

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 10 – The Catacombs

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Simon was beginning to realise that if someone says there are catacombs deep underground; it’s important to find out exactly how deep. Talk of the lowest of the catacombs being as deep as hell itself, were wonderfully poetic; but not very useful. No one had any idea how much to bring in the way of supplies. As for clambering to the surface every evening for clean clothes and supplies.....That was a complete non-starter. By its very depth, the lowest of the catacombs was unreachable and unexplorable. Or rather it would have been, if it wasn’t for a very strange and unique pairing.

“If you need anything not on this morning’s list ?” Asked Niccolò Machiavelli. “Let me know now and I can get it brought to you before bedtime.”

“Don’t forget to mention that I’m the one carrying everything.” Said Karkengara.

“How could we forget ? You remind us so often.” Said Machiavelli.

They were actually getting on well, though no one would suggest they were inseparable friends. Machiavelli could instantly go where he chose in the underground chambers, but he couldn’t carry anything worth carrying. Karkengara could carry the supplies needed underground, but he needed Machiavelli to give him help with directions while underground.

“We should break through into the deepest level tomorrow.” Said Simon. “We’ll need to keep Karkengara with us all day.....I dread to think what we might find in that part of the catacombs.”

“He’s yours for the day.” Said Machiavelli.

There were people on the surface buying supplies and loading up Karkengara and although Simon had a few misgivings at the beginning, things were going like a well-oiled machine. No one seemed likely to go hungry, thirsty or run out clean clothing. Weapons they’d taken with them, lots of sharp blades, heavy clubs and the odd bow or two. No firearms of course, Brother Alberti thought that importing modern weapons into the age of the Medici, might cause a few temporal issues. Being honest, Simon preferred blades to guns.

“That’s all I am now.....A beast of burden.” Said Karkengara.

“Think of the battle, there’s bound to be a battle.” Said Patsy. “I know how much you love a good battle.”

“Yes, there is that I suppose.” Said the bringer of fire.

“We’ve yet to see the mass of hostile creatures everyone expected.” Said Giovanni.

Simon had expected more and more enemies with each level of the catacombs. It seemed to be a tradition of exploring deep dark places. The lower you went, the more enemies waiting to kill you. There had been a few, all easily dealt with. Some were fairly solid and carried wicked looking blades.

Others were creatures of mist and vapours, as Machiavelli called them. All of them were quickly incinerated, or boiled away by the hot breath of Karkengara.

"They're down there, mostly beings of mist and vapours." Said Machiavelli. "I've been down there a few times, trying my best to remain just a phantom among them. They've been sealed up for a very long time; in chambers caught between the outside world and the Underworld."

Simon was getting used to Machiavelli only recalling certain facts from his various trips around the catacombs. It really did seem to be a memory issue, rather than being awkward. That didn't stop Giovanni glaring at their ghostly historian.

"How many are down there?" Asked Giovanni. "A rough idea will be fine."

"Though accuracy would be better." Said Patsy.

The shade of Niccolò Machiavelli gave them the look of a man who'd been respected while alive and wanted to be similarly respected in death. Simon liked him, but he did seem to drift quite a lot and treat accuracy as optional.

"Difficult to be precise, they are spread out through many chambers." Said Niccolò. "I'd say many hundreds of them are down there; many hundreds. I think that without Karkengara, it would be a battle you couldn't win. Vittoria is essential too, for her magical ability."

"I'll be there.....No intention of missing the great battle." Said Vittoria.

Simon would have liked Karkengara to take all the non-magic users to the surface, but that would leave them with a tiny army. Everyone had taken the oath to follow him. As he looked around and thought of those busy on the surface, he realised that not everyone was guaranteed to survive the coming battle. Everyone would be there though, everyone would fight; it was the way they were.

"I'll talk to Brother Alberti tonight." Said Simon. "He may have ideas on evening up the odds a little."

"I'd like them evened up a lot." Added Vittoria.

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Patsy had been there every time Simon spoke to Brother Alberti. It had become a habit when talking to Alberti via his power nexus, from a very long way away. She was pleased that she was still there, still invited to every meeting. Not just to watch either, her thoughts and ideas were listened too and often acted on. The last talk to Alberti before what was expected to be a huge and important battle. Just the three of them would decide on many things and that gave Patsy a definite buzz. They'd chosen an old grain store at the farm to talk to Alberti in private. It was hoped that they'd see and hear him with some clarity; he was just a few kilometres away in Florence. Alberti could be in good moods, or sulky, but rarely in an out and out bad mood. The smiling nebulous figure sat behind his equally nebulous desk, seemed in a good mood.

