

## Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 8 – Machiavelli

**“Simon had never seen Niccolò Machiavelli in the flesh and there had been no cameras in his day. There was one particular painting that seemed to be the default image of the man in front of him. That painting had always seemed sinister to Simon, as though the artist had an agenda. A lot of people had been jealous of Niccolò during his lifetime, has was a very clever man. Perhaps the artist had been jealous of his intellect.” – Chapter 3 Festina Lente**

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Simply burying Lucia's body in a few feet of loose sand, didn't feel right; even if it was how she'd instructed them to deal with her remains. Simon felt that wouldn't show proper respect for the witch who'd brought them to the right place and understood what needed to be done with the scrolls. Without Lucia of Malta his quest would have failed. He was determined to bury her deep, a proper burial guaranteed to keep the night scavenger off her remains. Borren's battered and crushed body was left lying at her feet, like some kind of guard dog.

“Not what she asked for, but this is better.” Said Simon.

“I agree.....The local villagers will look after her grave.” Said Hassan.

As a last touch a large stone slab had been laid over the grave of Lućija, the witch from Malta. No name was carved into the stone, but those who'd been at the battle would know who was buried under the stone slab. As Hassan, Gabriel and Mia had buried Cosimo under the ground, Simon had decided not to disturb his remains. With the help of the villagers, a stone monument was placed over where Cosimo was buried. Not huge, but enough to keep the night feeders off the remains of the brave warrior. Again there was no name on the monument, just a carving of a large man wielding a sword. All who'd been there that day would remember that Cosimo Pazzi was buried there. It all took time, which gave Karkengara time to use his cool breath on those who needed healing. The healing flame of the bringer of fire had a lot of injured to heal. Once they were almost ready to head back to Italy, it was Captain Galeoto who wanted to slow down their journey to Florence; a place Simon now thought of as home.

“You're certain Brother Alberti is in favour again ?” Asked Galeoto

“Yes, the Brotherhood and the Medici are friends again.” Said Simon. “From what Alberti tells me, all past sins are forgiven.”

Confirming that there was a way of talking to Brother Alberti was a new revelation for Galeoto, but he'd handled having a dragon on the Mermaid without getting disturbed by it. A few of the crew still looked at Karkengara as though he wasn't quite real, but they'd get used to him.

“As it now seems safe to do so, I'd like to trade on the way home.” Said Galeoto. “It was how the Mermaid earned me enough to pay the crew and mooring fees. We'd pick goods up from just about every port along the coast of Italy and drop it off where it to needed to go. Time consuming, but I think it's time that we started putting some gold into the purse.”

“And, I remember you picked up a lot of good information delivering cheap ale.” Said Simon.

“We did, everyone wanted to tell Galeoto their woes.” Said Galeoto. “I often felt like a travelling doctor, rather than captain of the Mermaid. Who was divorcing who, which children were not

related to the man they called father.....I used to hear it all. One trip along the west coast of Italy and we'll know every piece of gossip worth hearing."

"Yes, I can see how that would be worth knowing." Said Simon. "And the gold would be useful too of course."

"So, you don't mind the delay in getting to Florence ?" Asked Galeoto.

"No, I think that just this once; we can afford to take the long way home." Said Simon.

"I don't want to upset Machiavelli by getting you there late." Said Galeoto.

It was one of those moments that was going to require a lot of explanation as the Mermaid headed for home. Galeoto wasn't stupid though, he was definitely brighter than the average captain working out of Livorno.

"I'm sure you know what year it is ?" Asked Simon.

"If course I do, it's fifteen seventy one.....Maybe two." Said Galeoto. "We've been on this trip for a while now, but definitely one of those years."

Simon had mentioned talking to Machiavelli in his garden in Florence, but he'd left out one key piece of information. That was when Galeoto probably still accepted Simon for a sane individual, not prone to whimsy, or mental aberrations. That might all be about to change.

"My dear friends Galeoto." Said Simon. "Niccolò Machiavelli will not complain about us being late. He died sometime in June fifteen hundred and twenty seven."

