

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 14 – Fire and Ice

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"New faces.....New faces, I am spoiled tonight." Said Alberti. "The bringer of fire and the famous Machiavelli. Good to see you here and I'm sure the reason for your presence will soon be clear."

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Simon liked the idea of being able to choose between Fire and Ice. For far too long he'd felt like a pawn in his own game. Now he could choose the next stage in his quest, and the stage after that; until he reached where the ultimate answer to Festina Lente could be found. It had always felt as though he'd been fated to discover the true meaning of Festina Lente; but now it felt as though he had a lot of freewill in the matter. Could he decide to abandon the quest and take Patsy home to Florence; maybe even marry her ? He probably could, but that might bring its own complications. Brother Alberti had put a lot of gold into the venture and was likely to turn nasty if there was no return on the investment. One thing was certain; he was going to give those with him an opportunity to be free of their oath to follow him. It was time for them to be part of the great quest of their own free will. Simon picked up the agitation from Patsy, before he heard her words.

"Oh, the Mermaid seems to have gone." Said Patsy. "I remember exactly where she was in the harbour."

A long time after they'd headed out of Latakia and they were back again. Looking down from a slight hill near the harbour, things looked pretty much as they had the day they'd left. A few more cargo vessels maybe, perhaps a few more people on the quayside. Nothing drastically different, even the number of gulls seemed about the same. Simon felt those left behind on the Mermaid, an ability Patsy Smart would never possess.

"There." Said Simon, while pointing. "You can see her between two other ships. They must have moved her around a little since we left."

"I see her.....The Mermaid looks smaller than I remember." Said Mia Cassar.

"It's home.....Home always seems larger in memories." Said Vittoria. "You'll find her just the same size she always was. It has been a long time since we've walked her decks."

Simon understood what Vittoria meant, the Mermaid was hidden amongst the masts and rigging of other ships. He'd expected her to be the most prominent vessel in the harbour. Home was good enough though, the place where he'd shared a bed with Patsy for quite some time. He briefly held hands with Patsy.

"I just want to be in our bed in our cabin tonight." Said Simon.

"Oh yes, I've had enough of bedrolls on rough ground." Said Giovanni.

"Me too, I need to sleep on a decent mattress for a while." Said Mia.

Simon knew them well after the long trudge to Nineveh and back. His people might be extolling the virtues of comfortable beds, but when the next part of the quest began; they'd be with him sleeping in bedrolls on dry stony ground.

"Someone needs to signal the Mermaid." Said Simon. "Or, we'll be here for the rest of the day."

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Cook had bought fresh provisions in the market, before getting brought to the Mermaid. He'd asked for enough gold to.....

"Make a bit of a treat for everyone."

Of course Simon had agreed and the expense had come out of Simon's purse, rather the Mermaid's supplies budget. Patsy had enjoyed the meal and everyone sharing their favourite tales about exploring Nineveh. Some were definitely based on truth, but with a lot of gilding of the lily. Some were completely true, while others were a pile of nonsense; not that being fiction stopped them from being enjoyable.

"Karkengara had an adventure here on the Mermaid." Someone yelled. "Get him to tell you about the two assassins who arrived on a very dark night."

The bringer of fire was in the main hold as just a head, which poked out of a wall. He made a kind of grumbling sound, as if he wasn't keen on relating the tale.

"Oh, it was nothing.....Easy to deal with." Said Karkengara.

Patsy rose from her chair and stroked Karkengara's head, from forehead to the tip of his snout. Something she'd probably never have done if she hadn't drunk a few glasses of ale.

"Please.....Tell us about the assassins ?" Pleaded Patsy.

"Just two of them who rowed over from the quayside." Said Karkengara. "I have one of their tunics, which has the look of a uniform about it. According to their map of the Mermaid and a little eves dropping, they were here to assassinate Simon. I heard them talk about a Duarty, who seems to be their boss."

"Where did their bodies end up ?" Asked Giovanni.

"In the sea, many miles from here." Said Karkengara.

"Yay.....Karkengara killed the assassins." Someone shouted.

