

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 12 - Latakia

"Patsy had kept in touch with her college friends, but that was no longer possible. It was a hell of a long way from twenty first century Southgate in North London; to Italy at the time of the Medici. One thing Patsy remembered was her old friends saying men who went on top were an endangered species. Patsy had blamed unrealistic romance dramas on TV; which she blamed for quite a few other things too. Simon seemed to have no hang ups about getting on top, after a bit of wonderful foreplay of course. Simon entered her and thrust deep inside her, until Patsy thought she might actually pass out. It was superb, it was wonderful; it definitely wasn't out of any daft TV miniseries she'd ever seen."

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Simon wasn't as keen on Malta as Patsy, who referred to it as a home from home. He could see her point though; they'd never had to flee for their lives; as they'd had to do elsewhere. They'd never even had to leave the island in a hurry. Galeoto and his crew liked Malta and on the whole, the people of Malta liked them. There'd always be the occasional argument over the price of supplies, but nothing that couldn't easily be dealt with.

"You can hire more than two extra crew if you want to." Simon said to Galeoto. "With money from Machiavelli and the sale of a few artefacts found on the Ivory Coast; money isn't likely to become an issue."

There was an ulterior motive to Simon's generosity. Patsy had heard about several secluded beaches she wished to explore; and of course Simon was invited to explore with her. Nothing strange, or even slightly mystical; just beautiful beaches with lush green vegetation and a reputation for being gorgeous on a sunny day. Galeoto was old school though, which might mean Patsy never seeing those beaches.

"I only need two new crew members to make up to my ideal number." Said Galeoto. "I've found over the years that if you hire too many, they tend to get under each other's feet."

Patsy had found the beaches and unlike Simon, she was shamelessly honest when it came to asking for a favour.

"There are a few places I want to explore before we leave, Captain." Said Patsy. "Maybe you could take an extra day or two seeing new crew members; without feeling a need to actually hire them."

Galeoto had been with Paola quite a lot in Livorno, it was still the talk of the ship. He always had a romantic streak in him after a few nights sharing a bed with Paola and enjoying her home cooking. He actually patted Patsy on the shoulder and laughed.

"Fair enough Patsy Smart.....I'll take a while looking for crew I don't need." Said Galeoto. "Let me know when you're done with exploring the less seen parts of Malta."

"Mia will appreciate a bit of extra time here." Said Simon. "She has family on the island and a couple of business concerns.....Thriving, so I heard."

Thriving seemed like a word to describe infants, but Mia used it to describe her two ship chandler businesses. Simon had no idea of what each one sold, but Galeoto had been buying from Mia for quite some time.

"I think Agata also has people on Malta." Said Patsy.

"If I might make a suggestion ?" Said Galeoto. "We could just add five days onto the date we set sail for the Eastern Mediterranean. That way everyone gets a while to explore, see their people, or just sit on the beach.....Does that sound a good idea ?"

"That sounds perfect." Said Simon.

There was still an unanswered question about Cyprus; were they going to enter the harbour to restock with supplies ? It was the ever present need to buy food and water to keep those on the Mermaid fed and healthy. In a way, stopping or not stopping in Cyprus had an easy solution. If they were hungry and thirsty as Cyprus came into view on the horizon; they'd stop there.

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It was a hot night on a beach to the west of the island, their last night on Malta. Patsy quite missed proper weather forecasts with details of what to expect; especially the night time temperature. It was hot and that was all anybody knew; a hot night after a nearly a week of hot nights. It was better than the radio news she'd listened to in London, before being zapped away from the twenty first century. Constantly hearing about the latest cold snap or heatwave could become quite irritating. A man down at the harbour with a bottle of cloudy shark oil, said it was going to be a hot night; and he'd been right. That was all that really mattered. Simon and her were both naked and lying on a blanket, with another blanket to pull over them if the weather turned cold. They didn't look likely to need the second blanket.

"I love it here." Said Patsy.

"The beach, or Malta in general." Asked Simon.

Her lover had a hairy chest, which had surprised her the first time they'd undressed together. Why a vampire having a hairy chest seemed weird was another of those things she'd probably never really understand. Simon was as he was and she loved him; totally and unconditionally. Patsy kissed that hairy chest, which tasted a bit sweaty in the heat.