Captain Galeoto didn't look shocked, he was actually grinning at him.

"Ahhhh, we're doing it again aren't we ?" Asked Galeoto. "We're off to somewhere weird strange and probably dangerous."

"Actually we'll be going to Machiavelli's garden in Florence." Said Simon. "As to the weird and dangerous.....You never know old friend; you never know."

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It was a little over five years from leaving the Ivory Coast, to the Mermaid approaching the Italian port of Livorno. They'd traded everywhere that had goods to carry, making no less than seven trips from Naples to Palermo in Sicily. Everyone seemed to enjoy the life, including Juliana. After being pursued for some time by Hassan, she'd allowed herself to be caught. No talk of marriage or children, not yet anyway. Juliana was happy to drift through their relationship, much in the way the Mermaid seemed to drift through the warm water of the Mediterranean Sea. Hassan was a different kind of lover to Simon, he was much more attentive.

"Livorno.....In all sorts of ways, the Mermaid is coming home." Said Galeoto.

They'd all been picking up gossip on the way up from the toe of Italy. Many of the city guard of Florence had died by their hands. No one wanted to upset the Brotherhood though and five years was a long time. According to the gossip no one would be waiting for them at Livorno. As Giovanni pointed out several times, death was an occupational hazard for the city guard. Definitely not something to hold a grudge about, at least not for a little over five years. It was still a relief to see an empty quay with no city guard sharpening their swords.

"I've never heard you mention anyone, Galeoto." Said Juliana. "Is there a wife waiting for you, maybe a few children ?"

"No, not with the kind of life I live." Said Galeoto. "There are ladies I know in several ports we visited. I'm sure you understand."

Of course she did, it partly explained why the captain of the Mermaid had been so keen to visit several ports on the toe of Italy; so often. She'd never really looked at Galeoto that way, but for a woman of a certain age, he'd be quite attractive.

“You devil, a wife in every port.” Said Juliana, while chuckling.

“Not every port, but I am working on that.” Said Galeoto.

They were stood by the wheelhouse, watching Livorno become clearer as the Mermaid got closer to the quayside. Juliana hadn’t felt that homesick, but once they stepped onto the quay, she’d only be a two day fast horse ride from Florence; her home for most of her life. It was a warm sunny day and Juliana felt happier than she had for a while. Travelling around the globe was fun, but sometimes.....There was nothing quite like going home.

“Are you coming to Florence with us, Captain ?” Asked Juliana.

“No.....The Mermaid has been busy.” Said Galeoto. “That means a lot of minor repairs. We’ll also need to resupply for the next place Simon wants to visit. I’ll remain with my ship and keep an eye on things.”

“Can I help ? I really don’t like the idea of visiting Cosimo’s estate.” Said Juliana. “Still.....They have to know what happened to him.”

“He died in battle, Juliana.” Said Galeoto. “No old soldier wants to go any other way. His family will appreciate you being there with Simon and the others.”

Family ! Juliana had forgotten that Cosimo had people; quite a few people from memory. It wasn’t going to be a pleasant time at Cosimo’s villa, but Galeoto was right; his people had to know he’d been loved and respected.

The Mermaid took a few minutes to tie up at the quayside; there was a bit of a strange current.

Once the ship was secured, Juliana thought she’d run off the vessel; maybe even kiss the ground of Livorno. Instead she felt a little sad, as though she was leaving a kind of home away from home.

“Be gone with you, Juliana.” Said Galeoto. “I promise to keep the Mermaid safe and sound until you return.”

Juliana hugged the captain of the Mermaid. Then she was off, down to her cabin to retrieve her bags. Her packing had been done two days before, when they’d sailed past a lighthouse to the south of Livorno. She shared a cabin with Hassan, and a bed. He’d already gone though, his bags weren’t there. Juliana touched the wooden panelling next to the door.

“I love you old ship.....Still be here when I return.” She muttered.

