

## Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 1 – Leaving Florence

**“Alberti wasn’t immortal, just incredibly long lived. He’d been the head of the Brotherhood for longer than anyone could remember. His long life and occult powers came from sitting at the centre of a power nexus. One rather rude pope had likened Alberti to a large spider, sat in the centre of his web. Most feared Alberti, so arguments and fights with those who ruled were rare.”**

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After two nights at a house owned by Juliana’s father, Simon thought it was time to load their things onto a cart and travel to the port of Livorno. The heat was still on; there were all sorts of rumours about the evil deeds committed by Brother Alberti and his Brotherhood. It would pass of course, when Alberti was once again seen as useful to those in power. As Simon was a senior member of the brotherhood, it was the perfect time to travel by ship to Cyrenaica in North Africa.

“Who are we going to see in Cyrenaica ?” Asked Patsy.

Patsy was fairly new to the group; she was new to that timeline. She hadn’t been with him when he’d seen the demon oracle in Leptis Magna. To say that had been a strange day was an understatement. The oracle had told Simon there was one true meaning to Festina Lente (Make haste slowly.) Best of all, he was destined to learn the meaning of that ultimate question in his own lifetime. Being a vampire didn’t mean that was necessarily soon, but it was nice to know he would one day know the great secret.

Not that the oracle had promised that he’d understand what he was told. Brother Alberti had become very excited when Simon had told him the news. That was one of the factors causing the current trouble between the Brotherhood and the city guard of the Medici. The oracle had pointed Simon at Cyrenaica, but problems in Florence had delayed his return to North Africa.

“Cyrenaica was an old Roman province, with several major cities.” Said Simon. “The oracle told me to arrive by sea and make an offering to the protector of the province, as soon as I arrive. I’m not sure what the protector is, but it’s not an ordinary human. We’re talking about a being of immense age.”

“What happens after you’ve made the offering ?” Asked Karkengara.

They were in the kitchen of the house, with a different layout to the kitchen in Simon’s own house. He actually jumped a little as Karkengara’s head seemed to appear out of a solid stone wall.

“I bet we have to wait for weeks.” Said Juliana. “The number of times some strange deity or oracle has wanted us to wait. We even had to wait to see a Djinn once.”

“I know it can be a bit frustrating.” Said Simon. “I have no idea who we’re expecting to see, but it must be someone important to my quest. The demon oracle of Leptis Magna would never waste my time.”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you call it a quest.” Said Patsy.

More might have been said about that, but Giovanni had arrived back at the house, with a horse drawn waggon and a few paid by the hour helpers. They’d tell the city guard everything they knew of course. Hopefully, by then their small group of friends would be on-board the Mermaid and heading for North Africa.

“Come on, get everything on the waggon.” Said Giovanni. “There’s already muttering about us going around among some. It seems we’re to blame for everything since the last bad winter and the recent outbreak of the Flux.”

The servants worked hard, everyone worked hard. Fairly soon the waggon was ready to begin the eighty mile journey to Livorno. More than they could do in one day, but Simon was hoping to spend the night at the farm of an old friend. With luck, the old friend might join them. Hoods up and weapons well hidden under clothing, they headed west out of Florence. Luckily there was no sign of pursuers when they left by the city gates at Scandicci.

“We might get to the Mermaid without a fight.” Said Juliana.

Simon had his horse and Juliana had hers. Just by luck they’d been brought to the house by a quick witted servant. Giovanni and Patsy were in the waggon. Anyone trying to get at their provisions in the waggon was in for quite a surprise. As for Karkengara ? Simon didn’t expect to see him again until they were well out to sea on the Mermaid.

“Don’t say that, you’ll ruin our good luck.” Said Simon.

Some of those who’d been with them in Leptis Magna might have been persuaded to join them again. There was no time though, barely time to reach the ship without fighting for their lives. They’d need to stop of in Malta for water and provisions. Simon was hoping to find a couple of fighters there. They’d be mercenaries of course, but there had been times when he and Giovanni had been mercenaries.

“Are we going to stay at Cosimo’s farm on the way to Livorno ?” Asked Juliana.