"Ahhhh, yes.....Thinning out the enemy a little." Said Alberti.

"We are going to be heavily outnumbered." Said Simon.

"Even with Karkengara's famous dragon fire.....We'll be struggling." Said Patsy.

Alberti sometimes scribbled notes during their meetings. This time he was scribbling a lot. He pursed his lips, as if considering something they wouldn't like.

"Basically there are two workable options." Said Alberti. "Tell me if you disagree of course. I can have brotherhood fighters there by tomorrow, a lot of brotherhood fighters. I'm sure Karkengara can take them to where the fighting will take place."

"I like the sound of that option." Said Patsy.

"It has a simplicity to it and our simple plans tend to work." Said Simon.

"It doesn't have to be that simple." Said Alberti. "First though, tell me if having his farm destroyed would seriously upset Niccolò Machiavelli?"

They were both looking at her, as if being a woman would give her a little more empathy than they possessed. Part of her was angry, but part of her was a little pleased. For whatever reason, she could feel her face blushing.

"Why are you both looking at me ?" Asked Patsy.

"Out of all of us, I'd say you've spoken to Niccolò the most." Said Simon.

"Nonsense." Said Patsy.

"Not so, he actually seeks you out most days." Said Alberti. "I've been watching, once there might be a need to do something drastic to his farm."

"Niccolò claims to hate the darkness he feels in the farm." Said Patsy. "In truth the farm was his life for many years. It defines him and destroying it might destroy Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli."

"So, there will be no destroying of the farm." Said Alberti. "The Brotherhood fighters will be with you in the morning. They will have their own supplies.....Just give them their orders and they're a fairly self-contained fighting unit."

Patsy had become fond of Niccolò in the way she'd once become inseparable from a middle aged uncle. She'd been quite young and unlike Niccolò, her uncle was alive then. Her curiosity was combining with her genuine affection for the dead politician. She had to ask the question.

"Out of idle curiosity, what was the destruction option ?" She asked.

"Only to be implemented if we looked to be losing the battle." Said Alberti. "We'd pull everyone on our side out and then let Vittoria do her worst. She could leave behind a smouldering hole in the ground where the farm once stood. It would destroy the catacombs too of course."

The way he said it, Patsy was becoming quite insightful about those around her. Alberti might still consider the hole in the ground option, if it looked like a good way to win the fight.

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It felt wonderful, but a bit strange to actually have a decent sized fighting force willing to obey their orders. Alberti had sent them three hundred of his best, most of them had been trained by the now deceased Cosimo Pazzi. They arrived on horseback, arriving an hour before Giovanni had normally climbed out of bed for the day. They all knew Hassan and Gabriel and by the time breakfast was ready, they already seemed like regulars in Simon's army of strange and wonderful misfits. Used to obeying Brother Alberti's orders without question, Giovanni was certain they were damn good fighters. They even knew Karkengara, which saved a lot of fuss and explanation.

"Just clamber onto me and hold tight." Was Karkengara's standard instruction. "I'll get you safely where you need to go."

The deity who looked like a dragon was large, tough and very strong. It didn't surprised Giovanni that over fifty Brotherhood fighters could clamber onto his back at the same time. A few of the newly arrived warriors seemed a little nervous of the bringer of fire. When they saw Juliana treating him as an old and trusted friend, they quickly climbed onto him and held on tight.

"No fur.....Just grab my skin." Said Karkengara. "Don't worry, you won't hurt me."

The catacomb chambers above the lowest level, had always felt large and open. Now they actually seemed a little tight for space. Every set of stairs going any further down, had been effectively sealed. The only way to descend to the underworld was by digging, or explosives. Actually the third way was sort of like explosives and called Vittoria Bianchi. To Giovanni it felt as though they were about to blast their way into another world, which excited him. Another world tinged with darkness and evil just made it better. He was a vampire after all; one of Satan's favourite children.

"You know what needs to be done, Vittoria." Said Simon. "We'll take our lead from you."

