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

Chapter 17 – The Red Temple

'The priests rose and more of them appeared, scampering into the throne room from all over the Red Temple. The picture on the wall was still amazing Simon. In an age long before cameras, it must have seemed like a gift from the Gods. No wonder so much trouble had been taken in copying it to the wall behind the altar. The voice of Nenzuma brought Simon out of his daydream. "Simon Atherton, we are yours to command." Said Nenzuma. "Tell me what information you need from me ?"'

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Patsy Smart thought the temple built of red stones looked fairly new. Mainly she suspected, because they'd gone a very long way back in time. Niccolò seemed to think the time slip was temporary, which suited Patsy. She was fed up with changing time lines and how that could tear her life apart. She was a woman of the Medici era now, living with the man she loved. She was happy and didn't want anything happening to spoil that. The temple's main doors were slightly ajar, which might be a good sign, or a bad sign.
"The temple feels empty to me." Said Vittoria.
"I sense no heartbeats in there." Said Giovanni. "But that doesn't mean there are no living beings in there."
"We need to be very careful as we explore the Red Temple." Said Simon Atherton.
Red Temple sounded ominous to Patsy, but they had to call it something. Simon pushed open the temple doors and there were lights hanging from the corridor walls. Some kind of oil lamps by the look of them.
"Something living must visit this place and keep the lamps burning." Said Juliana.
"Hello !" Shouted Simon. "Is there anyone here ?"
Patsy jumped at the unexpected shouting, but it did make sense to announce their presence.
"They might not know the language we speak." Said Niccolò. "But someone should come running to see who we are. We might be robbers; come to steal the silver and gold."
"There might not be any." Said Giovanni.
"All temples have silver and gold." Said Niccolò.
Simon shouted again and there were a lot of scampering sounds. Then again, the residents of the temple probably spoke an ancient language and had no idea what Simon was yelling.
"Someone is here, but I still sense no heartbeats." Said Giovanni.
There were lamps hanging everywhere and the inside of the temple was clean, not a spot of dust; as far as Patsy could see. So far though, they'd only wandered along several corridors and opened one or two doors.
"I'll try Latin…….If in doubt try Latin." Said Niccolò.
Niccolò shouted something that reminded Patsy of the words used by the priest at a friend's wedding. In truth, Niccolò had probably shouted much the same thing as Simon.
"More scampering about, but no answering call." Said Simon. "We need to get deeper into this place."

No stairs, but they discovered a wide ramp leading down into the Red Temple. Lamps hanging everywhere again, they had no worries about ending up in the dark.
“We mean you no harm.” Shouted Simon.
“Aren’t we invited, or something ?” Asked Hassan.
“Hmmmm, I wouldn’t go that far.” Said Simon.
The ramp turned and went deeper into the temple, but there was no answering call. The scampering implied creatures with feet, but Patsy was prepared for anything to be residing in the temple. At least there was no strange or unpleasant odour. The room they entered was quite large and at its centre was what looked like an altar of some kind. Made of red stone like everything else, but to Niccolò’s obvious delight, there were golden candlesticks on the altar.
“I told you…….All temples have holy items made of gold and silver.” Said Niccolò.
There was a lot of scampering and several creatures in red robes were stood in front of the altar. Patsy quite liked red, but thought the inhabitants of the temple were overdoing it a little. No hands on weapons, or anything like that; but the creatures definitely looked to be guarding their altar against the unknown interlopers.
“The minions said to expect you. They told my forefathers and that was a very long time ago. I really didn’t think you’d ever arrive, Simon Atherton.”
The creature speaking was just one of the group in red robes. Nothing to mark any kind of seniority, he appeared to be just another priest of the temple. Patsy later mentioned hearing him talk in perfect English, while the others heard the language they were used to. It was all a little weird, but totally non-threatening.
“How do you know me ?” Asked Simon.
The priest speaking to them pointed at a hanging fabric behind the altar and seemed to nod at no one in particular. There was an especially bright lamp hanging over the fabric, as though it covered a particularly holy relic. Not that Patsy had any idea which God or Gods were worshiped in the Red Temple. When a priest pulled at a rope and wound up the fabric, Simon gasped; everyone in their group gasped.
“Where……Who painted that onto the wall ?” Asked Simon.
Patsy knew the time and place of the picture which had been expertly copied onto the wall. It was Simon and her, enjoying a Christmas several years ago; at the house in Hornsey. It had been taken by Niña who at that time; still viewed twenty first century technology as being a little magical. Oh, how Niña had loved taking pictures with that digital camera. Patsy had positioned Simon in front of the Christmas tree for that picture. Vampires might allegedly be Satan’s favourite children, but they still seemed to enjoy Christmas.
“We were brought a picture by a minion of the most holy of all the Ancients Gods. The picture itself decayed with time, but the painting on the wall has been blessed and enchanted. It will be there, looking as it does now; for eternity.”
“Ahhhh, eternity is one hell of a long time.” Said Vittoria.
“That is myself and Patsy.” Said Simon. “But who brought the picture and gave it to your forefathers ?”
As far as Patsy could tell from various conversations, they were at the Bay of Naples when Vesuvius was a young volcano. Now there was talk of forefathers. The numbers involved, the staggering movement of someone through time. It was all making Patsy’s head spin a little.
“Magitte brought it, a minion of Horus then.” Said the priest. “She served Horus for countless millennia, but I heard she now serves another.”