“We have to stop somewhere.” Said Simon. “If he’s in a good mood, I’m hoping to persuade him to join us.”

Cosimo Pazzi was an old friend, once leader of Brother Alberti’s personal guard. He was tough and wouldn’t appreciate them just turning up. If he could be persuaded though, Cosimo was worth ten back street fighters. If Cosimo was in a really good mood, he might bring several of his fighters with him. They all tended to be retired fighters who’d decided to go into farming. Nothing about Cosimo Pazzi was ordinary, nothing at all. Patsy leant her head out of the back of the wagon.

“Can they catch us.....The city guard I mean ?” Asked Patsy.

“The waggon isn’t the fastest way to travel.” Said Simon. “If we’re pursued by determined enemies on fast horses.....Yes, they can catch us before we reach Cosimo’s farm. We need to watch out for them, especially as it’s likely to be dusk when we arrive there.”

Cosimo’s farm was really an estate and he didn’t just employ retired soldiers. He also gave jobs to younger men who’d decided that training for the military might have pleased their parents, but it wasn’t for them. Villa Pazzi was large, more rooms than he knew what to do with as Cosimo often said. There was space for them and fighters for hire, if his old friend was in the right mood.

“Well.....We’re there and none of the city guards have caught up with us.” Said Giovanni.

“They may have taken the old road and be waiting for us in Livorno.” Said Simon.

“Then we all need some good food and a decent night’s sleep.” Said Giovanni.

What put Cosimo in a good mood ? Winning a purse full of silver from one of his neighbours, in a game of dice would do it. It wasn’t the value of the purse that mattered, it was winning. One of his household staff told them that Cosimo was out in the fields and wouldn’t be home until supper time. They helped them get their bags inside though and gave them one each of the many rooms in Villa Pazzi. Why did they know their boss was in a good mood and would welcome finding Simon and his friends under his roof ? Not dice, one of the pigs he’d bred had won top prize at the local farmers’ fayre.

"We'll be eating when the master returns." Said a large lady who seemed to be the cook. Simon had noticed that as it got dark, it became very dark. There should have been a decent moon to see by, but it was totally obscured by clouds. Only a fool was going to ride his horse hard along rough roads, in the dark. Simon thought more and more that the pursuing city guard were riding at a slow pace, eventually staying in a hostelry in Livorno. Run by the local clergy, Simon had stayed there a few times. Good food and comfortable beds, though no alcohol was served. Yes, a wise and experienced leader of those chasing after them, had decided to get a decent bed for the night and wait for them to arrive in Livorno. It was exactly what Simon would have done.

"Do you think we might get a peaceful night's sleep?" Asked Patsy.

"I do, but I can't be sure." Said Simon. "Stay alert, but they're probably on the old road to Livorno." Dinner was late; Simon was beginning to wonder if they'd ever get to eat that night. It was the voice of the cook after banging a gong, which told them the master of the villa had returned from the fields.

"Dinner is served." Yelled the cook, several times.

"How well do you know our host?" Asked Patsy.

"We've fought side by side and watched friends die." Said Simon. "Those kinds of experiences bring you close to anyone."

Cosimo was standing at the head of the table in the large dining room. A mountain of a man who wasn't as strong as a vampire, but he had fighting skills that were second to none. It seemed he was in a very good mood.

"I know that face.....Sit beside me Simon." Yelled Cosimo. "Your lady can join us at the head of the table. Later you can tell me why you've come all the way from Florence in a waggon."

His lady? The staff had probably sent messages to Cosimo, while he was out in the fields. They probably mentioned Simon only requiring one bedroom for himself and Patsy. Simon sat to the left of Cosimo, with Patsy on his left. Juliana sat next to Giovanni at the other end of the long dining table. Not all the staff were there by the look of it, only those Cosimo viewed as senior people looked to have a place at his table.

"Simon Atherton, I heard you were dead." Said Cosimo.

"If I had a gold piece for every time someone thought I was dead." Said Simon. "I'd be a very rich man."

Cosimo knew what Simon was. As the head of Brother Alberti's guard he knew that vampires were real, as were demons, djinns and many other creatures who inhabited the dark places. That was one of the reasons Simon wanted him with them. It would save the shock and explanations further along the road. Cosimo knew the correct etiquette and waited until coffee was served, before asking any questions.

