

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 16 – Fire And Orbs

“You could easily walk past Simon on the streets of North London and not even notice him. There was a green tinge to his eyes that had gained him quite a few female admirers, but he was completely ignored by the queues using the ATMs near Wood Green Tube Station. He was just another skinny guy in a hoody, probably in his late twenties. He’d lived in London since nineteen-oh-seven and millions of people had gone about their business and ignored Simon Atherton. None of them had realised that the ordinary looking young man, with the unsettling green eyes, was a vampire.” – Chapter 1 – London’s Night Stalkers.

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Simon Atherton ran up the first set of stairs he could find, with Patsy Smart so close behind that he could hear her breathing hard. Simon wasn’t guessing where Eduino Colombo was in the large and impressive house, he knew. Juliana was from the same Colombo stock and Simon had lived with her for some time. He knew the essence of the Colombo family, better than if he had a bright light in his mind to show where Eduino was hiding. Simon crossed to a narrower set of stairs.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way ?” Asked Patsy. “These look like stairs to the servants’ quarters.”

Could he tell Patsy he could almost still taste Juliana when she was in the same building ? Would he have a relationship still intact after mentioning Eduino had the same Colombo essence as Juliana ? It was like a form of DNA, but far more basic and rooted in the blood. Everything like that was based in the blood. That would do as an explanation and was unlikely to cause a huge row and sleeping in somewhere other than his own bed with Patsy.

“I can feel him.....The Colombo essence in his blood.” Said Simon.

Patsy nodded, but she wasn’t stupid. Eventually she’d realise how he knew the Colombo essence so well. By then she’d probably accept it for what it was, a hangover from his relationship with Juliana.

“Here, through the heavy door on the left.” Said Simon.

Ideally he’d have waited for a few of the others to catch up. It was a huge house though and it was likely the others were spread out all over the place. Simon was also eager for the battle; he could feel the tingle at the top of his spine. He suspected that Patsy was just as keen to cross swords with Eduino and his personal guards. They opened the large heavy door and entered the room beyond. The house was different there, more like the palatial home of a very affluent family. Every wall was covered in portraits of the family, from the living to the long dead. The furniture looked more expensive than in Brother Alberti’s personal sanctuary.

“Wow, this is more like it.....You can smell the money in here.” Said Patsy.

There was a crash to their left, as Mia kicked open a door and came rushing into the room. She was on her own and looked to have been through a few fights. There was blood on her jacket, which Simon hoped wasn’t Mia’s.

“Mia.....Weren’t you with Hassan ?” Asked Patsy.

“We were separated somewhere.” Said Mia. “Then I got involved in a fight.....The blood isn’t mine by the way, it’s from a Colombo guard.....Where to now ?”

"This way." Said Simon.

A rather nondescript door, which took them into quite a narrow hallway. Again, it looked as if they'd left the affluent part of the building and were in the servants' quarters.

"Are you sure, Simon ?" Asked Mia. "This hardly looks like somewhere Eduino Colombo would have his rooms."

"Don't ask him that unless you want a long talk on tasting Colombo essence." Said Patsy. "Best to just accept that Simon knows the right way."

"Fair enough." Said Mia.

It was a red door and Simon had always considered red doors to be bad luck. As his hand touched the handle, he knew that Eduino was in the room behind the door. Sadly, so were quite a large number of his personal guards. It was the heartbeats in the room, there were far too many of them for his liking. Simon hesitated for a second and looked at the two female fighters standing with him.

"This.....Is going to be a tough fight." He muttered.

"Is Eduino definitely in there ?" Asked Patsy.

"Yes." Said Simon.

Simon opened the door and ran into the room beyond, his sword up and ready to strike.

"Eduino Colombo.....We are here for you." Yelled Mia.

The room was large but unimpressive, as though it was somewhere the guards rested between shifts. There were table and chairs, plus a few bedrolls against a wall. Simon had slept in worse places, but he'd also slept in far better.

"Your guards can leave.....They don't have to die here." Shouted Simon.

Was there a bit of a twitch from one or two of them ? Did some look at the door on the far side of the room ? One guard did move away from Eduino and was stabbed between the ribs by one of his colleagues.

"You have it wrong Simon." Yelled Eduino. "You are the ones who die today."