"Both." Said Patsy. "One day it would be nice to live on Malta for a while."

"Once the quest is over, we can live where we want to." Said Simon. "We're stuck in this timeline, but I can think of worse things. Shall we pencil in living in Malta after the quest ?"

If they both survived seeking the answer to the ultimate question. Not that Patsy thought of herself as being unduly morbid. Death tended to be taken seriously by all those on the quest; they'd already seen so much of it.

"Consider it pencilled in." Said Patsy.

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"I love you." Gaspd Patsy.

Much to her relief, he repeated it back at her. They both fell asleep and when they woke up, the sun seemed intent on making it a hot day on Malta. Simon was already coughing and sneezing, as though he had the world's worst hay fever symptoms. Vampire sunshine allergy was hardly something that big pharma could develop a cure for. How would they market it ?

“Come on.....Bathe in the sea.” Said Simon. “Then I’ll race you back to the Mermaid.”

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Simon kept muttering about Malta being in their rear view mirror, though it took Giovanni a few minutes to realise it was a reference to transportation used in the timeline Simon and Patsy had left behind. There Malta was; a green and lush looking island about five miles behind them.

“Whichever deity looks after the weather, is giving us a good start.” Said Agata.

Small and pretty, Giovanni could see a lot of her younger sister in her. Rosa had mentioned her sister a few times, usually mentioning her skill with a sword and shield.

“A good wind pushing the Mermaid east.” Said Giovanni. “I’m not an expert on sailing the oceans, but even I know that’s really good news, I just hope it lasts.”

“Get a good steady wind.” Said Agata. “And Galeoto said we’ll be able to sail straight past Cyprus.

Probably for the best, I’ve heard some bad stories about ships who stopped there for supplies.”

Giovanni had never heard anything bad about stopping at Cyprus for water and supplies, but as he often said; he was no expert on such things. His expertise lay in dealing with anyone trying to swindle them, or steal from the Mermaid, or even take over the ship. That was when Giovanni really came into his own. Actually Giovanni had another thing he was good at; but Simon had warned him off trying to get Agata into his bed.

“Nothing else to annoy Cosimo’s people.....Promise me Giovanni.” Simon had said.

Giovanni had given his word, even if it was rather grudgingly. It was a pity really; Agata seemed just his type.

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Mia Cassar had worked things out with Juliana. Spending all night in the forward hold might work for one night, but Mia was damned if two young lovebirds were going to take over her cabin for the entire journey to Latakia. It was her cabin; Galeoto had allocated it to her before Juliana and Hassan had claimed it as a love nest. They all tried to be useful, but in reality; none of them were members of the Mermaid’s crew.

“You can have fun with Hassan during the day.” She’d told Juliana.

May the Gods save her from young women on their second, or maybe third lover. Juliana blushed and became fairly inarticulate for a while; but in the end they did agree on a plan. Mia got her bed back at night and Juliana entertained Hassan during the morning. Not a perfect solution, but they had shaken hands on it. Occasionally Mia went back to the cabin to change her clothes; to be greeted by the squeals and squeaks of Juliana enjoying Hassan. But as Giovanni often said; no plan is perfect. They had put in to the harbour at Cyprus; as Galeoto put it.

“Any captain not filling the water barrels at every opportunity; is a fool.”

Just two days and nights at a port on the south side of the island; a port with a name she’d given up on trying to pronounce. As Mia had told Simon.

“Alberti will know the name.....I don’t care where we are if I’m only there for two days.”

Simon had pretty much the same philosophy on life, but Juliana had looked disgusted. Sacks of supplies were bought too and brought aboard the Mermaid. The third morning, the anchors were up and Galeoto was taking the Mermaid out of the harbour only a few of them could pronounce. It was a moment of potential trouble, their first for quite a while now. ‘Cook,’ the first officer had been working with the crew on swinging the deck cannons around. They could now aim at any enemy ship in a few minutes, or any potential enemy ship.

“A ship seems to be heading right at us.....I’m not happy with that, Cook.” Said Galeoto.