"So, you're alive old friend." Said Cosimo. "Tell me why you arrived at my door looking over your shoulder? It's obvious someone is chasing you."

"The Brotherhood are out of favour, as they've been many times before." Said Simon. "I've decided to continue my quest and head for North Africa. By the time I return Brother Alberti is certain to have a seat next to the ruling member of the Medici family. This setback is only temporary."

The food was good, as was the wine; Cosimo knew how to spoil his guests.

"Ahhh that quest for the ultimate secret." Said Cosimo. "If Alberti hadn't been so intent on giving you every possible piece of aid; I'd have assumed it was all nonsense. Alberti is no fool though; you're looking for something beyond ordinary wealth and power."

Cosimo seemed in a fantastic mood, so Simon decided it was now or never.

“I’m glad you think that, because I’d like you to go with me.” Said Simon. “I’m hoping you can bring a few good fighters with you.”

“I’m not sure, Simon.....There’s so much work to do on the farm.” Said Cosmo.

“You must have a foreman you trust.” Said Simon. “Are you really going to miss the chance of a lifetime to breed a few pigs and grow wheat ?”

Had he pushed too hard ? There was a darkness in Cosimo’s eyes, but it quickly went away. Simon would remember that, never insult what Cosimo cultivated, or the animals he bred.

“How long would you need me for ?” Asked Cosimo.

“Who can tell.....Being honest, maybe forever.” Said Simon.

“Join us, Cosimo.” Yelled Juliana. “You’ll never be bored.”

Cosimo looked around the table and Simon knew he was going with them and was selecting who to bring with him.

“Very well, Simon.” Said Cosimo. “I’ll be ready to leave at first light.”

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Brother Drefan Alberti rarely told anyone his first name; to almost everyone he was known as Brother Alberti. The Brotherhood was a religious order who supported whoever was pope and acted as the eyes and ears of the true rulers of Italy, the Medici. Alberti wasn’t immortal, just incredibly long lived. He’d been the head of the Brotherhood for longer than anyone could remember. His long life and occult powers came from sitting at the centre of a power nexus. One rather rude pope had likened Alberti to a large spider, sat in the centre of his web. Most feared Alberti, so arguments and fights with those who ruled were rare.

They did happen though and were likely to happen again. Alberti was sat in an unmarked horse drawn carriage, quite close to the secret entrance to where he usually sat for most of the day. Since his office had been taken over by the city guard, he’d been unable to recharge at the power nexus that filled the room with power. The door to the carriage opened and Alberti felt for his dagger. Not a threat, it was one of his own well-trained guards.

“They only left two guards, it’s safe to enter.” Said his guard.

The early hours of the morning and even the city guard were scared to remain in the headquarters of the Brotherhood. One day Alberti would give them a reminder of why they feared him. For now he needed to recharge at the Nexus and talk to Simon Atherton, the troublesome feeder on blood.

“Thank you.” Said Alberti. “Stay close, there may be other enemies hiding in the shadows.”

It was raining quite gently as he left the carriage, not that a little rain bothered Alberti. He needed to sit at the centre of the power Nexus for a while, or he’d begin to suffer from various problems. He’d been summoned to Rome a few times, to attend important meetings. A great honour, but being away from the Nexus had caused health problems. On one occasion a large tumour had attached itself to his spine; on another the bones in his hands had become incredibly brittle. Nasty and unpleasant, but a day back in the centre of his Nexus had cured everything. He needed the Nexus, or his life was likely to end in pain and misery.

“If only it was possible to move the Nexus.” He muttered.

Over the years Alberti had discovered that few things were impossible, but moving the focus of the Nexus was one of them. No matter what might occur, or who he upset; he could never be away from the focal point of his Nexus for longer than two weeks, ideally not longer than ten days. Alberti had a large cast iron master key to the headquarters of the Brotherhood, it opened every door. He opened the back door few knew existed and stepped inside. Against one wall of the corridor were stacked the two dead members of the city guard.

“Dispose of these before we leave.” Alberti told his guard.

“Yes Sir.”