The quayside was empty, apart from half a dozen of the crew. It seemed everyone had gone to the stables to either buy a horse, or rent one for a while. Juliana found them at the stables, politely haggling over the price for the best horses in the place. They were going to clear the place out of available horses, which gave them a little edge on prices. Mia’s was the first voice Juliana heard, of course it was; and the red haired fury was yelling at some poor soul.

“How much for the grey ? You must be joking.” Yelled Mia.

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Giovanni hadn’t enjoyed being asked so many times, how Cosimo had met his end. They’d all been asked, as if Cosimo’s household wanted to compare notes. One of Cosimo’s brothers had talked about going to the Ivory Coast, to pay his respects at the monument to Cosimo Pazzi. Simon hadn’t tried to dissuade such an expedition, but he hadn’t exactly encouraged it either. It had been a relief to get away from the Cosimo estate and back on the road to Florence.

“I know they’re suffering, but that was hard work.” Said Patsy.

“I’m not trying to be cruel.” Said Mia. “But the bereaved have the ability to drain all the air out of the room.”

“True.....Very True.” Said Giovanni.

Giovanni was not only enjoying the road on a warm sunny morning, he was also enjoying being on horseback again. Getting horses onto the Mermaid was a pretty hard task; and they needed a staggering amount of feed. For nearly all the time they'd been away from Italy, they'd travelled on foot.

"We're almost home.....I can see them; the city gates at Scandicci." Shouted Simon.

Simon had bought the grey from the stables in Livorno. A beautiful thoroughbred, but skittish as hell. Every time Simon shouted, Giovanni expected the horse to buck and send him flying. There they were though, the ancient city gates of Scandicci. Just a few more miles and they'd be at Simon's house; with proper food and decent beds. Decent wine too, unless the city guard had made off with it.

"Yell again and that grey might turf you off his back." Said Mia.

"I think I'm just getting to know him." Said Simon.

Like a whirlwind they rode through the streets of Florence; as if telling the locals that they were back. At one crossroads the grey snorted at several members of the clergy in their robes. It was enough to make them scatter in all directions. Not done deliberately, but Giovanni doubted if any vampire didn't like seeing the clergy look uncomfortable.

"Come on girl.....Nor far to go." Juliana muttered at her horse.

Two more long straight roads and then right at the State Archive, a building Giovanni rarely visited, but Niña had loved to visit. He often wondered how their strange street urchin was getting on in London. She'd thrive of course, she was a vampire now. He wasn't fully aware of how Niña had moved through time, but she was sort who always landed on her feet and running. After all, she had survived a particularly virulent dose of the Flux. It was Patsy who first brought her horse to a standstill, about thirty or forty feet from Simon's house. Everyone else stopped too.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I'm so pleased to see our home is still there." Said Patsy.

"The windows are still clean and shiny." Said Giovanni.

"Brother Alberti will have made sure the servants were paid." Said Simon. "With luck, the house and garden will look as clean and well cared for as it did when we left."

"They'll have forgotten what we look like by now." Said Giovanni.

The maid who answered the door looked much older of course, but she recognised Simon as the master of the house. There was just about enough room in the stables for their horses, who seemed happy with their new accommodation, even the skittish grey. Juliana and Hassan only stayed long enough for a drink, before going to Juliana's house.

"I have to make sure my home is still there." Said Juliana. "We'll be back later though.....Cook enough dinner for us."

"Cook lots, I could eat a horse." Said Hassan.

"Any problems.....Come and get us." Said Simon.

"Oh, I will; I definitely will." Said Juliana.

Hassan went with her, a new man to be part of her life now and introduced to her large and extended family. Juliana Colombo seemed to be related to half the nobility of Florence. How would they react to her returning with a live-in boyfriend? Giovanni didn't envy her the tense conversations she was certain to have with her relatives.