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Simon had summoned Karkengara as soon as the conversation shifted to Ancients Gods and their minions. Laura was happy dealing with minions and their omnipotent masters, but Simon still felt out of his depth with such creatures. He'd summoned the bringer of fire with a whisper. Karkengara fitted into a large space to the left of the altar, as though the room had been designed for him; perhaps it had. All the priests in red robes instantly prostrated themselves. Down on the floor they went, their faces pushing hard into the red stone floor.

"Get up……..I require no worship here, just respect." Said Karkengara. "I know you Nenzuma and I know the power you serve. You are to talk sense to Simon Atherton. No riddles, no nonsense…..Do you understand ?"

Simon was glad Patsy was keeping a journal and writing down all the key names and places. Having a name for the head priest was likely to make things easier, but there had been so many strange places and even stranger names. Nenzuma was talking to Karkengara, but he showed no sign of getting up off the floor.

"I understand Holy One." Said Nenzuma. "I had heard that Magitte now serves you."

"Get up old friend……..You can't talk sense while lying on your belly." Said Karkengara. "Get up all of you……..Come on, I have no need of your adoration. Simon needs the truth from you; the fate of worlds may depend on his quest. And…..You know I rarely talk in such a way."

The priests rose and more of them appeared, scampering into the throne room from all over the Red Temple. The picture on the wall was still amazing Simon. In an age long before cameras, it must have seemed like a gift from the Gods. No wonder so much trouble had been taken in copying it to the wall behind the altar. The voice of Nenzuma brought Simon out of his daydream.

"Simon Atherton, we are yours to command." Said Nenzuma. "Tell me what information you need from me ?"

"My choice for this stage of my quest was either into fire, or into ice." Said Simon. "I chose into fire and was sent here by scrolls so ancient…….Let's just say it was a long and confusing path. What I need from you may be a deep secret of your temple, but it is essential to my search for the ultimate answer, to the ultimate question."

"Ask me, Simon……If my vows allow it I will tell you what you need to know." Said Nenzuma.

The other priests were all nodding and Simon really did think it was going to be that easy. Maybe he was a natural optimist, or never learned from experience.

"Into fire, Nenzuma." Said Simon. "What is it and most importantly…..How do I get through it without dying."

"You seek the talisman of the flame ?"

Simon had never heard of such a talisman, but Patsy had read far more of the scrolls she carried almost everywhere than he had. Patsy was nodding at him without being seen to make a huge thing of it. He'd seen her subtle nods before and sometime; like now; they weren't that subtle.

"Yes, I am here seeking the talisman of the flame." Said Simon.

All the priests looked shocked and a few actually looked scared.

"Others have come seeking the talisman." Said Nenzuma. "Two within the last century to be precise and they knew the holy text and the correct way to walk with fire. Both of them died."