Mia had run with pirates once, when she'd been too young to know better. Coming up on a ship that had just left port was a fairly standard pirate trick. Their two surviving pirates from Crete, were saying pretty much the same thing. The crew of the Mermaid were rested and not expecting trouble, which made them a soft target. Obviously the pirates hadn't heard about Captain Galeoto and his deck cannons.

"Fire if they look even slightly hostile." Yelled Galeoto.

"No pirate flag on her." Said Mia.

"Sometimes they don't have one." Said Cook.

It was a musket ball which decided things, or at least began the hostilities. A single, solitary musket ball fired by someone up in the rigging of the pirate ship. It missed Galeoto, but tore into the wall of the wheelhouse. The crew often moaned about the food, or the long hours if they were unloading. But no one was allowed to try and kill their captain; they'd have gone after the devil himself if he'd tried to kill Captain Galeoto. Mia picked up a musket from the rack and began the time consuming process of loading it.

"First deck cannon.....Fire high into their rigging." Yelled Cook.

A bang loud enough to make her ears buzz and a cloud of grey smoke came from the cannon nearest to the port guard rail. There was a scream from the pirate vessel, as someone fell and hit the deck. A good area of rigging fell from the pirate's mast and landed on the deck.

"We'll.....That will slow their gunners up a bit." Shouted Galeoto.

"Second cannon.....Strafe their deck." Yelled Cook.

Mia was closer to that cannon than the first; her ears were really beginning to ring. More grey smoke that seemed to drift everywhere in the wind. There were a few cries from the pirate vessel, but they were a long way from being beaten. Luckily they weren't as well trained with deck cannons as the crew of the Mermaid. Their first shot was high and wide to starboard; but there was yet more grey smoke making things difficult to see. Mia had finally loaded the musket. Not that she expected to hit anything, but she was better with the weapon than most. There was a saying that if you aimed a musket at the church, you'd be lucky to hit anywhere in the parish.

"Important looking man on their rear deck, Galeoto." Said Mia. "Do you mind if I try to put a musket ball into him?"

"Not at all.....May the saints bless your aim." Said Galeoto.

Cook was doing his own thing, getting the cannons reloaded as quickly as a target offered itself up. He yelled at the gun crews to fire four deck cannons at once, all aimed right on the waterline. More noise and yet more grey smoke, this time with a hint of black. They'd aimed well, pieces of hull from the pirate ship, were sent flying into the air. One of the crew looked over the guard rail and proclaimed the enemy were holed below the waterline and sinking. Maybe not immediately, but they were sinking.

"Are we picking up survivors, Captain?" Cook asked Galeoto.

"No, we haven't got room for them, or the inclination to save them." Said Galeoto. "Let the bastards drown."

The two surviving pirates from Crete were cheering; as if Galeoto couldn't possibly mean them. If there was a rule about picking up pirates from a sinking vessel, Mia had never heard of it. Let the bastards drown seemed fine, but she had a loaded musket, a target; but she was yet to fire it.

"Keep the Mermaid steady." Said Mia. "I still have an important looking man to fire at."

"Who do you think he is?" Asked Giovanni; who'd just turned up.

"I have no idea." Said Mia.

A ship wobbling about a little as she fired, but her musket ball must have hit its target. The man in a fancy looking shirt and hat had a spurt of blood on his chest; precisely where she'd aimed for.

"Got him !" Yelled Mia.

"What.....Yeah, I can see.....He just fell over." Said Cook.

"One important looking pirate assumed dead." Said Mia.

They didn't recover any pirates, even if they were badly wounded. They didn't even try to salvage anything worth having from the pirate ship. The Mermaid sailed on and half hour or so later; the pirate ship sank. Everyone cheered.

"The next time we drop anchor, we'll be in Latakia." Said Captain Galeoto.

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If Gabriel had been asked for one word to describe the port of Latakia, it would have been dry. The eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea was always hot and dry, at least according to Galeoto and his charts. The Mermaid had entered the harbour and dropped anchor, rather than tying up at the quayside. It seemed they weren't expected and Latakia was a busy port. When Gabriel pressed him on the subject, Galeoto had other reasons to leave the Mermaid resting at anchor.

"Some captains say Latakia is safe, some say it's not." Said Galeoto. "My own experience of the port is limited and I've heard good and bad things. Best to leave the Mermaid where she's easier to defend if a local gang try to take her over. I think we can rely on Karkengara to teach them a few good manners."