“Properly.....Burned and buried.” Said Alberti.

The guard nodded at him and looked scared. Alberti liked everyone to have a little fear of him, even those he employed. It tended to keep them on their toes. If the bodies of the two members of the city guard were never found, his personal guards couldn't be accused of killing them.

“I may be some time.....Let no one in.” Said Alberti.

Again his guard nodded and Alberti noticed another two of his guards were in the corridor. They could deal with most things, but Alberti would need to be in his carriage and some distance away by dawn. His guards couldn't take on the entire city guard and running away was so.....Undignified. Alberti unlocked the door to his Nexus and stepped inside. There was no sign of anyone going through the drawers and cupboards. There were rumours about dark forces inhabiting the room, which the city guard obviously believed.

“Idiots and fools.....Not half a decent brain between the lot of them.” He muttered.

The oil lights on the walls were always lit, with enough oil in them to last for days. Alberti went straight to the high backed chair which some referred to as his throne. The elegantly carved hardwood chair was at the centre of the power Nexus. He felt so much better from simply sitting in the chair and settling back into the many cushions.

“Ahhhhh.....That's better.” He mumbled.

Just a few minutes soaking in the power of the Nexus and he'd get busy with why he'd risked coming there in the middle of the night. There was noise outside the door, sounds of fighting, steel on steel. There'd been another of the city guard hiding in the building, which wasn't a surprise; it was a large building. The noises stopped, which meant his own guards had won the battle. They'd dispose of the body without disturbing their busy master.

“First.....A quick talk to Simon.” He mumbled.

Alberti had disturbed Simon and Juliana a couple of times while they'd been enjoying sex; being honest it was close to a dozen times. After a few arguments, Alberti was more careful about when he talked to Simon, even if it was in the dark hours before dawn. He used the Nexus to look over Simon and was happy that the vampire was asleep. He was with Patsy now of course, who Alberti quite liked. She could be rude and downright disrespectful, but he liked her. Alberti used the Nexus to scan the estate of Cosimo Pazzi. As he suspected, Simon was there and sharing a bed with Patsy.

“Simon, wake up.....Go to somewhere private.” Alberti spoke into the Nexus.

It took four repeats to wake Simon, who immediately rolled towards Patsy. She was easy to wake up, Simon only had to kiss her once on the cheek and speak her name.

“I'm going outside, Alberti wants to talk.” Said Simon. “I shouldn't be long.”

“Don't let him talk you into anything stupid and dangerous.” Said Patsy.

Despite such comments Alberti liked the woman; one day she might well save Simon from getting into a pile of trouble. Simon put on the trousers and shirt grubby enough to be the ones he'd been wearing the day before and headed towards the garden. Out of the front door of Cosimo's villa, nodding at two guards as he went. Well past them to be out of earshot and Simon ended up sat on a large grey boulder. The Nexus link was used to the area now; Alberti could even feel the cool of the night and smell a nearby olive orchard.

“Nice to know you're alright, rather than in a Medici dungeon.” Said Simon.

“Ahhhh, the city guards aren't much of a threat.” Said Alberti. “They are managing to disturb my use of the Nexus. I'm sure things will soon be as they used to be.”

“I’m going to board the Mermaid at Livorno.” Said Simon. “Now seems the perfect time for that trip to Cyrenaica. I’ll hopefully move on the great quest a little.”

“Excellent.....Excellent.” Said Alberti. “There is a limit to what I can do to help you, but the Brotherhood has plenty of gold. I take it you wouldn’t say no to a nice heavy purse full of gold pieces?”

“We’re not paupers, but the gold would be appreciated.” Said Simon.

“You’ll need to take on provisions on the way to North Africa.” Said Alberti. “Where are you planning to go ashore?”

“Malta, Giovanni has contacts there.” Said Simon.

It was the Nexus again; the longer he used it with the same person, the better it became. One mention of Malta and it was showing him all of the Brotherhood agents on the island. One was a red headed female who dressed rather extravagantly. Simon would like her; he might even try and recruit her.

“I have someone in mind, a red head called Mia Cassar.” Said Alberti. “I’ll have her come to the Mermaid, so warn Captain Galeoto to expect her.”