"Just.....When I begin, don't look directly at the bright lights." Shouted Vittoria.

The way she said it, the tone and feeling of darkness; would have spooked lesser fighters than the Brotherhood warriors. Giovanni knew he preferred someone like Vittoria using magic to bend worlds to her will, rather than someone warmer and more touchy-feely. He actually cheered when Vittoria's fingers began to glow and crackle with raw power.

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Simon knew the name ancient Egyptian Gods had given the Underworld, or at least part of the Underworld. It had been named Duat and Laura had been there a few times, she'd even taken Clara with her. Reality changed in Duat, it became more flexible. Dead cities came to life again, but sadly.....Cities of the living had been known to die there. Karkengara didn't like to discuss it, but Simon knew his temple was in an area of Duat. Worshippers at his temple were rare and it had become a dark and lonely place. Laura was the expert on Duat, though Simon hadn't seen that coming. Relatively new to being a vampire, it was Laura who knew many of the old languages and actually spoke to the Ancient Gods. It would have been nice to have Laura with them, but they had to make do with the resources they had.

"This is one of those times." Said Giovanni. "I wish we had Laura and Clara with us.....Maybe Mabina too if she's not in a feral mood."

"I know.....I was thinking the same." Said Simon. "Not all problems are fixed by throwing lots of vampires at them. We have more than enough good fighters to win the battle."

"Hmmmmmm, but now I'm thinking about what lots of vampires could do." Said Giovanni, with a huge grin.

Karkengara arrived with definitely the last few; his words. He almost seemed to shake them off his back, the way a dog dries itself after a bath. Vittoria's fingers were still crackling with dark energy. When Simon heard her mention Duat as she pointed her hand at one set of sealed off stairs; he knew they were going to win the battle. Sadly it was unlikely that no one on their side would die, but there was a wonderful phrase to deal with that; shit happens.

"Now.....Now.....Now it begins." Yelled Vittoria.

She screeched the next three lines of some kind of invocation and again there was the word Duat in there. Her crackling fingers became bright lights. Which Simon avoided looking at; even seven hundred and fifty year old vampires needed to obey sensible instructions. Somewhere below their feet, something was breaking apart, he could feel the vibrations.

"Be ready.....They'll soon be coming for us." Shouted Karkengara.

It wasn't the best organised battle Simon had been in, but he liked it because of that. Laura and Clara would have over organised everything if they'd been there. Mabina would have gone into Queen mode and tried to order everyone about. It would have been nice to have Niña with them; she was incredibly powerful, without making a thing about it. Simon liked battles which grew organically.....As long as he was on the winning side of course. Vittoria seemed to send tongues of fire down the now unsealed staircase.

"I can hear them.....The sound of many running feet." Said Mia Cassar.

Karkengara must have heard the noise from another staircase. He spun around, not easy for such a large creature. The sealed up stairs opened and strange dark things hurtled into the chamber. The bringer of fire incinerated a few, but mopping them up was left to the Brotherhood fighters. The strange dark things had two legs, two arms and a head, after that; nothing looked human. Dark skin, grey blood and a piercing scream seemed their only way to communicate. Tough fighters though, a few of the Brotherhood fighters fell to the swords they carried. The Brotherhood trained their fighters well though, the first wave of dark things died quickly and with little dignity.

"I'm going to use the main staircase to enter Duat." Said Karkengara. "Follow me, or use one of the other ways down."

That wasn't part of the plan they'd talked over many times. It was the bringer of fire being a little adaptable and organic with the plan; plus he had an interest in Duat. His temple was there; had been there for many thousands of years. Vittoria was supposed to lead the invasion of the Underworld, or at least a small part of it. She was looking ready to go, but confused.

"I'll be going with Vittoria." Yelled Simon. "Those who wish may follow us to the Underworld."

Good, Vittoria and many others were looking less confused. Simon would take them down the stairs they'd just unsealed and, hopefully, cleared of the enemy. Karkengara would be fine; he was an almost indestructible ancient deity. He definitely had Mia and a few others following him.

"To Karkengara.....To the Underworld." Mia was shouting.

"I'm with Simon and Vittoria." Shouted Giovanni.