Quite a large group ended up sat around the dining room table. The two surviving pirates from Crete had remained on the Mermaid to help with repairs. Galeoto had said any busy ship needs repairs. Gabriel had been left with Cosimo's people, with a promise to come to Simon's house in a couple of days. They were still a large group, sat around the table, enjoying a superb meal. Simon didn't like

having too many servants, but those he did have were paid well. Some, like the gardeners, lived away from the house. Their special homecoming dinner had been cooked by the grandmother of one of the permanent maids and it tasted like a little bit of heaven come to earth.

"Oh, ambrosia.....Food of the Gods." Said Giovanni. "This is the best meal I've had in.....Has to be at least seven years."

"I make it closer to eight years." Said Patsy.

Only chicken cooked up with a few herbs and served with fresh vegetables, but compared to some of the meals they'd forced down in strange grubby eating places, it really was superb. The grandmother came in to receive their thanks for a fine meal. Then she took herself off home. As it was dark out, Simon went with her and returned about half an hour later.

"To business." Said Simon.

Simon had the leather bag; the one Patsy had been carrying around as though it held the most precious things in the world. For all Giovanni knew, the contents might well point them at the solution to the ultimate question.

"Some of you have seen the scrolls, but not the blade and ring of the King." Said Simon.

Giovanni had seen the contents of the bag before and knew that some of the scrolls were just very old parchment, while some were truly priceless. Simon referred to one scroll in particular, before placing the tip of the black obsidian blade through the obsidian ring.

"There.....And Mia has been looking after the third item." Said Simon.

Simon put his hand out, palm upwards and Mia looked awkward.

"Thank you for keeping it safe, but now is the time to let it go." Said Simon. "The medallion is needed if we're going to move on with the quest."

The medallion of Borren, the insignia of evil. Giovanni had heard of it, but had never actually seen it. For some reason he'd assumed it had been dropped into the ocean on the way back from the Ivory Coast. Mia was obviously reluctant to give it up.

"Now, Mia.....Give me the medallion of Borren." Said Simon.

He had his hand out, as if he was quite prepared to wait all day. Besides fancy clothes and bright red hair, Mia Cassar also had a thing about wearing thin leather gloves. She said they improved her grip on a sword, which Giovanni could relate to.

"I'd quite forgotten I had the damned thing." Said Mia.

Mia pulled off her left glove and let the medallion fall onto the table. She then picked it up and dropped it into Simon's waiting palm. There was something about the medallion; it seemed surrounded by a kind of darkness. Giovanni wondered if Borren had created the medallion, or maybe it had created him.

"Thank you Mia." Said Simon. "Now.....If I read the scroll correctly."

Simon pushed the medallion against the point of the blade of the King.

"Crap.....I tried to think what might happen." Said Hassan. "I'd never have imagined that."

Blade, ring and medallion seemed to melt into one another, yet there was no heat. There on the table was an obsidian sphere, with the medallion inside it. A medallion of evil inside an orb of black volcanic glass. Giovanni felt something, which he knew wasn't his imagination.

"I'm not imagining it.....The sphere is pulsating." Said Giovanni.

"No, you're not imagining it." Said Karkengara.

Everyone there knew Karkengara, they'd fought beside him in West Africa. The maid who'd served the meal had gone to her room, so the bringer of fire must have assumed he could show himself. It was still a shock after a rather boozy meal with friends.

“Wow, you made me jump, Karkengara.” Said Patsy. “That said, it’s nice to see you.”

“Thank you, Patsy.” Said the bringer of fire.

“Tell them, I’d like to know I’m not wrong.” Said Simon. “How will the orb of the King help me in my quest?”

Karkengara made a grumpy snuffling sound, as if such things were beneath a deity of his stature. He still told them though, even if it was just the key and essential information.

“The orb can bring the ghost of Niccolò Machiavelli into the world of the living.” Said Karkengara.

“You’ll also need a few of the scrolls to accomplish that, but you have those. The next step in the quest is by far the most dangerous so far and only the ghost of Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli can point you in the right direction.”

More dangerous than Borren ! Giovanni was already getting a little edgy.

“Where do I call on the shade of Machiavelli?” Asked Simon.

“In his garden of course.....The same place as last time.” Said Karkengara.