For a second everything was a whirl, until Simon's body automatically sent him into fighting mode. Everything was fairly monochrome, volumes were increased for sounds he really needed to hear; but decreased for the general noises around him. His reaction times went up to around ten times what they usually were. Best of all it was all done without him having any conscious awareness of changing anything. After all that it was Mia who skewered the first Colombo guard; of course it was, that was how the chaos of battle tended to confuse and annoy those in the battle.

"Wow, did you see that ?" Shouted Mia.

"Concentrate of the fight, Mia." Yelled Patsy. "Concentrate."

Simon leapt over the guard Mia had just killed and bit out the throat of another guard. That got the attention of their enemies, it always did. Simon would have given a lot to have Giovanni fighting with them, but that didn't look likely to happen. Patsy used her blade well, but Mia could get a bit flashy. Or maybe he was jealous of her getting the first kill ? Patsy struck fast and accurately and two of the guards were on the floor, writhing in growing pools of their own blood.

"Fools.....Kill them." Shouted Eduino. "Two thousand in gold to the one who kills Simon Atherton."

It had to happen as part of the chaos and general perverse nature of battle. Mia tried to get at Eduino and tripped over something on the floor; probably the dropped blade of a dead guard. One of the guards stabbed her in the shoulder and instantly; Simon and Patsy were fighting on their own. Mia wasn't dead, but she was ripping the sleeve off her shirt to create an impromptu battle dressing.

"Crap.....Are you alright, Mia ?" Asked Patsy.

"Yes, but the wound is deep and needs a bandage." Said Mia.

Simon had a battle dressing; even vampires could pick up nasty wounds in a fight. He gave it to Mia and carried on moving towards Eduino. He was one of those awkward targets to engage; always guards getting in the way. He'd been properly trained too, which wasn't helping. Someone in his life had probably thought someone annoying as Eduino Colombo, needed to be able to defend himself. Simon sent one of the guards to meet his maker, only for another to get in his way.

"Fight me.....Stop being a coward, Colombo.....Fight me." Yelled Simon.

The Gods of luck might have thought it was time to teach Simon a lesson; there was no real way of knowing. Eduino walked away from Simon, but he left a lot of his back exposed. As Simon prepared to thrust his blade into Juliana's murderous relative, one of the guards finally became courageous. He took a swinging blow and hit Simon across his back, just about his shoulder blades. Vampire strength and toughness didn't stop Simon going down.

"Foul beast, what did Juliana see in you ?" Asked Eduino. "Now I'll send you to hell, Simon."

Mia was busy getting the bleeding under control from the nasty looking wound in her shoulder. Patsy was too far away to quickly come to Simon's aid. Simon had long ago outstared death, but that didn't mean he was happy to die by the hand of Eduino Colombo. Dying there and then looked likely, as the point of Eduino's blade was stabbed at his throat. Bleed enough, quickly enough and even the toughest vampires can die. Patsy screamed, anticipating what looked to be the inevitable.

"No."

It sounded like the young voice of a child, a girl child. The lamps in the room went out, leaving just a glow around the face of Sabina, Gérard's youngest child. It was her; Simon had no doubt about it, even if it was impossible. Sabina's huge dark eyes glowed and there were a lot of screams in the dark. When the lamps came back on, Sabina was gone, as if she'd never been there.

"It seems like a miracle.....They're all dead." Said Mia.

The guards were dead, blood seemingly having poured from every orifice. Eduino was different; he appeared to have been burned to death, from the inside out. His face was barely recognisable, but it was him. As for Sabina ? There was no sign she'd ever even been there.

"Eduino is dead, we can leave now." Said Simon. "As for Sabina.....I suggest we just say Colombo was killed. Any mention of Sabina needs to wait until we're certain what we did see; agreed ?"

"Agreed.....I don't want to look crazy." Said Mia.

"Agreed.....Let's get out of here." Said Patsy.

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There had been no order to deal with the matter, no pressure at all. Simon had mentioned Karkengara being summoned to take her to the Mermaid, with just a single task to accomplish. Vittoria Bianchi was aware from the first mention of Esmé Duarty that she could refuse and another would be sent instead.

"Esmé is just too powerful." Simon had told her. "She sent out orders while locked in the forward hold of the Mermaid. It still doesn't feel right, but would feel worse if a man was being sent. I'd like you to put an end to the head of the assassins on Crete. I will understand if you'd rather I sent another."