“Thank you, I’ll do that.” Said Simon.

“Anything else I can do for you Simon?” Asked Alberti. “If not, I have other business to attend to before the sun rises.”

“No, the gold will enable me to hire a few good fighters.” Said Simon.

“I’ll talk to you again one night, not long after you arrive in Malta.” Said Alberti.

Alberti had at least twenty sets of orders to give out, before the sun rose in the east. All the time all he could really concentrate on was Simon and his small band of misfits. The Brotherhood had been out of favour before, but there’d never been anything like the current ill-will and aggression. Alberti hoped Simon managed to get out to sea before half the city guard arrived to put a noose around his neck.

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Juliana Colombo had surprised herself by staying with Simon after Patsy had arrived. Part of it was knowing everything by then, that both Simon and Giovanni were vampires. Simon’s house in Florence wasn’t just where they’d shared a bed and planned for a future. Even after they were no longer lovers, the house was where plans were made to find the true meaning of Festina Lente. Juliana still didn’t fully understand why she’d continued to be part of the group, but the excitement was definitely a huge part of it. Her life had been so tame and protected. Now she was stroking her horse’s neck and looking at the outskirts of Livorno. There was almost certain to be a fight to reach the Mermaid, but that too excited her.

“I know a way through the buildings to the quayside.” Said Cosimo. “We may not escape without a fight, but it’ll be more on our terms.”

“Sounds a good plan, I’m pleased you decided to join us.” Said Simon.

“The horses, they need looking after while we’re away.” Said Juliana.

“I remember where the livery stable is, but we’ll need the horses pulling the waggon.” Said Giovanni.

It was agreed that in all likelihood the city guard would sell the horses; they weren’t paid that well and always looking for ways to earn a few silver pieces. They’d also pay the livery stable to look after the waggon horses, if the city guard didn’t bother with them. As Juliana and Simon left their horses with the stables, it had obviously been a good idea. Like all local businesses, the livery owner picked up gossip like a sponge.

“Their horses are behind you.” Said the livery owner. “Worse cared for horses I’ve seen in a while; one even had a loose shoe. Unlike your party, they argued with me over everything. These horses need feeding I told them, or you’ll be walking back to Florence.”

“How many of the city guard are here ?” Asked Patsy.

“Seven, they’re lurking down by the quayside.”

Seven was fine, seven could be dealt with. Juliana knew how Florence worked and if the Brotherhood had really fallen out with a senior member of the Medici, it could easily have been fifty waiting for them, maybe even a hundred. She noticed Giovanni was smiling.

“We can handle seven, now we have Cosimo and his fighters with us.” Said Giovanni.

“Three of my best, as I was asked to bring.” Said Cosimo.

There had been introductions before leaving Cosimo’s estate. One woman and two men, who’d all insisted on paying the livery for their own horses. The woman was called Rosa, a native of Malta who’d worked for Cosimo for several years. Tough looking, she obviously knew how to handle a blade. Rosa was quite talkative, but there was a tall dark skinned man who spoke very little. Hassan had been born in the part of North Africa they were heading for and had a lot of local knowledge. The other man was from Florence and called Gabriele. He was older than the other two, but Cosimo had said he was the best fighter. Gabriele had been trained by the city guard and had served with them for many years. Not that he seemed worried about using his sword on them now.

“Do we draw lots to see who drives the waggon to the Mermaid ?” Asked Simon. “Or do we have a volunteer for the job ?”

“I’ll do it.” Said Hassan.

“Fine.” Said Simon. “Just keep your head down if any of them start firing arrows at you.”

“Come on, I know the way and the people here.” Said Cosimo. “No one will tell them we’re coming through the buildings.”

Cosimo had been worth whatever Simon had promised him to join them. He was large in a muscular way, once seen you’d spot him in any crowd. He took them through the back door of a leather tannery, smiling at everyone. He seemed to know everyone’s name. Out of the front door, along an alley and he was knocking on a heavy door to an anonymous looking building. There was whispering and they were inside what looked to be a house of ill-repute. For the first time since meeting Simon and Giovanni, Juliana hoped her mother never heard about where she’d been. Cosimo knew everyone and anyone, but Gabriele seemed to know a few of the girls very well.