Patsy thought the story could have been told in a more exciting way, but the important thing was that the two assassins were dead. She had to ask the question.

"Have you any idea who Duarty is ?" Asked Patsy.

"I've been a little bored." Said Karkengara. "I've hidden myself away in the homes of the rich and infamous of Latakia. I've heard many things, but.....Probably best kept for Simon's ears; at least for now."

Nothing kills a party quite like saying the best recent tale about the Mermaid, is private. The crew didn't look happy, especially Galeoto. After all, he was the captain of the Mermaid.

"I hope to be included in the story eventually." Said Galeoto.

"Everyone will know, once I know." Said Simon. "Obviously we need to find and deal with Duarty, whoever he or she might be. They need sorting out before we carry on with the main quest. But for now.....There is still a lot of ale to be drunk."

"Yay for ale to be drunk." Someone yelled.

"Yes Simon, you'll need to find this Duarty." Said Vittoria. "Otherwise you'll be trying to watch your back forever."

"I'll watch his back." Said Patsy.

It had sounded much better in her head than spoken out loud, but everyone was more than a little intoxicated. She was even given a quick cheer.

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Niccolò Machiavelli had been invited to be there, when Simon set up his connection with the head of the Brotherhood. Patsy Smart was there of course; as Simon's significant other it would have been strange if she didn't have a standing invitation. The oddity was Karkengara's snout apparently coming out of the wall of the small forward hold; as though he was a hunting trophy, a talking hunting trophy.

"I've no idea why I was asked to be here, but it's nice to be included." Said Karkengara.

"You have information on Duarty that Alberti needs to know." Said Simon. "I'd also appreciate your opinion about heading for fire as the next step in the quest, or taking the Mermaid to ice. The decision will be mine, but I'd appreciate your opinion."

"Fire, Mount Vesuvius." Said Karkengara. "I'll tell you where to go right now. I'll happily give you hours of reasons why."

"I tend to agree with the bringer of fire." Said Niccolò. "The temple near Vesuvius is the obvious choice."

"When do we connect with Brother Alberti?" Asked Karkengara.

"Now, straight away.....We're actually a little late." Said Simon.

Simon made various signs with his hands and muttered several lines of Aramaic, which Niccolò knew a little of; though he was no expert. Something to do with releasing power to see the unseeable, or something like that. A fairly nebulous form of Alberti sitting behind his desk; quickly appeared.

"New faces.....New faces, I am spoiled tonight." Said Alberti. "The bringer of fire and the famous Machiavelli. Good to see you here and I'm sure the reason for your presence will soon be clear."

The clarity of the image of Alberti was amazing for someone sat in his office in Florence; while the Mermaid was still at anchor in Latakia harbour. Not that Machiavelli was going to mention that; Alberti was already far too arrogant. It seemed that Patsy was a kind of master of ceremonies; introducing who needed to be introduced.

"The last surviving Hassuna of Nineveh; introduced the idea of fire and ice." Said Patsy. "Niccolò was invited to this meeting because of his understanding of such things."

"So, the Hassuna will soon be gone." Said Alberti. "A very clever race of creatures on four legs. I'll miss them, but they were rather surpassed by evolution. I understand Niccolò being needed here, but why Karkengara?"

"I've talked for myself since this world was young." Said Karkengara. "No insult to Patsy, but I'll continue talking for myself. Assassins boarded the Mermaid. Their aim was to kill Simon and they were under orders from Duarty."

"Oh, her.....You were right to bring this to my attention." Said Alberti.

"I went unseen through the grand houses of Latakia." Said Karkengara. "Almost by chance I stumbled onto a séance being held in a back room. One of the guests was a striking looking woman called Duarty."

Niccolò was surprised at how much effort the ancient deity had put into tracking down Esmé Duarty and her motivation in killing Simon. Motivation was money; she ran a large and well thought of group of assassins. Her client had been a senior member of the Medici, who still held a grudge against every member of the Brotherhood.

"I feel this Esmé Duarty should die before the Mermaid lifts anchor." Said Simon.

"I tend to agree with that." Said Niccolò.