Simon had already lived for around seven hundred and fifty years, even he wasn't certain about his age; but it was around seven hundred and fifty. It had been a good life, with plenty of times he'd really enjoyed. Still, hearing that the mortality rate for seeking the talisman of flame was a hundred

percent; was quite off putting. He'd promised so many people that he'd complete the quest, or die in the process. Simon refused to be discouraged by off putting statistics.
"I am sworn to find the answer to the ultimate question." Said Simon. "Only death can stop me and I've learned that death isn't always permanent. Tell me how to walk with fire ?"
"I can't tell you." Said Nenzuma. "As I told you, I've taken vows to never tell a living soul."
Yes, Simon knew that moment would come, it always did. Nenzuma simply stood there looking stone faced. The other priests brought out short blades from inside their red cloaks. They might not be that good with edged weapons, but there were a lot of them; about three hundred by Simon's reckoning. Of course, Karkengara could wipe them all out; but then who would tell him what he needed to know.
"I am asking you, Nenzuma……As a deity and bringer of the holy fire." Said Karkengara.
"I'm sorry, but a sacred vow is a sacred vow." Said Nenzuma. "I can't tell anyone, even you."
"Then you will die today." Said Karkengara.

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Giovanni thought he was about to die, but was determined to take as many of the priests with him as he could. Karkengara would avenge him of course by wiping out all their enemies, including Nenzuma; but Giovanni had never seen the value in vengeance if you're dead.
"Don't be in a hurry to die." Said Niccolò. "I was dead for quite some time and it was rather tedious and boring."
"What are you suggesting ?" Asked Nenzuma.
"There must be a way to solve this impasse, without everyone dying." Said Niccolò. "Apart from the bringer of fire of course, who is an immortal deity."
Giovanni had seen a lot of warriors who seemed eager to rush to their deaths. He'd also seen many who'd die for a cause, but weren't exactly keen on the idea. He knew the whole range of facial expressions; and Nenzuma didn't want to die, he'd have bet the contents of his purse on it.
"Yes, we can discuss some kind of agreement." Said Giovanni.
"No……A sacred vow is a sacred vow." Said Nenzuma.
He said it, but hated the idea; Giovanni was beginning to read his expressions like a book. Nenzuma didn't have a heart, so he wasn't even vaguely human, but he had feelings and emotions about dying; they were all there on his face.
"Take Simon away somewhere private." Said Giovanni. "Tell him about the walk of fire and the Talisman. Being realistic, he's not likely to survive the walk, so no one will ever know what you told him."
Simon looked stern, which was an expression he was very good at. Patsy looked angry, which was hardly surprising; they were having a conversation about the death of her partner. Simon held her hand and Patsy calmed down.
"Yes, I can see how that would fit into my sacred vows." Said Nenzuma. "Simon must promise to never tell how he came by the knowledge."
"I agree to never tell anyone." Said Simon.
Simon went away with the priest, through a set of doors Giovanni hadn't noticed until they were opened. It was alarming to see their leader heading towards somewhere they couldn't protect him, but it was preferable to a battle and wholesale slaughter.
"Treat Simon well." Said Patsy, just before the doors closed.
"I will, you have my word." Said Nenzuma.