"No, don't send another, I'll do it." Vittoria had said. "Esmé Duarty has caused us more than enough problems. Plus, now Eduino has been found and killed, we don't need her anymore."

Simon had nodded at her and offered her the loan of a blue steel assassin's blade, which she accepted.

"I'm glad you accepted the task." Simon had said.

"What is to be done with her, erm.....Remains ?" She'd asked.

"Karkengara will drop her miles out to sea after bringing you back here." Simon had said.

It wasn't the first time Vittoria had killed someone in cold blood. There had been a user of dark magic in Florence, a particularly nasty individual. A long and unpleasant story, but she'd sent him to whatever awaited him after death. Vittoria would feel guilty about ending the life of Esmé Duarty, but the guilt wouldn't last for long. Killing is killing though and as Vittoria stood in front of the door to the front hold of the Mermaid, her hand was trembling slightly. It was the hand holding the key to the door and she made herself relax.

"Calm yourself.....She deserves this." Vittoria muttered.

"Do you want me to come in with you ?" Asked Cook. "Simon didn't want her shackled, but we've had problems. Tougher than she looks, two of the crew have been hurt."

He meant well, but had been a nuisance since she'd arrived astride Karkengara. It wasn't a two person job to deal with Esmé; just one very determined person.

"No.....Thank you, but I can handle this." Said Vittoria.

Cook went, but Vittoria knew he'd be lurking somewhere. She opened the hold door and stepped inside, locking it behind her.

"I can no longer contact Eduino." Said Esmé. "I'm assuming he's dead and that I'm next."

"Out of interest.....How were you communicating with Eduino ?" Asked Vittoria.

"Ahhhh, a lady needs her secrets." Said Esmé. "That one I intend to take with me to the grave."

No ropes, no chains, but there was nowhere to run away to on a ship. Esmé could have jumped over the side and drowned herself; though that would have solved the current problem. Despite injuries to the crew, Cook had told her Esmé was still allowed to exercise on the open deck; on dry days.

"Where are my manners ?" Asked Vittoria. "May I sit down ?"

"Yes, of course.....I should have invited you to sit."

One large table with a few chairs to arrange as required. Vittoria pushed a chair up to the opposite side of the table to Esmé. It was quite a comfortable chair; it even had a cushion for her to sit on.

Vittoria had a few spells ready to use, but they were for emergencies. To kill the head of the assassins of Crete, Vittoria intended to use a long thin blade she had in a pocket of her jacket. She'd enchanted the blade with a spell of accuracy.

"Well.....Where do we begin ?" Asked Vittoria.

"That depends if this is an interrogation, or a general waste of time before you kill me ?"

Vittoria was beginning to like Esmé, just a little bit. It was nice to meet someone who spoke what was on their mind, and acted appropriately.

"I've yet to make up my mind about that." Said Vittoria. "I'd still like to know how you kept in touch with your people, while a prisoner on the Mermaid ?"

"That would put my entire network at risk." Said Esmé. "Most of them have been loyal and hardworking for many years."

Vittoria looked hard into her eyes, knowing the moment had arrived. Did Esmé have a plan to escape after killing her ? Probably, but there was just about no chance of her sharing it with Vittoria.

"So.....It seems you have nothing to offer me in terms of information." Said Vittoria.

"It seems not." Said Esmé.

The head of the assassins moved fast, faster than Vittoria had expected. She hadn't expected the small but sharp blade either, nor that it would be used to pin her right hand to the table. Where had the blade come from ? Esmé even had the nerve to laugh at her.

"Once you are dead, I have my own plans on escaping from the Mermaid." Said Esmé.

The knife was hurting, it was actually agonising, but Vittoria needed to concentrate. She didn't even want to scream, in case Cook used that as an excuse to have the door broken open. That might complicate matters and was likely to be part of Esmé's escape plan.

"Where did you get the blade?" Asked Vittoria.

"As I said before, a lady needs her secrets." Said Esmé.

The bitch hit the blade with her fist, driving it in deeper. Vittoria had to yell, even though that was likely to mean some of the crew breaking down the door. Any sympathy Vittoria might have had for Esmé Duarty, had now completely evaporated.

"I was feeling sorry about this, now I don't." Said Vittoria.