A lot of agreement, between people who often disagreed for the sake of it. Even Patsy was nodding her head like crazy. It seemed that anyone posing a threat to her man had to die, even if it was another woman.

"Once Esmé has been dealt with, I can get the Brotherhood investigating her client." Said Alberti.

"Fairly soon and well before the Mermaid is back in Livorno; I can give you the advantages and otherwise of killing a senior member of the Medici."

Patsy thought they'd been officially dismissed by Brother Alberti, leader of the Brotherhood. But Simon was having none of that.

"Before you go.....We could go around the table on the fire and ice question." Said Simon.

"We never take a vote, you know that Simon." Said Alberti.

"Not a vote as such." Said Karkengara. "But an idea of who likes fire, or who likes ice; would be nice to know. I say to go for fire and the temple near Mount Vesuvius."

"I prefer that to ice and the south pole." Said Patsy.

The ethereal image of Alberti gave a huge size twenty sigh, which was rather amusing.

"It seems we are taking a vote." Said Alberti. "I very tentatively favour fire."

"As do I." Said Simon. "We can talk again about this, but it will always be my decision."

Alberti gave Simon a nod, which might well have been a small bow. Niccolò could see Simon holding just about all the main cards of power before they were halfway back to Livorno and Florence.

"Last item.....Is there any other business ?" Asked Patsy.

"No one tells me these things and it can be embarrassing." Said Karkengara. "Are Juliana and Hassan now in a relationship ? A full sharing a bed relationship."

There was a lot of laughter, though Niccolò had thought he and Juliana might move to being something more than just friends. He was far too old for the girl of course, but so had been Simon. Hassan was perfect for her, but he hated admitting it; even to himself.

"I'm pleased to confirm that the two people in question, are now only using one cabin." Said Patsy.

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Like a mere one or two percent of women around the world, Mia Cassar was a natural red head. Some called her clothing outrageous, though Mia thought of her taste in clothes as bright and colourful. She was currently wearing a cerulean blue cloak, with a bright red dress beneath it. No matter what people might think of her clothing, it was always well made and expensive. The one item out of place amid the very pretty clothing, was a blue steel short blade in a scabbard on her belt. Then again, she was about to walk the fairly lawless streets of Crete.

"You'll just be there to open the front door for rest of us, Mia." Said Simon.

"And if I get a chance to slide my blade between her ribs ?" Asked Mia.

"Then you take it of course." Said Juliana.

There had been lots of assumptions about where Esmé Duarty had her base of operations, all of them wrong. She did have a room over a tavern in Latakia, but she was rarely there herself. When her base ended up being identified as an old stone walled villa in Crete, no one was that surprised. It was Crete after all; home of reputedly the best pirates in the Mediterranean Sea. Where had Giovanna gone to buy deck cannons for the Mermaid ? Crete of course. At the time Crete was just about ungoverned and ungovernable; perfect for someone like Esmé Duarty.

"Do we have an update on what she's wearing tonight ?" Asked Mia.

"Dark, she likes dark browns and blues." Said Patsy. "Plus she's a lot taller than most of the women on Crete."

“And you’re not there to kill her.” Said Simon. “As I keep saying, just get the door open for the rest of us.”

“I will obey orders, Simon.” Said Mia. “But you can’t blame a girl for being enthusiastic.”

The villa was old, with heavy well locked doors and a bad history. It was said to have once been used by some of the most notorious pirates of the Mediterranean Sea. One of the pirates on the crew of the Mermaid had once been housed there for a while. He talked of cells in the basement and a sea of bones in a dilapidated outhouse. Not that they’d relied totally on his memories of the place.

Karkengara had wandered invisibly through the villa, noting numbers of people and where they tended to sleep. He’d especially watched the very solid front door, with its very solid locks. Bolted at night of course, but the bolts were drawn back once the inhabitants of the villa were out of bed and moving around. Several other ways in and out of Esmé Duarty’s headquarters, but Karkengara had recommended an attack from the front; once the main door was open. Mia had attended the meetings, continually trying to get the most dangerous job. In the end Simon seemed to give way to her; to get a little peace and quiet.