Competitive battle leadership, it made Simon chuckle. He just needed Machiavelli with him; the ghost of the historian had become strangely popular. He couldn't fight and had the habit of vanishing when needed, but Niccolò charging down the stairs with Simon and Vittoria; just about sealed their popularity. Did any of it matter ? Not really, but Simon felt a need to not only be the ultimate leader of the group; but to be seen as the ultimate leader.

"Ohhhhh.....More of those dreadful dark things." Said Giovanni.

The stairs they were using hadn't been cleared; probably just a first wave had been cleared. Usually Simon liked using his fangs in battle; tasting the blood of an enemy. The dark things looked unappetising though, definitely an enemy to fight with his blade and strength. They hacked their way through the strange dark things. Not that the battle went totally their way, Simon had seen a few of the Brotherhood fighters reaching for battlefield dressings. A few of the Brotherhood carried lamps rather than swords. As the stairs ended, the tiled shiny walls of the stairs; became the dark obsidian floors of Duat. There was Karkengara, crushing any enemies missed by the Brotherhood.

"Now we're here, what exactly are we looking for ?" Asked Mia.

"Orbs, blue crystal orbs." Said Simon. "Find those and we can get out of this dark and dismal place."

"I quite like it here.....Once we've killed all of the local monsters." Said Giovanni.

Machiavelli seemed to live a charmed life, even for a wraith. He was hit with swords, which passed through him without causing any harm. He had lighted torches shoved into him, which did nothing to him, not even making him yell. The occasional war axe into the back of his nebulous head, didn't worry him either. Simon was beginning to see why he was so popular; who doesn't admire an indestructible hero ? There were a few among the dark and twisted things with magical powers; sparking fingers like Vittoria's. One of them touched Niccolò's head, just above his right ear. There was a flash, a few sparks and Niccolò was gone.

"Machiavelli.....Are you alright ? Answer me." Said Simon.

Not so much a panic, as hoping the ghost of Niccolò was as indestructible as he usually seemed. Simon knew roughly where the blue orbs were; and they were needed to move his quest forward. He wasn't absolutely sure of their location though. At the very least, Niccolò being totally dead, could prove to be a problem. Alberti agreed that the blue orbs needed to be activated, but only Niccolò had the skill to do it. Then there was where to go next.....Yes, Niccolò knew for certain, while everyone else was guessing.

"If he's totally, irreversibly dead ?.....I'll damn well kill him." Muttered Simon.

Niccolò Machiavelli was there again, reappearing as quickly as he'd vanished. A huge Brotherhood fighter walked right through him, without seeming to notice the dead historian. Simon ran up to

Niccolò, happy that his friend was only as dead as he had been. Being honest, Simon was relieved that that only person able to answer a lot of questions about his quest, was still around to answer them.

"Niccolò.....Are you still with us ?" Asked Simon.

"Well, I'm still dead." Said Niccolò. "For a moment there, I felt even more dead than I usually feel."

"Avoid the enemy magic users." Said Simon. "A zap from their fingers and....I thought we'd lost you."

"I will be extra careful." Said Niccolò.

Patsy had gone off hunting with Juliana and Hassan. They'd killed quite a few of the strange dark things, but best of all; they'd found a chamber with several blue orbs on the floor.

"She's found them.....Patsy has found the orbs." Someone was yelling.

"You have your orbs, Simon." Said Niccolò. "Your quest can continue."

"Where do I go next ?" Asked Simon.

The way Niccolò was looking at him, mixed with their recent conversations. It didn't take a skilled empath to guess what Niccolò wanted.

"I've got a taste for adventures, Simon Atherton." Said Niccolò. "Agree to taking me with you and I'll tell you right here, right now.....Where we go next."

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Karkengara was a little angry and usually he tried to avoid being even slightly angry. Worlds could end if he became angry, the good could be unintentionally killed and the bad could be inappropriately rewarded.

"Karkengara, talk to me. How many blue orbs are we supposed to have ?" Asked Mia.

"Five or six will do." Said Karkengara.

"Good.....We have five." Said Simon.

Karkengara made a grumpy sound, but he did slow down a little. Not everyone was with him, only those he trusted enough to take to his temple. Five of the orbs would get the job done, no matter what that fool Machiavelli might be telling them. Not that he was telling anyone anything now. An enemy magic user had hit him hard with a disruption spell and Niccolò Machiavelli appeared to have left the world of even the almost alive. After being a thorn in Karkengara's flesh recently, he now appeared to be fully and permanently dead. Not that death is ever that permanent if you have a living deity among your group.