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Patsy knew it had to look a bit cruel to the others, but Lucia needed replacing. There had been a long session with Brother Alberti at around two in the morning and as was becoming the new normal; only Simon and her were there. No forward hold of the Mermaid, they used the shed at the bottom of the garden where the gardeners stored their tools. Alberti had fussed about them seeing Niccolò Machiavelli, he’d even instructed Simon to take lots of notes on their conversation. Alberti viewed Machiavelli as one of the great minds of his day, an historian without equal. Nothing about Lucia though, apart from her being dead and buried. Alberti seemed amused that Borren had been buried at her feet, like a guard dog. The next day; it had been Karkengara who’d brought up the wisdom of obtaining the services of someone skilled in the dark arts. Again, the conversation rarely included anyone other than Simon and her, with Giovanni making the occasional comment.

“Doesn’t have to be a witch of course.” Said Karkengara. “Any skilled user of magic will do, but I’d avoid hiring anyone too infamous. It’s your choice, Simon.....Personally I’d go for another woman, another expert witch. Think of all the times Lucia helped you in ways you hadn’t even imagined.”

“That’s true, Simon.” Said Giovanni. “We wouldn’t have the Orb of the King if Lucia had shown us where to go.”

“Her healing skills saved a lot of lives.” Added Patsy.

“I tend to agree on a witch being an essential part of the group.” Said Simon. “There is someone, a relative of Juliana’s. One of those aunts three times removed type of things. She has helped us once or twice and seemed to enjoy the risk to life and limb. I’ll get Juliana to arrange a meeting.”

Gabriel had returned to the fold late and worried they might have left without him. It was nice to have him back, he was their expert on the city guard; he’d been one of them for several years. He seemed surprised that they were still all at Simon’s house and arranging to see another potential member of the group. He nodded his agreement when told they were looking for a witch to replace Lucia.

“Yes, we need a witch.” Said Gabriel. “Technically illegal of course, but the city guard have a witch or two on their payroll.”

Gabriel knew a witch he was happy to recommend and Juliana wasn’t thrilled with having an aunt in their group, even if she was an aunt several times removed. Too much opportunity for private matters to get around the entire family. Another day went by until Patsy was with Simon outside a house in the market district of Florence. It seemed the woman they’d come to see was descended from a long line of dealers in fine wines. Gabriel was with them of course, he knew Vittoria Bianchi

and several members of her family. Giovanni was with them and that was it. It seemed that many of their ever growing group still felt awkward about replacing Lucia, even if they accepted it needed doing. Patsy understood, many of her mum's relatives were slightly crazy too.

"You should go to the door and introduce us." Simon told Gabriel.

They were expected and quickly taken through the house and into a quiet study at the back of the house. It was just after dark, the curtains closed. Patsy didn't have vampire sight, but the oil lamps gave her enough light to see by. No relatives with the woman sat on a couch, no husband, no children concerned about who'd come to see their mother. There was just them in the room and smartly dressed Vittoria Bianchi, who looked to be in her late forties.

"Please come in.....Sit, make yourselves comfortable." Said Vittoria. "The inquisition have been busy lately, so our business must be done in private. The wine is good and the figs are fresh.....Please help yourselves."

Patsy poured a glass of wine for herself and Simon. They were both getting a bit of a thing for figs and Vittoria was right, the figs in a large bowl were wonderfully fresh. The room was clean and tidy, the flowers in several vases looked to have been cut that morning. The house was large, there had to be domestic staff somewhere. Whatever her reason for wanting to join them, it was unlikely to be anything as simple as money.

"Gabriel knows you, but I don't." Said Simon. "I'd like to ask for a demonstration of your competence in the dark arts."

"The dark arts indeed; there is no light or dark, just power. How one uses that power defines what you are. May I hold your hand, Simon?" Asked Vittoria.

"Yes, if it helps." Said Simon.

Vittoria held Simon's hand, as she looked at them all, going from face to face. Patsy had the distinct feeling that the witch they might be hiring, could look into her mind; examining her most intimate memories.