“Fine, go in first.” Simon had told her. “Honestly though, I don’t see the appeal of going in first and alone.”

He wouldn’t, he was Simon and their leader. He tended to go first in every fight, or through the door first at every ruin and mystical site. Mia had thought running the Brotherhood building in Malta would have given her the same kind of thrill of being first through the door of every enemy. Sadly that was not to be and she’d been stuck in a fairly innocuous admin role for years. She was trusted and paid well by the Brotherhood, but she craved excitement. Sometimes it felt like a hunger to go first through an enemy’s front door.

“Just be really careful, Mia.” Said Giovanni. “If things look like going bad.....Yell for Karkengara.”

“I will, I promise I will.” Said Mia.

Mia felt the glass bottle in her pocket, for at least the dozenth time that night. Vittoria had used a pestle and mortar to mix herbs and other ingredients. The mixture had gone into the glass bottle and water had been added. An incantation followed by a good shake; and Vittoria had assured her the contents of the bottle would eat through the lock on the Villa’s front door. The workings of the lock were on the inside though, so Mia had to be on the inside. Care was needed, as the mixture in the bottle would happily melt into her flesh if used incorrectly. The last instruction Vittoria had given her was to drop the bottle once she’d used it on the lock.

“Time to go.....Good luck, Mia.” Said Simon.

There was a path to the villa, but the others were approaching the front door over rough ground.

Karkengara had estimated there’d be around fifteen trained assassins sleeping inside the villa, though most of them would be asleep. As for asking to see Esmé Duarty in the middle of the night ? There were many visitors to the villa at what most would consider to be strange hours. Mia used the heavy steel door knocker and waited. After a few minutes a flap in the door opened. Two eyes peered at her in the light coming from inside; male eyes by the look of them.

“What is your business here ?” Asked the man.

“I am here to see Esmé.”

“What is your name ?” Asked the man.

The next step might be awkward if the real owner of the name was now out of favour with Esmé, or even worse; dead. There was no way to be certain, but Karkengara had heard the name quite a lot during his reconnaissance trips to the villa. The worst possible scenario ? The owner of the name was already inside the villa and sleeping soundly in a guest room.

"I am Eleni Petrakis.....She is expecting me." Said Mia.

Mia had been well known in Malta, very well known. That had been some time ago, before she'd joined Simon on his quest. There was a chance the pirate in Crete would recognise her, but it was quite a small chance. Not that he was taking much notice of her face, as he opened the door. Like most strangers, he seemed hypnotised by her flamboyant clothing.

"Come in.....I'll tell the boss you're here." Said the man.

Whether the boss was Esmé or someone who ran the Villa, didn't really matter. The man closed the door as she went inside; there was a click as the door locked. Mia was a few seconds from carrying out her most important job of the night; getting the door open for Simon and the others. The man turned away from her and Mia took the bottle of something nasty and caustic from her pocket. She unscrewed the top and began pouring the liquid over the workings of the lock. There was an odour, which was probably why the man turned towards her.

"Sorry.....Nothing personal." Said Mia.

He got the remaining quarter of the bottle, right in his face. He was large and the caustic gunk was quicker to use than digging in her clothing for a blade. Mia dropped the empty bottle on the floor, so there was no chance of the liquid getting on her hands. Using the caustic mixture on the guard hadn't been planned and his reaction hadn't been planned for. He was holding his face and screaming for a few minutes, before collapsing unconscious to the ground. There was the sound of running feet somewhere in the villa.

"Awful.....But better him than me." Said Mia.

The door, the door was now the main thing. It had to be opened and according to Vittoria the lock would now be useless metal slush. No touching the lock, Mia pulled at a handle halfway up the door. Nothing moved, but the heavy old door did rattle slightly.

"Oh, come on.....Help me now Gods of luck." She muttered.

Two more hard pulls and the door opened, letting cold night air remove the ghastly odour of the guard's corroded flesh from her nose. Simon came through the door, closely followed by Giovanni. Soon everyone in Simon's group were in the villa's hallway, looking at the dead guard.

"What happened here, Mia ?" Asked Simon.