"Do we have to watch for any enemies in your realm ?" Asked Giovanni.

"No, my realm is peaceful.....Any enemies are long dead." Said Karkengara.

No doubt that fool Machiavelli had been filling their heads with more nonsense. A clever man in his own field, but a disaster when it came to the affairs of demons and deities. Mainly.....Karkengara resented Simon listening to the words of the long dead fool.

"Please tell us what we've done wrong ?" Asked Juliana. "Does it have something to do with Niccolò Machiavelli ?"

"That one is now fully dead and can no longer annoy the living." Said Karkengara.

There was a lot of agitated chatter for a while, with them wondering how much a truly dead Machiavelli might affect Simon's quest. Actually, there might be an effect, Karkengara couldn't be totally sure; but he had a way of fixing that. They were at the edge of his temple, which was as large as some small cities. The statues which lined the streets might have looked better, if most of them hadn't been of him; even Karkengara accepted that.

"Your temple is wonderful, but we need to talk about Niccolò." Said Juliana.

Karkengara liked Juliana; she was always friendly and polite to him. If getting the dead historian back pleased her, then he was still willing to do it for her. Plus, it might save Simon a lot of time trying to work out the whats and hows of the later stages of his quest. For now, Juliana Colombo was actually crying over the dead historian.

"Here.....We need to put the orbs into the enchanted pool." Said Karkengara. "We can leave the orbs to be activated and.....Then we can discuss the mortality of Niccolò Machiavelli."

"Are you saying you can bring him back from the dead ?" Asked Mia.

"Of course I am.....I'm a deity dear Mia. Bringing back the dead is one of the things we do."

The blue crystal orbs went into the enchanted pool, though actually it was the water in the pool which carried a powerful enchantment; not the stone pool itself. Karkengara gently stirred the pool with the tip of his tale, while reciting a memorized ancient text on the using the pool. When the orbs began to hiss and give off a blue vapour, it was time to leave them for a while.

"That's it.....We leave them to cook for several hours." Said Karkengara. "Let's talk about Machiavelli now.....Simon, are you prepared to speak for him ?"

"Do you mean talk for him as a friend ?" Asked Simon.

"More like a brother, Simon. You will get the say on whether he lives or dies. The dead can hardly make that kind of decision for themselves."

Minions appeared, the women in lilac robes who looked after the day to day needs of deities. Many of them had once ruled cities and been heads of magical sanctuaries. For most it was seen as a huge honour to serve the Gods in such a way.

"I ordered food and wine.....The kind I know you like." Said Karkengara.

"Details.....I need details." Said Simon. "If I'm going to decide on the fate of Machiavelli I need more details."

There was no question of buying more time by organising refreshments, but Karkengara did need a cool and clear head. Give anyone the chance of life and they'll agree to almost anything, Karkengara had witnessed it. There needed to be a friend like Simon, someone to judge if the pros outweighed the cons.....Not an easy job when it came to deciding on life or death.

"I'm not saying a non-corporeal Machiavelli was useless, but I intend to give him a fairly normal corporeal existence." Said Karkengara. "He can help you far more if he has the simple ability to pick things up. It's a simple two way choice you have to make for him, Simon. Leave him among the dead, which might cause you problems, though I'm sure you'll solve them."

"I'm not sure about that." Said Juliana. "Every time a problem came up, Niccolò always knew a sensible solution."

"And sometimes he got the situation totally wrong." Said Giovanni.

"You can't leave him among the dead because he fucked a few things up." Said Mia.

There was an argument, which Karkengara hadn't intended. Everyone got far too heated, which would make it hard for Simon to make a well thought out decision. The second choice had to be offered though and the over emotional humans were likely to win the day; they usually did.

"The second choice is three years for Niccolò as a normal solid human." Said Karkengara. "If he dies I'll bring him back, but he gets three years and then he's gone..... Into the Underworld. He'll need to look different and change his name, but I'm sure you can help him with that."

"But....knowing the moment when the three years was up.....He'll go crazy." Said Juliana

"Not Niccolò, he's lived as a wraith for a very long time." Said Mia

"Four years.....I feel I should negotiate for him." Said Simon. "Make that four years of life as a normal human and I'll agree to it."