They were gone for some time, long enough for everyone to get a little concerned and restless. It was nice to see Simon return with a smile on his face, even if he was wearing strange looking robes and shoes that didn't seem to fit him that well. Patsy gave him a long hug, of course she did.
"It's so good to see you return…….And in one piece." Said Patsy.
"The robes are fine, but these shoes seem determined to injure my toes." Said Simon. "These are the raiments of the walk of fire."
"It is time…….To enter the chamber of endless flames." Said Nenzuma.
Only a small number of priests went with them, they'd probably seen it all before. Did they expect Simon to die, incinerated by the flames ? Giovanni thought they probably did. It was a long walk, down corridors which sloped gently downwards.
"It's getting warmer." Said Vittoria. "I think we're heading towards the heart of Vesuvius, the magma chamber."
"There is some screening from the heat." Said Nenzuma. "Not that it has helped any who come here to survive the walk. Simon's friends will be hot, but reasonably safe from the flames."
Giovanni wondered about reasonably safe, but decided to let that comment go. Simon was the one taking the big risk, despite wearing the heat resistant raiments.
"Not far now." Said Nenzuma.
It was a large chamber that looked to have been constructed; but by who and when seemed unimportant. Running through a channel for the entire twenty yards or so of the chamber, was magma so hot that it actually stung the skin of Giovanni's face.
"You can't do this, Simon…….You'll burn to death." Said Juliana.
The mechanics of the chamber were dreadful in their simplicity. On the wall at the far end of the chamber was something hanging by a chain from a hook. It had to be the talisman of the flame; there was no point in risking life and limb for anything else. A walkway went upward very gradually, allowing someone to take the talisman. The heat above the magma filled channel had to be enough to scorch Karkengara, let alone poor Simon.
"He has to do it, or the quest will fail." Said Patsy.
Patsy looked hot, they all looked hot. Quest or no quest, Giovanni felt a need to state what seemed obvious.
"You heal fast, Simon; but not fast enough to heal from being incinerated." Said Giovanni. "Clara told me she was scared of fire, because it's one of the few things that can kill a vampire. No second chance, no running away……You'll die. Forget the quest and find something else to take up your time for a few millennia."
"The raiments will help quite a lot." Said Nenzuma.
"They didn't help the last two poor devils." Said Hassan.
"If the rules allow it, I can apply some spells to help against the heat." Said Vittoria.
"Is she allowed to do that, Nenzuma ?" Asked Simon.
"Do whatever you think will help." Said Nenzuma. "I want you to claim the talisman. I dread watching the next hopeful being devoured by the flames."
Karkengara's head appeared through the wall, sighed very loudly and left again. While Vittoria used her spells, Giovanni took a good look at the walkway Simon had to walk along, or run along. There were several piles of ashes; probably all that was left of the last few hopefuls.
"This is crazy, I just can't watch." Said Niccolò.
"He's strong……He'll heal, I have to believe that." Said Patsy.
"Is Simon good with pain ?" Asked Mia. "He'll need to be."

Karkengara appeared through the wall again, as a huge disembodied head. Strangely none of the priests seemed shocked by his coming and going like that.
“Simon needs to get the talisman back to the start of the walkway.” Said Karkengara. “As long as he still lives, I can use my cold healing breath on him.”
“Start whenever you are ready Simon Atherton and good luck.” Said Nenzuma.
Simon was never going to be able to run; the special shoes were too tight and oddly shaped. No throwing them away though, they were obviously enchanted and part of the raiments. The shoes would make the difference between coming back with the talisman on badly burned feet; and returning screaming on bloody burned stumps of bone.
“Good luck, Simon…….You’re crazy, but good luck.” Said Hassan.
Simon pulled the cloak up high, getting the collar right around his face. Then he was kind of limping along the walkway towards the talisman hanging from the wall. Why was the talisman so essential ? No one had mentioned that, everything was being taken on trust. If Nenzuma said it was essential, it was essential; simple as that. About eight awkward steps along the walkway and Simon let out a small but unmistakable scream.
“You can do it.” Shouted Patsy.

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Niccolò Machiavelli had seen heat and fire used as torture, he had been a high level political adviser to some very brutal people. But all that pain accepted voluntarily was something new. Simon had to prove himself worthy of the great secret, Niccolò realised that. It seemed such a terrible price for yet another list of strange places they’d need to visit. No one was enjoying the spectacle, with Simon’s hair bursting into flames; just as he grabbed hold of the talisman. There was a loud scream as Simon clutched the red hot talisman. Patsy was taking it the worst out of them all, with her screams drowning out Simon’s. It was crazy, all crazy……. Niccolò had told them but no one had listened.
“Back to the start of the walkway, Simon.” Shouted Giovanni. “You can do it.”
“If he dies we should destroy this place.” Said Juliana. “Let all this quest nonsense end here.”
Nenzuma didn’t look pleased at that idea. The priest was only keeping to orders and vows from long ago, maybe from before humans existed. It wasn’t as if he was hurting Simon; his agony was self-inflicted. Not that any thoughts of destroying the temple were likely to be uppermost in anyone’s mind. The first concern had to be the way Simon was suffering, as he struggled to put one foot in front of another.
“I can’t watch this……I just can’t watch it.” Said Patsy.
“Remember the long march from Venice to Florence.” Said Giovanni. “We were signed up to the army of the Medici then. Two hundred miles with just crap food to eat and not much water. We did that old friend and if we could do that……You can do anything.”
“I’m on fire.” Said Simon. “All of me……Everything is burning.”
“Can we help him, Nenzuma ?” Asked Hassan.
“No, the talisman will vanish and the quest will be over.” Said Nenzuma. “Simon has to do this on his own.”
Patsy had obviously decided that if she wasn’t allowed to help, she could at least offer encouragement. She ran to the start of the walkway and began shouting directions; Simon did seem to be drifting from the most direct route back.
“Here……..Here.” Yelled Patsy. “Follow my voice my darling.”
Patsy was never going to burn the way Simon was burning, but he was directly above the magma. When Niccolò saw Patsy’s hair smouldering, he knew it was time to act.