"Not now Simon, please not now.....Ask me later."

"Fair enough.....You got the door open." Said Simon.

More sounds of running feet and then the enemy were there, shouting and brandishing longswords. Simon ran straight at the assassins and as usual, Patsy was right behind him.

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Patsy Smart assumed Esmé Duarty had her private quarters on the top floor of the villa. In just about every good guy versus bad TV show or film she'd ever seen, the bad guy had his, or her lair on the top floor. Not that she could start telling Agata or Gabriel about movies and TV shows, they'd think she was crazy. They were following her, probably assuming she knew where to go. There always seemed to be someone following her lately, no matter what the task. Patsy had assumed Simon had instructed various people to watch her back. Now she wasn't so sure.....She did have quite a bit of fame now, simply by where she'd been and the battles she'd survived. The main staircase for the villa creaked a bit, but the gorgeous carpets made it almost a pleasure to run up.

"The top floor.....I guarantee Esmé will be on the top floor." Said Patsy.

"We'll be right behind you." Said Agata.

"Simon said to try and take her alive." Said Gabriel.

"I know.....I know." Said Patsy.

Esmé Duarty had to have a head full of useful information. It would be nice to hear most of that information; before dumping her overboard somewhere between Crete and Livorno. Maybe between Crete and Naples if Simon definitely chose fire and Mount Vesuvius. No one could die to keep Esmé alive though. If it came to it, it had to Esmé leaving the land of the living.

"Stop, Patsy.....Stop." Karkengara said in her head. Patsy instantly stopped.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Agata.

"Karkengara sometimes gets into my head." Said Patsy. "He told me to stop."

When he came the bringer of fire was barely there. Like a tissue paper tracing against the wall, he looked more like an apparition than a living deity.

"No.....Duarty has her office at the downstairs rear of the building." Said Karkengara.

"Where do we need to go ?" Asked Patsy.

"Straight in front of you is a spiral staircase." Said Karkengara. "Go down four floors, it's the furthest you can go down. Then straight forward and you'll find a door to the private study of Esmé Duarty. Be careful, she is not without defences."

Karkengara vanished, leaving Patsy to run towards the spiral staircase. The other two were still with her, still easily keeping up.

"What do you think he meant by not without defences ?" Asked Gabriel.

"I have no idea." Said Patsy. "We'll probably find out when we get to her study."

The staircase had stone steps with no carpeting. Patsy was relatively young, but the stairs were still giving her poor knees a pounding. At the bottom the spiral staircase had only one exit, though there wasn't a clue that the short corridor would take them to the boss lady's lair. The phrase not without defences was lodged in Patsy's head, like an earworm on music radio; from the days when her world seemed full of radios. She slowed and then came to a stop in front of a very ornate wooden door.

"Be careful." She whispered.

Laura used the saying most, though she'd sort of stolen it from Clara. A wooden door wasn't much of an obstacle; it wasn't even much of a door. Patsy lifted her foot and used the heel of her shoe. She kicked the door the way Laura had taught her, her heel hitting just above the lock. The beautifully carved door with its wonderfully intricate patterns, broke apart as it flew into the room where Esmé was supposed to be. Patsy went first of course, running into Esmé's study while trying to be alert and ready for anything. The tall woman sat behind a large desk, looked surprised; which was nice. She had two guards with her, one of them sat in a high back chair and looking half asleep. That too was nice, really nice.

"Don't kill Esmé Duarty." Yelled Patsy.

There was an 'unless you really have to,' echoing in her head, but Agata and Gabriel weren't stupid; they'd know that.

"Many have tried child.....Many have tried and I still live." Shouted Esmé.

The boss lady was wearing a black dress, with a large patterned collar. She looked quite old, but not too old to use the sword lying on her desk. Relatively old is the phrase Simon liked. Esmé was a babe in arms compared to Simon and Giovanni. No yelled instructions, Patsy moved towards the boss lady, while the other two went after her guards.

"I really don't want to kill you." Said Patsy.

"As I told you.....Many have tried to kill me and failed." Said Esmé. "Most of them are in the ground now.....So do your worst child."