"Simon Atherton, for you it is always about the blood." Said Vittoria. "Your friend Giovanni introduced you to that world, but you've taken to it with enthusiasm. Gabriel I know, so I'll leave his memories unmolested. As for Patsy Smart, she is the most interesting out of you all. Partner to one who feeds on blood, that is incredibly rare. She has also moved through the mists of time, which I've never come across before. You are a varied and unusual group of people.....I would be proud to join you."

"We need a healer with us; there is always a need for a healer." Said Simon.

"Hmmm.....Patsy would need to trust me." Said Vittoria. "There will also be a little pain."

Patsy had no idea why she was going to allow Vittoria to wound her, that was obviously where she was heading. Gabriel knew her and vampires healed fast anyway. The conclusion was that Patsy was going to be cut, if she agreed to trusting the witch.

"Fine, I will trust you." Said Patsy.

A small razor sharp blade, Patsy didn't see where the witch had been hiding it. The pain was intense, but Patsy refused to yell. There was blood, dripping over the beautiful carpet.

"You're a tough girl." Said Vittoria Bianchi.

"I have my moments." Said Patsy.

The witch held her hand over the wound and said just two words. Lucia had been good at healing, but Vittoria seemed better. It wasn't just that the bleeding stopped; her hand looked as good as new, the wicked looking cut was gone.

"Well, I'm impressed." Said Giovanni.

“So am I.” Said Simon. “I’d like you to join us on an expedition to little visited parts of the world. You’re likely to be away from home for several years.....And if that wasn’t enough to put you off, there will be extreme danger.”

“Vittoria knows about Lucia dying of a curse.” Said Gabriel.

“For a witch; Curses come with the territory, I understand that.” Said the Witch. “As far as I’m aware, there are no curses placed upon me.”

“Simon never gets round to the big question.” Said Patsy. “I trust you and like you.....I’m sure the others do too. Will you join us on our little adventure ?”

“No one has mentioned what I’d be paid.” Said Vittoria.

So busy with what they wanted, they’d forgotten what their new group member was hoping to get out of it. There was no haggling; Simon offered her the same pay as Lucia was receiving. It was a good sum, all payable in gold. Vittoria would have been stupid to refuse and Patsy didn’t think their new witch was stupid. No one asked her why she wanted to leave her nice home and travel into danger, such a question would have seemed inappropriate.

“I accept your offer, Simon Atherton.” Said Vittoria. “I just need a day or two to get my affairs in order.”

“Not a problem, but we are hoping to see Niccolò Machiavelli tomorrow.” Said Simon. “Finding a magic user with your powers took precedence, but we can talk to him now.”

“I always wanted to meet him, but hasn’t he been dead for many years ?” Asked Vittoria.

“Death doesn’t seem to hinder him that much.” Said Giovanni.

“Will you come with us ?” Asked Patsy. “It shouldn’t take up your whole day.”

“I’d be delighted to go with you.” Said Vittoria.

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Niccolò Machiavelli had been dead for some time; his house had become a sort of shrine to many and a museum to others. The great man must have had people, everyone has people. If any of them thought they’d inherit the grand house in Florence, they were disappointed. The rulers of the city took over ownership of the property. That meant the house and garden were properly cleaned and maintained. It also meant that those in the Brotherhood were allowed access to the house and the works of Machiavelli on the bookshelves. As Simon was still a senior member of the Brotherhood, he was allowed to enter the house by the domestic staff who effectively ran the place. It was a nice sunny Florentine morning, which was unexpected. Every other time Simon had looked out into the garden, it had been raining.

“Do you need my help to find a particular text ?” Asked a man in a kind of uniform.

“No, I’m very familiar with the house.” Said Simon.

Being a recognised member of the Brotherhood could be a problem if they were out of favour with those who ruled the city. Brother Alberti was in favour again. The man bowed slightly and left the room. They had complete privacy for whatever might happen.