It was hard to get the blade from her pocket with every nerve in body feeling like it was racked with pain. Vittoria did it though and once it was in her left hand, she threw it at Esmé, aiming for her throat. The spell of accuracy did the rest, just as Cook began banging on the door.

"Are you alright, Vittoria?" Shouted Cook. "I can have the door down in a few minutes."

"I'm fine Cook, the door is Fine." Yelled Vittoria.

Vittoria's enchanted blade entered Esmé's throat and went in deep. By the time the head of the assassins was probably drowning in her own blood, the blade was turning, drilling itself into her spine. Esmé Duarty died before giving her any useful information, but that hadn't been the purpose of the visit. As Esmé fell off her chair and became a lifeless corpse on the floor, the most important part of Vittoria's mission had been accomplished. The head of the assassins was dead and no further threat to anyone. Banging began on the door to the hold.

"We'll be in there in a moment." Yelled Cook.

No good shouting at Cook to tell him he was an idiot; besides, he meant well. Vittoria pulled the blade out of her hand and couldn't help yelling with pain. She had her bloody hand wrapped in Esmé's expensive blouse, by the time Cook succeeded in breaking down the door.

"Thank the Gods.....You're alive." Said Cook.

There they were standing in the wrecked doorway, about half a dozen of the crew; all armed with long swords. Cook seemed to doubt that Esmé was really dead; he shoved at her corpse a few times with his foot.

"She's dead.....And won't get any deader." Said Vittoria.

"What do you want done with her body?" Asked Cook.

"Karkengara will deal with it after taking me back to Florence." Said Vittoria.

She wasn't going to mention it, but it might mean there was a spy on the Mermaid, or even worse; one of Esmé's assassins. The small blade which had been used to pin her hand to the table, was still covered in her blood. Vittoria threw it onto the table.

"You need to find out who owned this, Cook." Said Vittoria. "They gave it to her, the head of the assassins."

"I will, we'll start investigating that right away." Said Cook.

Vittoria used a few healing spells on her hand and it was quickly healed. It still stung though, which she put down to the blade going in so deep, for so long. Once she was satisfied that her wound needed no further urgent care, she used the summoning word Karkengara had given her. His head appeared first, then a huge clawed foot. Like Cook, the bringer of fire prodded at a very dead Esmé.

"Dead then?.....I knew you could do it." Said Karkengara. "I'll need to pick you up on the main deck. It's the only place I can get you onto my back."

"I'll meet you up there." Said Vittoria.

Cook helped her turn over the body and search every pocket, every crease in the clothing. There was nothing, it seemed the small knife had been her only concealed weapon. A device was what Vittoria was hoping to find, the method Esmé Duarty had used to contact Eduino; and probably a few others. "Nothing." Said Cook.

"At least she can't hurt anyone else." Said Vittoria.

"Will he burn her ? The dragon, will he burn her ?" Asked one of the crew.

"No, she'll be dropped into the sea a long way from here."

Karkengara was waiting on the deck for her and he extended a leg for her to climb up. Seated on his back, she felt they could conquer the world, or at least worry it a little.

"Thank you for coming to get me." She said.

"Are you ready ?"

"Yes."

The Mermaid seemed to vanish into a kind of mist, as did the entire Bay of Naples. The air became cooler as she seemed to sense Karkengara moving almost instantly through the miles between the Mermaid and Florence. As Karkengara became visible again, they were in a wood. Simon was there to help her climb down to the ground.

"So, she's dead." Said Simon.

"Yes..... Esmé Duarty is dead." Said Vittoria.

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"If you want to be part of this, Galeoto." Said Simon. "You'll need to carry a few things. Giovanni and myself are carrying the blue orbs. Even Vittoria has been given a full pack and her wounds are still healing."

Niccolò Machiavelli was enjoying watching the squabbles as the team got ready to go ashore.

Giovanni had wanted to call it the fire team and that had been argued about for some time. Sanity won of course and they were just to be known as the team. Surprisingly for people who seemed to be perpetually moaning at each other, their preparations were ahead of schedule.

"My pack is full." Said Galeoto. "I just draw the line at being expected to have two gallons of water on straps over my shoulders."

"Bring Cook; he can carry the drinking water." Said Simon. "I know he's quite keen on exploring with the rest of us."