“Don’t get any ideas, Gabriele.” Said Cosimo. “We’re just passing through today.”

Another two buildings, far more ordinary than the house of ill-repute. By the time they were looking at Hassan driving the waggon past the windows, they were close to being where the Mermaid was waiting for them. It was time to fight the city guard and hopefully win the fight. Juliana could feel her heart beating a little faster than usual.

“No more hiding and watching.” Said Giovanni. “When we go out of this door, everyone in a city guard uniform is an enemy.”

“We’ll kill them all if we can.” Said Cosimo.

According to Simon, every battle had an element of luck in the result, be it good or bad. Juliana hadn’t been through that many battles, but she tended to agree. As they came out of the building, several of the city guard were shouting question at Hassan. Who was he ? Whose waggon was he driving ? They were thinking about everyone apart from who might be coming out of the rather nondescript looking stone building.

“Get them.....Cut them down.” Yelled Giovanni.

“No prisoners.” Yelled Simon.

They had at least one archer among them, though they weren’t very good. Juliana felt the wind as an arrow went past her cheek, it’s flight may well have cut her; she wouldn’t know until the battle was over. It quickly became like every other fight she’d been in. She’d hack away with her sword at anyone who wasn’t on her side, while trying to stay alive. That was really important; she’d already given her mother far too many reasons to cry. The battle quickly became total chaos, but she was certain she’d sent at least two of the city guard to meet their maker.

“They’re trying to burn the waggon.” Yelled Patsy. “Stop them.....We need everything in the waggon.”

Hassan was trying hard to keep the waggon safe, but he was only one facing many enemies. Juliana saw the archer who’d aimed at her, his throat had been cut by someone. She’d always been far more dangerous with a bow, than with a sword. She picked up the bow and a half full quiver of wicked looking arrows. She turned and two of the city guard trying to torch the waggon; fell to her archery skills.

“Get on the waggon, Juliana.” Said Simon. “You can do far more damage from up there.”

“Will do.” She said.

For the first time she had a good view of the Mermaid, with what looked like a few of the crew waving encouragement. Hassan looked to have been wounded, but there wasn’t much blood. She decided that patching him up could wait until Livorno was a speck on the horizon behind them. With ships to their right and cargo waiting to be loaded to their left; there really was only one direction for the horses to pull the waggon.

“Damn.....They have another archer.” Yelled Cosimo.

Cosimo had an arrow sticking out of his thigh, though he was still managing to stride along the road at a good pace. Juliana spotted the archer, a woman who didn’t look much older than her. Once she’d have felt guilty as her arrow tore into the woman’s throat, but she’d hurt their friend. It was a kill or be killed situation and Juliana was determined to come out of it alive.

“I make it there are two city guard fighters left alive.” Said Rosa.

“No, there look.” Said Simon. “Captain Galeoto of the Mermaid is waving their heads around.”

“Yay, good for Galeoto.” Shouted Patsy.

It was good having the enemy out of the way and finished with, they could get the waggon below decks without the worry of an arrow in the back. They’d done it before, winched a waggon up, over and into the main hold of the Mermaid. It was quicker than unloading the waggon, with pretty much zero chance of leaving anything important on the quayside. Hassan was moaning every time he moved his arms.

“Come on; time to get a dressing on that arrow wound.” Said Juliana.

She had his shirt off and cleaned up the wound on the open deck, while the waggon was winched up and over the Mermaid. The wound looked painful, but unlikely to cause Hassan any long term problems. Juliana found it hard to credit that before she’d met Simon, just the sight of blood might make her pass out. She finished the dressing by pulling it tight over the wound.

“There.....If you get a lot of pain come and see me.” Said Juliana.

“Thank you.” Said Hassan.

He was giving her the look, the one that said she looked pretty and they might be at sea for a while. Juliana ignored it and went looking for Simon. The last thing she needed on the current expedition were even more complications. She found Simon talking to Galeoto; when her eyes were drawn to the view of Livorno, gradually getting further away.

“That.....Is a great view.” She said.

“I won’t argue with that.” Said Galeoto.

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