Galeoto gave a wicked grin as he mentioned the bringer of fire being used to guard the ship. It made sense of course, when a good number of the crew would be trudging across five hundred miles of hot, dry land to reach Nineveh. Not that the port didn't have those selling water and supplies; there were even lodgings available for those wanting a little comfort. Simon studied the port through a telescope, before summarising the problem.

"The Mermaid might be at anchor for close to a year." Said Simon. "I can't see a local gang of ruffians resisting the urge to board her if she's at the quayside; even if it's just out of curiosity. Our ship is much safer where she is, resting at anchor."

Gabriel had served a while in the city guard of Florence. He'd seen many crimes committed purely to satisfy the curiosity of the criminals; often the amount gained in goods or gold seemed hardly worth their effort. So, it was settled; the Mermaid was going to wait for them at anchor, a fair way from the shore. Mia was wearing the brightest colours Gabriel had seen her wear, so far.

"Come on." Yelled Mia. "The sooner we're ashore, the sooner we can begin heading towards Nineveh."

"No mention of Nineveh to the local children." Said Giovanni. "One word to any of them and the entire port will know where we're going by mid-afternoon."

"Do you know Latakia ?" Asked Gabriel.

"No, but I know children and their perpetual curiosity." Said Giovanni.

Getting everyone ashore who was going ashore took a while. Getting their supplies ashore added an hour to the entire process. There had been no timescale agreed, or a deadline. No one seemed eager to complain when they began heading east after the heat of the day was beginning to cool a little. Still a way off dusk and there were good oil lamps among their supplies. Not that travelling at night was going to be the norm, but Galeoto's caution about local thugs made everyone keen to put a few miles between them and Latakia. Machiavelli had been quiet for quite some time, but he seemed to enjoy heading out into the dry hot lands east of Latakia.

"I can feel Nineveh; I can almost see the ancient city." Said Niccolò. "Its power seems to.....Sparkle in my mind."

Gabriel found Niccolò to be a little theatrical at times, which could be annoying. Sparkling with power indeed, as if that could be seen over five hundred miles away. Simon believed in the historian though and his importance to the great quest.

"Can you see if it's raining there, Niccolò?" Asked Giovanni.

Machiavelli glared at Giovanni, which caused quite a few chuckles among the members of the crew heading east with them. Simon seemed to view the philosopher as being able to defend himself and ignored what was going on.

"You'll see, Giovanni.....Nineveh is one of the few places with genuine power." Said Niccolò.

There were no more chuckles after that. Gabriel wasn't sure how many of the crew believed in the quest for the ultimate answer to the ultimate question. They seemed to view Machiavelli as the real thing though, a genuine mystic. Simon made the decision, that they'd walked long enough in the dark, stumbling about by lamplight.

"I can just about see a group of well grown trees and hear a river." Said Simon. "We'll camp there for tonight. I don't care who takes which watch; just so long as a watch is kept until dawn."

The river just past the trees wasn't shallow, but it looked swimmable. Gabriel would need to see it in the daylight to decide if he'd risk his life trying to swim across it. Cook was trying to convince everyone it was the Euphrates River, but it was much too narrow. Vittoria scooped up two good handfuls of the river water and sniffed at it. After sniffing, she took several mouthfuls.

"The river water is fresh, clean and safe to drink." Said Vittoria.

A few dead tree branches made a fire and fairly soon, their camp was cosy and reasonably well lit. As he did on the Mermaid, Cook prepared a meal that wasn't wonderful, but it would keep body and soul together. The group now had a routine for making camp and Gabriel quite liked it. After the meal, plates and utensils were rinsed in the river. Gabriel volunteered to help wash the crockery, though he wasn't happy when his offer was accepted. Saying how clumsy he was with plates made no difference, he seemed to be the group crockery washer in perpetuity. Just before everyone settled down to sleep, Patsy had a surprise for them. She'd been looking up through the trees for a while, though Gabriel couldn't see what had got her so interested.

"I think some of you owe Niccolò an apology." Said Patsy. "Look between the high trees and look just north of east."