“We can’t help Simon, but can we help Patsy ?” Asked Niccolò.
“Yes, as long as none of you help carry the talisman, or assist Simon.” Said Nenzuma.
“I’ll help her too.” Said Juliana.
Niccolò and Juliana poured water over Patsy, as she encouraged her lover. Who was going to need help from who became the question, as Niccolò smelled the leather on his shoes beginning to scorch. Juliana was coping better than him, but only by a little.
“No, you’re drifting again…….Follow my voice.” Shouted Patsy.
“I can see you……I love you.” Said Simon.
Oh, poor Simon, he was struggling along as best he could. It was taking so long though, so very, very long.
“Tell him he needs to hurry up, Patsy.” Said Niccolò. “He’ll listen to you.”
“I can’t bully him, not now.”
“If you don’t, I think we’ll lose him.” Said Niccolò.
“Simon, get a move on……Do you hear me ?” Yelled Patsy. “No time to mess around……..Get a move on.”
“I’ll try.” Said Simon.
One step, one step after another. As Simon got quite close to them; Niccolò could definitely smell cooking flesh. It was dreadful, but it seemed that only Patsy had the ability to get him moving.
“Ten steps left……Let him know, Patsy.” Said Niccolò.
Simon was close to death and Patsy was crying. Niccolò wondered if when he died the next time, he really would be doomed to an eternity in hell.
“Tell him !” Niccolò said to Patsy.
“Just ten steps my beloved……Come to me…..Just ten steps.” Said Patsy.
“Yes old friend, just ten steps.” Said Niccolò.
The smell of burning flesh was worse with every step Simon took towards them. No wonder his hearing seemed a little bad, his ears probably resembled half cooked burger meat. Luckily the worst of the horrors were hidden underneath the hood of the robe Simon was wearing. Eventually Simon took the final step and tumbled to the ground. The way Simon screamed as he tried to move.
“Enough……..Can we help him now ?”Asked Giovanni.
“Yes, let Karkengara heal him now.” Said Niccolò.
“Heal him, help him…….Simon has the talisman, if he survives his injuries.” Said Nenzuma.
Karkengara’s head was there again, but this time he was blowing his cool healing breath over Simon. Patsy and Juliana needed a little of his dragon breath too, they were both looking quite scorched and the worse for wear. Simon was rummaging in the pocket of his robe. He produced the talisman of the flame, holding it up and jiggling it a little.
“I got it……I got the talisman.” Said Simon.
Oh, those fingers Simon was using to hold the talisman. He was alive so Karkengara could heal him, but Niccolò knew he’d see those burned and blackened fingers in his nightmares until the day he died.
“Nasty burns, but Simon is alive.” Said Nenzuma. “Just surviving is truly a miracle. We have accommodation for you all to use for tonight. Not exactly palatial, but we’ll make sure you’re comfortable.”
“Thank you, I wasn’t looking forward to the walk back to the Mermaid, not tonight.” Said Patsy.
“You need some healing and I need to give you the information Simon nearly died for. Don’t forget that the Mermaid is waiting for you a long time in the future.”