"Yes, bring Cook.....He'd very useful." Said Vittoria.

Another argument began about how useful Cook might be when exploring an ancient temple near Mount Vesuvius. Galeoto didn't seem keen on having his first officer there to steal some of his thunder.

"Alright.....I'll send someone back for Cook." Said Galeoto.

Everything took a while, but Niccolò would never have described Simon's team as inefficient. They'd travelled from Florence to the Bay of Naples in a very good time. The Mermaid had been left at anchor, but most of the crew had been left on-board, as guards and protectors. No one was certain of a location for the temple they sought, but everyone was sure they'd find it. They were experienced explorers now and sometimes they made him feel like a complete novice.

"Who has the bag full of scrolls ?" Asked Mia Cassar.

"Me.....It's always me carrying the scrolls." Said Patsy.

They'd set up a base camp quite close to Vesuvius, in the hope that it chose another year to erupt, or another decade. Clouds circled the might volcano, which was just a weather event and nothing sinister. Cook arrived while everyone was having a quick food and drink break. He seemed quite

happy to be a water carrier. Karkengara would be around to help protect the Mermaid, but not the expedition into the volcano. For some reason he thought they were on a key part of the quest and needed to succeed without the aid of a deity. That seemed a bit churlish to Niccolò, but Simon seemed to accept it with no bitterness or resentment.

"Oh, the people wanting money are back." Said Juliana.

"And they've brought some friends." Said Mia. "There are more of them again."

A group of locals trying to extort some kind of idiot tax on visitors to the famous volcano. They'd been sent on their way twice, without the asked for payment. There seemed to be many more of them now, but they were still some distance away.

"Pay them and we'll never get rid of them." Said Patsy.

"We can hardly slaughter them all." Said Giovanni. "Even if some of us might enjoy it."

"I'd enjoy it." Said Vittoria. "They're parasites."

Everyone was looking at Simon, including Niccolò. Being the leader had to lose some of its sparkle when your team wanted orders on whether to deal with petty crooks in a violent manner.

"We're not killing them, no matter how irritating they are." Said Simon. "Everyone seems ready; some of us have been ready for this for many years. We'll set off now and get ahead them."

"We're not even killing one or two of them ?" Asked Giovanni.

"No, none of them." Said Simon, though he was smiling as he said it.

They set off at a brisk pace, rather the usual trudge. Across the lower slopes of Vesuvius covered in ashes, until the annoyance became a group of dots far below them. They were pointing at the idiot tax avoiders, but didn't seem keen on coming further up the volcano.

"They're not coming after us anymore." Said Hassan.

"No perseverance, they don't deserve the money." Said Mia.

"Higher.....I sense we need to be higher up the mountain." Said Niccolò.

In truth it was more than a sense, a voice was in Niccolò's head; telling him roughly where to go.

They'd eventually need the sacred scrolls from Nineveh, but that wouldn't be a problem; Patsy had already said all the scrolls were in her leather bag.

"Fine.....We'll go where Machiavelli takes us." Said Simon.

Niccolò hoped he was worthy of Simon's trust, but in reality; it was the voice leading them. It was a hard to place voice, until it spoke a few words in Arabic. The tone, the accentuation.....Only the last time he was speaking the language of his people. Niccolò dropped to his knees.....

"I know the voice in my head." Said Niccolò. "It's him, Emshara The last of the Hassuna."

"Is it Emshara who guides us ?" Asked Simon.

"Yes, it is."

The voice in his head spoke too fast in a language Niccolò didn't understand. He knew one thing though, the direction they all had to go. It was a narrow valley, not far from the summit of the volcano. Niccolò got up and pointed.

"There.....We'll find the entrance there." He said. "Patsy.....We'll need the scroll with the face on it, the face of Emshara."

"I'll find it as we walk." Said Patsy.

"What about these damned heavy orbs ?" Asked Giovanni.

"As far as I can tell.....They're not used, but you need to be carrying them." Said Niccolò.

"That's as clear as mud." Said Gabriel.

"We need to trust the last of the Hassuna." Said Niccolò.

The walk up to the summit became a climb, as the ground became a mix of ash and rocks. Warm too, as though a furnace raged below their feet. Vesuvius was dangerous, no one could argue against that. It might well be the most dangerous volcano in the world. Smoke was coming out of holes in the ground, smoke which was making them all cough.