"The approximate direction of Nineveh if I'm not mistaken." Said Niccolò.

"What have you seen?" Asked Giovanni.

"Look.....Look where I said; it sparkles." Said Patsy.

Those already in their bed roles were out of them, scanning the sky roughly a little north of east. It was Mia who gave a huge yell and pointed at a certain spot in the night sky.

"It's the magic of Nineveh, its power." Yelled Mia. "It must be lighting up the sky over that ancient city."

"I see it too." Said Simon.

No one actually offered Niccolò an apology, but he looked happy anyway. Everyone was looking at the sky over Nineveh, which was at least five hundred miles away. It really was sparkling with unknown power.

"No doubt about it, we're definitely heading the right way." Said Mia.

"The greatest civilisation that ever existed." Said Niccolò. "Even the ruins of Nineveh will have a lot to teach us."

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For two months and three days they'd been trudging over rough dry ground; they'd even waded across a few relatively shallow rivers. If they hadn't managed to successfully hunt small creatures for the pot, they wouldn't have starved; but their diet would have been repetitive and boring. Similarly, the fresh water rivers meant there was no need to ration their drinking water. The rivers meant they could bathe too, though not as often as Juliana bathed when she was at home. There was a definite odour to her and her clothing, which she was trying hard to ignore. The thought of two months trudging back to the Mermaid filled her with dread.

"According to Niccolò, we'll be there tomorrow." Said Mia. "Vittoria agrees with him, but everyone trusts Niccolò about such things."

Every day the sparkles in the sky looked closer and brighter. At night the sky seemed to glow with power for miles around them. It didn't take much skill to work out that the following day they'd be there; the grand arrival in Nineveh. Not that Juliana was going to say anything about that.

Machiavelli was the group's accepted mystic and every quest needs one of those. Juliana did have her own tiny gem of information, given to her by Patsy.

"Brother Alberti spoke to Simon and Patsy yesterday." Said Juliana. "He says the sparkling and lights in the sky over Nineveh are something new. Alberti seems to think that our expedition is the cause of it; more specifically the arrival of Simon in the area."

"That does make sense." Said Mia. "It is his great quest, he is our leader."

"And partly chosen because of his immortality." Said Juliana. "Nineveh may be the final destination for Simon's quest, but I doubt it. My guess is that it's just another stepping stone on our journey."

They camped that night at the base of a hill, with a very specific promise for the following day. Once they reached the top of the hill, they'd see the entire city of Nineveh laid out before them.

The next day arrived, with Niccolò Machiavelli on good form. The sparkles of power could still be seen in the sky above them, despite it being a bright sunny morning.

"Some of it will be a ruin, but much of the city should still look as it did when it was built." Said Machiavelli.

"How long ago was that?" Asked Cook.

"Around six thousand years ago." Said Machiavelli.

That caused a few gasps, especially from Galeoto's crew. At a time when life expectancy could be as low as thirty years in Italy; six thousand years had to sound like a staggering period of time.

"Who built Nineveh?" Asked Hassan.

"People.....People not that different to us." Said Simon. "Come on.....We have a hill to climb."

Juliana had to smile at Simon saying people not that different to us. He was a vampire after all, but she knew what he meant. People with two arms, two legs and a head on their shoulders; probably a clever head by all accounts.

"A steep hill first things in the morning." Said Giovanni. "Can we leave the next hill until the cool of the evening?"

Machiavelli ignored him of course, probably the best way to handle Giovanni. The hill was steep and the sun was trying to boil them. Niccolò was doing well though, the heat didn't seem to bother him that much, or the climb. He kept up a steady stream of information on Nineveh and like guides in galleries; he didn't seem bothered if anyone was actually listening. Juliana heard again a name of a peoples already mentioned by Brother Alberti.

".....The main part of Nineveh was built by the Hassuna, who....." Said Niccolò.

"That's it; we need to find a living Hassuna." Said Juliana.

"Are we talking about finding someone over six thousand years old?" Asked Giovanni.

"Probably.....That will become clearer as we explore the city." Said Simon.

"Well.....It'll be a neat trick if you can do it." Said Giovanni.