They'd been to so many strange places on roads less travelled. Niccolò had forgotten that this time they'd actually stepped back in time. Pure curiosity of course, but he had to ask; for all he knew they might never visit the Red Temple again.
"How far back in time have we stepped ?" Asked Niccolò.
"Telling you that would break so many vows……..Let's just say a very long way back." Said Nenzuma.
Everyone offered to help, but Giovanni ended up carrying Simon to a long room full of beds. It looked like a dormitory and it crossed Niccolò's mind that some of the priests might be sleeping on the floor for a night. Simon was now famous of course; there'd be a drawing of him painted on the wall opposite the altar. Simon muttered at Patsy a lot until she briefly left his bedside to bathe and put on clean clothing from her backpack. Niccolò saw his opportunity to talk to Patsy, when Vittoria began to heal her scorched feet and forearms.
"I have to ask, Patsy." Said Niccolò. "How is Simon……In himself I mean ?"
"We saw him bring back the talisman." Said Patsy. "The priests will carve or paint his face onto just about every wall in the temple. To Simon though, he came so close to dying. He has a lot of self-doubt, more than I've ever seen him with before. We'll need to offer him a lot of support for quite some time."
"I'm sure everyone will help…….We all think the world of Simon in our own way." Said Niccolò.
"He'll always have a few scars, physical and mental." Said Patsy. "Karkengara has already told him that. It seems that healing some wounds is beyond the skill of a deity."
Being truthful with his himself, Niccolò had never thought Simon would complete the quest of Festina Lente. Not that he'd die, but he'd try for several centuries and simply give up trying. He saw Simon carrying on until he nearly died as a positive thing, but he wasn't going to say that to Patsy.
"If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask." Said Niccolò.
"Nenzuma wants to run through the scroll of fire with me tonight." Said Patsy. "As Simon is injured, he said I should bring a few people I think could be useful. I immediately thought of you Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. Will you come ?"
"Of course I will."

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Vittoria had been invited as someone who might have something to add to the conversation. Nenzuma would be going through the ancient fire scroll Patsy had in a leather bag; together with the other incredibly ancient scrolls. Simon was likely to be resting for some time, despite the healing skills of Karkengara. It seemed that some dark flames burned too hot for their wounds to be easily healed. Patsy would talk everything over with Nenzuma and then update Simon when he was thinking a little clearer. Oh, and there were five option for Simon to decide on, as his next step on his quest. Of course, it didn't help that Patsy had been burned trying to help Simon. There was a priest in front of the door to Nenzuma's inner sanctum.
"My name is Vittoria Bianchi. I have been invited."
The priest opened the door and moved to one side. There was only one person in the fairly large room, Niccolò Machiavelli. The room looked fairly opulent in comparison to the room they'd all been packed into for the night.
"Assuming Nenzuma will be here; are we expecting anyone else ?" Asked Vittoria.
"Patsy of course, who seems to be fashionably late." Said Niccolò. "And Juliana has been invited."
"Good, I quite like small numbers when it comes to meetings." Said Vittoria.
"Yes, large numbers tend to mean large arguments." Said Niccolò.

The door sort of rattled as it opened and Patsy came in, with Juliana just behind her. Vittoria hadn't noticed it with Patsy wearing a hood to the chamber of fire; a large piece of the hair on the right side of her head was gone, burned away. She still managed a smile to greet everyone.
"Good we're all here." Said Patsy. "Simon will take a while to heal. I am looking to those here to ask the right questions to enable Simon to decide on where to go next. There will be no coming back to the Red Temple once we've gone back to our time."
"I will do my best." Said Vittoria, and she meant it.
"All the knowledge I have in my head, is at your disposal." Said Niccolò.
"Anything for you and Simon." Said Juliana.
The door sort of rattled again, which seemed odd for a stone door. In came Nenzuma, who sat at the end of the table.
"I'm assuming Patsy brought the scroll of fire ?" Asked Nenzuma.
"I did."
Patsy took the scroll out of her bag and smoothed the wrinkles in the parchment, as she spread it out on the table.
"How many options will Simon have to choose from ?" Asked Juliana.
"There were six, but a temple in the jungles of the far east was destroyed by an earthquake." Said Nenzuma. "I believe you call the area Indonesia. According to my records that leaves a choice of five. Part of the problem with such a quest is that one day; all of the places and buildings will have ceased to exist. Maybe a little rubble, but nothing usable."
Patsy gave a sort of grunt as she turned over the scroll of fire and prepared to write on the blank side with a pencil. Vittoria had ceased to wonder how Patsy acquired pencils and what she called pens.
"Please go slowly through all five options, Nenzuma." Said Patsy. "I will need to be able to explain my notes to Simon."
"Of course…….Of course." Said Nenzuma. "Going in no particular order, the first option is a vault below a temple in somewhere you would know as Leptis Magna."
"We've been to Leptis Magna before." Said Patsy.
"Good, then Simon should easily find the place again." Said Nenzuma.

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