"Very well Simon, we have a deal.....Four years of life for Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli." Said Karkengara.

"Now, bring him back now." Said Juliana.

Poor Hassan, his relationship with Juliana was likely to end soon. As soon as Niccolò was capable of a full physical relationship, Karkengara was sure Juliana and Niccolò would become what young people annoyingly called an item.

"Fine, the orbs are still cooking." Said Karkengara. "We'll use the plinth in front of my ceremonial statue to bring Niccolò back into the world of the living."

It was his favourite statue of himself, though he'd mentioned that to very few people. Even the Greek sculptor who'd created it, was never fully aware of how much the image cut out of dark marble, had meant to Karkengara. The statue had a front clawed foot resting on a plinth. The strange and mystical things that had occurred on that plinth over the years. Now it was about to be where Machiavelli returned to the land of the living.

"Vittoria, do you feel him?" Asked the bringer of fire. "Do you feel Niccolò's presence?"

"Slightly.....I get the feeling he might drift away entirely."

"Well.....We can't have that." Said Karkengara.

There were lots of terms for bringing someone back from the dead. His personal favourite was revivification; which literally meant a return of life. The trick was to imagine the body was there, on the plinth in front of him; even if the body had been interred elsewhere and was probably just a few decaying bones by now.

"Come to us Niccolò." Said Karkengara, in a deep booming voice. "Enter the Underworld as a ghostly visitor, to leave as a living being."

"I can feel him getting closer." Said Vittoria.

"Everyone call Niccolò." Said Karkengara. "Call quietly in your mind, or yell to get his attention. Make a lot of noise if you wish.....Let him know he's wanted here."

"He is wanted here." Shouted Juliana.

Definitely a lot of love there, she might well bring the historian back on her own. As everyone spoke, or thought about Niccolò, Karkengara pointed a front claw at the plinth.

"A second chance at life is rare, Niccolò.....Don't let the call go unanswered."

"Ahhhh.....Yes, I can see him; like the outline of a wraith." Said Simon.

There had been times when Karkengara could have happily stomped Niccolò into a bloody mess, but he was likely to be useful to Simon and his quest. Karkengara placed a claw on the barely visible wraith and covered it in his cool, healing and life giving fire. There was actually an audible sigh from Machiavelli.

"This might sting a bit, Niccolò." Said the bringer of fire.

If it hurt Niccolò, there was no sign of it. One moment Machiavelli was a wraith, a barely visible ghost. The next he was a solid looking normal human, with similar clothing to Giovanni and Simon. He even had a bag over his shoulder, though there was no clue what might be in the bag. He was blinking a lot and looking around, as if he didn't quite believe he was no longer a ghost.

"Breathe deeply.....Get used to being alive again, Niccolò." Said Simon. "Karkengara has given you four years of being alive again. Four years of being a normal human."

"Do you feel any pain?" Asked Mia

"Skin.....I can feel air on my skin." Said Niccolò. "After so long being a wraith, it feels strange."

"I'm sure you'll get used to it." Said Juliana.

There was the question of course, why four years of life ? Karkengara said the only other realistic option was to be one of the strange dark creatures; wandering the Underworld for centuries. After being told that option, Machiavelli seemed very grateful for be a living human again, even if it was for just four years. As the ever sensible Patsy put it.

“None of us are guaranteed any lifespan.....Be grateful, Niccolò.”

Machiavelli seemed excited by the need to take a new name and maybe even a new profession. He was especially keen on being a living member of Simon’s team. By the time they were back at the enchanted pool, the blue crystal orbs had finished cooking. Machiavelli seemed interested in them, but he still seemed surprised at simply being alive again.

“The orbs are ready to open the way, once we’re in Lisbon.” Said Niccolò.

“Ahhhh, so we’re off to Lisbon next.” Said Mia.

“I’ve always wanted to visit Portugal.” Said Patsy.

Karkengara felt such anger, that he could barely contain it. There’d be no taking back the four years of life, but there might well be regret at offering it.

“This.....The belief you’re always right, Niccolò.” Said the bringer of fire. “It drives me crazy.....Lisbon is just so wrong, an epic mistake.”

“So.....Where do you think we should go next ?” Asked Machiavelli.”

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