"Is this place safe?" Asked Galeoto.

"Safe.....Of course it's not safe." Said Juliana.

Smoke everywhere, the last fifty yards was done blind; with just the voice of Emshara directing them via messages in Niccolò's mind.

"Stop on the edge of the valley." Said Niccolò. "We'll not be walking to our destination."

It took some organisation to get the blue orbs in the right orders on the ground. Emshara was likening it to a door key, which could let them in and then let them out again. Niccolò read two lines from the scroll with a face on it, even though he didn't understand them.

"Now.....Now.....It will happen soon." Said Niccolò. "Don't be nervous.....We are moving into the darkness."

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Moving into the darkness should have made everyone think of who had lamps, or who could produce magical light. Sadly it didn't and they arrived in total darkness, seemingly wondering what to do. Simon Atherton at least had the sense to ask the right question of the right person.

"Can you give us a little light, Vittoria?" He asked.

"Yes, of course."

Vittoria made a hand gesture and uttered the two lines of a cantrip Simon was beginning to recognise. Not that the very basic spell worked for him, he'd tried one particularly dark night in Florence. A light orb appeared in Vittoria's left hand, which she sent up the ceiling in some way. What it illuminated wasn't exactly encouraging.

"Oh, great.....Another grubby cave." Said Patsy. "If I had a gold piece for every filthy cave we've been in.....I'd be wealthy by now."

"Exploring them does seem a regular thing." Said Giovanni. "This one is quite small, so I'm guessing we're on the way to somewhere else."

Simon was no expert on volcanos, but Brother Alberti had talked about Vesuvius during their regular information update sessions. Still not an expert, but Simon had heard about magma chambers, fumaroles and volcanic lava. Thanks to Alberti he was sure they were in an old lava tube, where red hot lava ran like water. If Vesuvius picked that moment to erupt, they'd all be in trouble. Karkengara might have been useful, but he'd refused to be one of their team.

"This is a lava tube, Niccolò." Said Simon. "I think we should quickly be on our way somewhere else."

"Yes, yes.....I agree." Said Niccolò. "If Vittoria will give me more light, I'll be able to read the crucial scroll Emshara gave us."

"More light you shall have." Said Vittoria.

Simon watched as Niccolò hunched over a scroll, with a light orb hovering over his head. Niccolò refused to be hurried, but kept saying 'yes' quite a lot as he read. Simon chose to think of that as encouraging, but not everyone did.

"How's it coming along, Niccolò?" Asked Giovanni.

"Shush."

No one shushed Giovanni unless they wanted to feel his wrath, but Niccolò got away with it; Giovanni left him in peace. There was something about Niccolò, no one ever tried to give him grief, except maybe Karkengara; but who dares to talk back to a deity who looks like a dragon.

"Yes, I understand now." Said Niccolò. "We're just in a kind of entrance lobby."

"What do we do now ?" Asked Simon.

"I have two paragraphs to read from a very ancient scroll." Said Niccolò. "If I get it right, we'll be on our way to somewhere much more pleasant."

"Please get it right." Said Juliana.

"Believe me, I will do my best." Said Niccolò.

Simon was getting used to words spoken in old dark magic languages, but some of the others looked a bit nervous. An incantation in one of the first languages ever used, one of the languages of ancient Nineveh. Niccolò stopped after speaking, as if waiting for something dramatic to happen, maybe something dangerous too.

"I can feel it.....Here we go." Said Vittoria.

The cave was gone in a heartbeat and they were all stood in front of a temple on the side of Vesuvius; a much older Vesuvius. The sky was clear and the temple constructed of red rocks, could have been built the week before.

"I think we've moved through timelines again." Said Simon.

"Only for a while.....With luck we'll soon be home." Said Niccolò.

Home, it had taken Simon a while to think of Florence at the time of the Medici as home, but now he did. It was a home he loved; it was their home; him and Patsy.

"Crap, someone got angry with the crooks.....There was no real malice in them." Said Vittoria.

Torn apart by the time lines, or ripped apart by something dark and nasty ? There had to be at least twenty of the crooks looking for a dodgy payment; and all of them were dead.

"We've no way of know what happened to them." Said Simon. "If we did there's nothing we can do about it.....Let's get inside this temple."

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