could.
“That’s perfect…….Did you steal it ?” Asked Giovanni.
“Of course I stole it.” Said Gabriel.
There was even a top made of metal hoops and a canvas cover. They left it open a little, but Mia was well away from the chill night air and the prying eyes of strangers.
“Are you comfortable, Mia ?” Asked Vittoria.
“Yes……Very comfortable.” Said Mia.
Giovanni had the question in his head since Mia had mentioned learning more from the small band of ruffians than they’d learned from her. The question had been in his head while helping Mia get comfortable in the cart. They were almost at the quayside when he couldn’t keep the question inside any longer.
“Sorry, Mia…….Tell me to go to hell if talking hurts.” Said Giovanni. “But what did you learn from that dreadful gang of kidnappers ?”
“The witch seemed so keen on having another woman to talk to.” Said Mia. “She mentioned knowing that the Staff of Dikta was more a place than a wooden staff. She went on and on about it and I have a good memory. I’m pretty sure I can find where we need to start digging at Zakros Palace.”
“Thank you, that is very useful.” Said Vittoria.
“Good……Now I need to close my eyes and pass out for a while.” Said Mia.

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Several of the crew were nervous about dropping anchor at Crete, but Niccolò Machiavelli wasn’t. The Mermaid needed a bit of a refit and some time in dry dock to deal with any problems normally below the waterline. In other words, there was going to be quite a bit of gold spent on the Mermaid. In his experiences, grudges usually took second place to earning some gold. Simon still needed to heal, but he was improving with every passing day. Karkengara seemed to think a long thin scar on

his left cheek was there for life. Like a duelling scar, it might look fairly dashing. Not that Niccolò would mention that to Simon until his dark mood had lifted a little. While Simon healed, their ship could be repaired; while they began exploring the extensive ruins of Zakros Palace. The only person who looked genuinely happy to be at Crete again was Captain Galeoto.
“The Mermaid will be soon as good as new.” Galeoto had told Niccolò. “They can supply everything here; it’s all the pirate ships that need repairs. We could even add a few more cannons; big ones this time.”
Two large cannons below the deck, Simon had already approved the cost. Niccolò wasn’t sure if he liked to be travelling on such a heavily armed ship, but everyone else seemed happy with the idea. With their own ship in dry dock, they’d hired a fairly small single-masted vessel to get them around the coast to Zakros Palace. That limited how many could go at the same time, which Niccolò considered to be a good thing. Too many trudging through the ruins sounded like a recipe for trouble.
“The palace covers quite an area.” Said Niccolò. “Far more of it running back from the sea than I’d expected. We may have quite a lot of digging and exploring ahead of us.”
Someone had found a kind of bath chair device for Mia to travel in, until she could breathe without her ribs causing pain. Patsy said Mia was a patchwork of bruises, so taking it in turns to wheel her around the ruins; didn’t seem excessive. Galeoto had a crew member strengthen the wheels on Mia’s chair, so she could be pushed over some quite extreme terrain. Giovanni had just pushed her up a gentle rise in the ground and along what looked like part of a cobbled street.
“I feel such a fraud.” Said Mia. “The last two places I thought were right, turned out to be a waste of time.”
“Don’t beat yourself up, take it slow and steady.” Said Giovanni. “Nothing can really happen until Simon is completely well. Think of us as the advance survey team……Or something like that.”
“Thousands of people must have trampled over these ruins.” Said Niccolò. “Destroying any sign of the Staff of Dikta the dead witch told you about.”
“Thank you, I know you’re both trying to make me feel better.” Said Mia. “Being honest, you’ve actually succeeded, but only a little bit. We need to be closer to the eastern edge….I remember the witch mentioning it a lot.”
The bath chair device rattled a lot, but Galeoto had used one of his heaviest members of crew to test it; before declaring it to be safe. It might make weird noises, but they all trusted it not to fall apart, or dump poor Mia on the ground. As if annoyed at the pace being set by Giovanni, Mia began pushing at the wheels to go faster. Of course, the rattling noises became louder.
“East…….I know we need to go east.” Said Mia. “Right on the coast……..We need to be almost on the coast.”
“Fine…….East it is, just calm yourself.” Said Giovanni.
“It’s just……..If I can’t find the right place, Simon will think I’m an idiot.” Said Mia.
Giovanna would have loved to reassure Mia, but he’d been called quite a few rude names by Simon. Not that the leader of their expedition was normally rude, he was obviously still in a lot of pain.
“Simon will be back to his old self once he’s fully healed.” Said Niccolò.
It took a while to reach where Niccolò could hear the sound of crashing waves. Up and down with Mia’s chair, while avoiding piles of debris; it all took time. Mia seemed happier once they discovered three almost pristine female statues in a row. Three gorgeous women carved out of marble. Whoever had carved their robes had been a genius; they appeared to actually be moving with the wind.

“Yes, the three statues…….She mentioned these.” Said Mia.
“After the statues we’re almost on the beach.” Said Giovanni.
“No, we need to get behind the statues.” Said Mia.
“Maybe we should leave this until tomorrow ?” Asked Niccolò. “We’re due back at our boat soon.”
“No…….We’re so close……I know it.” Yelled Mia.
Mia’s chair rattled over the rough ground and towards the statues. Mia had Giovanni pushing her so fast, that her chair was wobbling from side to side.
“I know this is it…….Just as the witch described it.” Said Mia.
“Slow down, Mia…….Slow down.” Shouted Niccolò.
Mia kept going, even when Giovanni stopped pushing her. It was downhill then, between two of the statues and into what looked like a crypt of some kind. Deep and wide, half a dozen bath chair devices could have entered the crypt, side by side. There Mia went, hurting into the dark, still trying to push the wheels to go faster.
“Slow down, you’ll kill yourself.” Shouted Giovanni.
Giovanni ran after Mia and Niccolò ran after Giovanni; dreading what might become of Mia.

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