“The garden, Karkengara said to talk to the great man in the garden.” Said Simon. “Machiavelli told me it’s his favourite place on a warm sunny day.”

“How will you summon him ?” Asked Vittoria.

“No magic required, I’ll simply hold the Orb of the King in my hand.” Said Simon. “It will make him curious and he’ll have a need to satisfy that curiosity.”

“Like a large curious cat.” Said Giovanni.

“Indeed, like a very clever and curious cat.” Said Simon.

Simon went in front, with the others following. The garden was beautiful, but it lacked that personal attention Machiavelli used to lavish on it. Simon held up the Orb and simply asked Niccolò Machiavelli to appear.

“Niccolò old friend.....I brought something that I know will intrigue you.” Said Simon.

Old friend was probably overdoing it a bit, but he had shared a lot of anecdotes with the great man. Simon had also offered to turn him into a vampire, but Niccolò had turned down the offer.

“I am what I am, Simon.” Niccolò had said. “For better or worse, I will leave the stage when my time comes.”

Niccolò had left the stage at fifty eight, a victim of some kind of obscure stomach disease. Simon still thought of that as being a pointless tragedy. That mind and the longevity of a vampire.....He really might have ended up ruling the world.

“I can feel you close by.....I am carrying the Orb of the King.” Said Simon.

There was a climbing vine and it looked as if the vine had given birth to Niccolò, created him in some way. The human dressed in robes was still fairly nebulous, but still being pretty active for a man who'd been dead for quite some time. Niccolò Machiavelli smiled and the slightly sinister look to his face was gone.

“My old friend Simon Atherton.” Said Niccolò. “The Orb you hold is totally evil, but I'll forgive you for bringing it into my home, or rather what was my home.”

“I'm informed that you can use the Orb to tell me where to go next on my quest.” Said Simon. “I'm sure you must remember my quest ?”

“Festina Lente; Make Haste Slowly.....I remember you promising to tell me the real meaning of that ludicrous phase.” Said Niccolò.

Simon remembered no such promise, but he might have given it after too much wine at the end of a busy day.

“I will, you have my word.” Said Simon.

“I'll remind him if he forgets.” Said Patsy.

“There, the love of a good woman.” Said Niccolò. “Worth her weight in gold, don't lose her, Simon.”

“I have no intention of losing her.” Said Simon.

No asking for the Orb, Niccolò simply put out a very nebulous looking hand and Simon dropped the Orb into it. It seemed fairly miraculous that the Orb didn't fall through it, landing on the ground below. There it sat, almost hanging in thin air.

“This won't take a moment. Who sent you to me with this evil Orb ?” Asked Machiavelli.

“A witch.....Lucia of Malta.” Said Simon.

“Her real name was Lučija of Malta.” Said Giovanni. “She died from a curse, so we've hired Vittoria to take her place.”

“HMMMMMM.” Muttered Niccolò.

After saying it wouldn't take a moment, it took nearly two hours before Machiavelli took his eyes off the Orb. He smiled at Vittoria and handed the Orb to her.

“Look after this, one day you will need it.” Said Niccolò.

“What did you see in the Orb ?” Asked Simon.

“We've come a long way to see you.” Added Patsy.

“Indoors, back into my study.....The map is there.” Said Machiavelli.

The map on the wall looked decorative rather than useful, but it definitely wasn't a map of somewhere on the lesser travelled roads in faraway places. Machiavelli was pointing a thin bony finger at somewhere called simply the farm.

“Here, not far from Florence, though it may not be as safe as you think.” Said Machiavelli. “I had a farm estate once; it may well still be owned in my name. Sant'Andrea in Percussina, near San Casciano in Val di Pesa. I went there to write in peace and the quiet nearly drove me insane. I am to go with you.....We need to explore the catacombs below the villa.”

“You’re going with us ?” Asked Giovanni.

“Yes, if you’ll have me ?”

“We will definitely have you old friend.” Said Simon.

No sailing to wild places, at least not this time. Val di Pesa was only about fifteen kilometres away from Florence.

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