Conversation stopped for a while, as they came over the top of the steep hill. Laid out in front of them was the City of Nineveh and little of it was a ruin. There'd have been earthquakes in a period of six thousand years; the occasional destructive storm. Juliana looked at the rows of building and her first thought was how well preserved they were; her second thought was.....

"Wow, Nineveh is actually beautiful." She said.

"It is.....Very beautiful." Said Mia.

"And above the city, the sky still crackles with power." Said Vittoria.

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Niccolò Machiavelli heard a few complaining at the steepness of the hill, as they negotiated the steep gradient down into the City of Nineveh. As first it perplexed him, surely going down was always better than going up a hill. After his second tumble on rough ground, he changed his mind. Patsy and Juliana seemed to have adopted him as some poor kind of befuddled relative who needed watching.

"Be careful, Niccolò." Said Patsy. "You were close to cracking your skull open on the last tumble."

"If you think I'm brain addled, you do me a disservice." Said Niccolò. "Don't forget that I was a nebulous ghost for years, a wraith as some call them. I had no solid body to lose balance and tumble over on the rocky path. But.....I will be much more careful."

"Of course, I understand now." Said Juliana.

"But I still intend to watch you.....In case you tumble." Said Patsy.

"Me too.....Watch you like a hawk." Said Juliana.

Niccolò gave a long grumpy sigh; he was getting rather good at them. When he was young and healthy a trip or tumble was just that, simply a loss of footing. Now he was getting old and had actually died for a while; a trip had become a fall. Some talked to him as though a fall was almost as bad as catching a virulent dose of the Flux. Still, it was rather nice to have Juliana and Patsy fussing over him. Just so long as he could keep it to small doses. Simon joined his two volunteer nurses, but they refrained from asking about his health.

"We're there, Niccolò.....Or we soon will be." Said Simon. "What are we looking for in this beautiful huge city?"

"Something Giovanni and you are almost designed to find." Said Niccolò. "We're looking for something intelligent and alive; we're looking for a Hassuna who has survived for thousands of years. Vampires will probably sense it, or them, as living beings. You'll also sense that the Hassuna are not humans."

If he'd given Simon a large chest of gold, he couldn't have looked happier. He was grinning from ear to ear, while he yelled for Giovanni to join them. Machiavelli repeated what he'd told Simon and Giovanni responded with a massive smile.

"All those centuries and we've finally found something we're designed for." Said Giovanni.

"I know, it's wonderful." Said Simon. "Come on.....Into Nineveh and see which of us is first to find a living Hassuna."

They were off, running down a hillside that Niccolò was having trouble walking down. He had to admire the vampires, even if they were often quite annoying. Simon was yelling to Giovanni about where to start searching.

"Sometimes.....They're like overgrown children." Said Juliana.

"But I bet they'll soon find a living Hassuna." Said Niccolò.

"So, where do we start searching ?" Asked Patsy

"You mustn't pass on what I tell you to Simon.....Agreed ?" Asked Niccolò. "Or anyone not in our small group, now I think about it."

"I agree.....I think Juliana and myself can keep your secrets." Said Patsy.

"This had better be a huge and impressive secret, after that lead up." Said Juliana.

Simon and Giovanni seemed to be getting a little competitive about the whole thing and Niccolò was aware that Karkengara wasn't exactly a fan of his. Niccolò wanted something that would.....Knock everyone's socks off as Patsy was fond of saying. Machiavelli looked around, just in case someone was within listening range. There wasn't.....Only him and his two keen helpers.

"I'm not fluent in the language of the Hassuna." Said Niccolò. "I don't think anyone alive today really is. I know several lines though, which is just enough."

"Enough for what ?" Asked Patsy.

Was it enough ? Of course it was and if he started trying to avoid saying how, his small team of eager helpers were likely to lose interest. Worse still, they might join Simon and Giovanni.

"We need to go to the Council of the Holy, it's a building." Said Niccolò. "I know where it is and the gold coloured roof will tell us we have the right place. The words need to be said in the Great Chamber of the Council of the Holy."

"You've got me excited and curious now." Said Juliana. "What happens when you speak the words in that place ?"

"Every surviving Hassuna will come to the Great Chamber." Said Niccolò. "It seems they have to, it's part of their social etiquette."

"Wow, now I am impressed." Said Patsy.

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