Well-spoken for a leader of a gang of assassins, Patsy hoped there was a way of not killing her.

Curiosity was beginning to grow and Patsy already had so many questions. Agata grunted, but Patsy

ignored the temptation to turn around. Esmé decided not to wait for Patsy to strike and picked up her own longsword. A nice looking weapon and Esmé handled it well; though Patsy doubted if she'd had a serious fight in many years. Fighting was what she paid her guards to do. Patsy easily ducked under a kind of swirling circular strike from Esmé.

"You move well." Said Patsy. "Not well enough though, or fast enough."

A shriek from Esmé and several thrusts that surprised Patsy. Things weren't going as Patsy had hoped and Gabriel was making the snorting sounds of a fighter who is outmatched. From an easy victory, Patsy opened her mind to the idea of dying in Esmé's study. A sword swing nearly cut across Patsy's throat, but something heavy fell on the boss lady.

"I've got her, help your friends." Said Karkengara.

He was there, the bringer of fire and more of him than comfortably fitted into the office. Tables and chairs had been crushed, cabinets broken; their contents scattered. Karkengara had the boss lady though. She was trying to thrash about, but the huge deity had her trapped under his right claw.

"Don't let her escape." Said Patsy.

Karkengara just sighed the sigh of the underappreciated. Patsy looked at Agata first, who had just plunged her blade into one of Esmé's guards. From memory he was the one who'd appeared to be taking a nap when they'd entered the room.

"Well done, Agata." Said Patsy.

"Help Gabriel, he has several wounds." Said Agata.

Patsy had been over confident, she realised that now. Karkengara had saved her from being killed by Esmé, or the boss lady escaping at the very least. Now Gabriel had blood on his shirt in several places. Judging by what Agata had told her, the blood was his. Patsy refused to lose another fighter from Cosimo's people. No fighters code, she plunged her blade into the assassin's back until he went down, never to rise again.

"Gabriel, Gabriel.....How bad are your wounds?" Asked Patsy.

"He'll be dead by morning." Said Esmé.

"Quiet, or no matter how useful you are; I'll gut you where you lie." Said Karkengara.

It was unlikely that Esmé Duarty had seen a deity who looked like a dragon before; much less being pinned to the floor by its claws. She'd obviously decided to be cautious with her sarcastic replies and didn't say a word. Patsy pulled up Gabriel's shirt and the wounds were bad, but not necessarily fatal.

"We'll get you to Vittoria.....She'll be able to heal you." Said Patsy.

"I can make him as good as new with my healing breath." Said Karkengara. "You take Esmé to Simon and I'll bring Gabriel when he's fully healed. Tie up Esmé good and tight though, she's obviously a tricky one."

While Karkengara breathed his cool healing breath over Gabriel; Patsy and Agata tied up Esmé Duarty like a Christmas goose. Agata gave the boss of the assassins a warning.

"We're not supposed to kill you, but I can hurt you a lot." Said Agata.

"You sent an assassin to kill the man I sleep with." Said Patsy. "Be cooperative.....You can still talk with a broken arm."

Esmé must have realised they were sincere and behaved herself. Simon actually found them, halfway up the spiral staircase.

"Well done, you captured Esmé." Said Simon. "I was worried that she might have escaped."

"No, we found her." Said Patsy. "Gabriel was hurt, but Karkengara is healing him."

"Fools.....My assassins will kill you all before you can reach your ship." Said Esmé.

"Shut up.....You've been warned." Said Agata.

"She has a point." Said Simon. "We need to be on the Mermaid and a long way out to sea, before her people organise a rescue mission."

"Crete is the island of pirates and assassins." Said Esmé. "You can't escape."

Patsy hit the boss lady hard in the midriff, winding her. Patsy wasn't proud of herself, but she did feel better. Agata gave her the smile of someone who knew exactly why Patsy had hit Esmé; and wished she'd done it herself.

"Back to the Mermaid." Yelled Giovanni. "Get back to the ship."

"Give us any problems and we can knock you out and carry you." Giovanni said to Esmé.

"You'll get no trouble from me." Said Esmé Duarty.

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