

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 11 - Mesopotamia

"The orbs are ready to open the way, once we're in Lisbon." Said Niccolò.

"Ahhhh, so we're off to Lisbon next." Said Mia.

"I've always wanted to visit Portugal." Said Patsy.

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

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

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

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Like everyone else in Karkengara's temple, Simon Atherton was enjoying an open argument between the great Niccolò Machiavelli and Karkengara, the bringer of fire. He respected them both, but in truth; the decision on where to go next would always be his. He'd listen and nod in all the right places. Then he'd ask Brother Alberti for his views on the direction of travel for the next part of the great quest. Based on his record of talking sense, he favoured Karkengara. One thing was certain, the Mermaid wouldn't leave harbour in Livorno, until he was happy it was going in the right direction. Simon would decide based on the consensus and he'd tell Galeoto which sea charts to get out of the drawer. Just about everyone was in the temple now, drawn there out of curiosity and transported there by Karkengara's minions.

"The orbs point there, because they were created there." Said Karkengara. "The Mermaid will be sailing for Mesopotamia, Nineveh to be precise. It makes sense, we should have realised sooner. The quest is leading us to the most ancient civilisation in the world."

"Just the place to find the ultimate secret." Said Mia Cassar.

"Or at least a pointer to it." Said Simon.

"Am I invited on this trip ?" Asked Machiavelli. "I've always wanted to see Nineveh."

"Of course you are." Said Simon.

Was it imagination that Juliana looked pleased by his answer ? Simon knew that Juliana had a bit of a thing for older men, she had lived with him for a while and he was now over seven hundred years old. Compared to him, Niccolò was almost a young man.

"When does the Mermaid Leave for Mesopotamia ?" Asked Giovanni.

"We'll need to deal with the dead first." Said Simon. "Some Brotherhood fighters died fighting for us. Their families will need looking after."

"Yes, of course.....The dead must be looked after." Said Mia Cassar.

Mia still wore flamboyant clothing and had a bit of a swagger as she walked. Simon thought she was the only person who could talk about looking after the dead while dressed in a red and white dress; and still look dignified.

"I will need to talk with Brother Alberti about pointing the quest at Nineveh." Said Simon. "It's only being polite as Brotherhood gold has paid for most of our adventures."

"Yes, I can see how Alberti would need to know what's going on." Said Patsy.

"Timescale.....We're back at a likely date for the Mermaid to leave Livorno ?" Asked Giovanni.

Simon had never known Giovanni so keen to get out of town. Maybe someone he owed money to was looking for him ? Or, more likely; a jealous husband was trying to track him down. Simon suggested both, which caused a lot of laughter, from everyone except Giovanni.

"With luck and Galeoto being happy with the time scale." Said Simon. "I'd like to be on the Mermaid and saying goodbye to Livorno in ten days' time."

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Captain Galeoto had received a messenger from Simon, an official Brotherhood courier no less. The timescale to be ready to set sail was tight, but it was always tight. Simon expected wonders and Galeoto always wanted the Mermaid to look perfect. Not just look perfect, he wanted her to steer and feel perfect; even in a storm. First job was to let the crew know what date they were working towards, or at least as accurate a date as Simon had given Galeoto. As often happened on such vessels, the first officer doubled as the cook and was known to most simply as 'Cook'. Galeoto put his head out of his cabin and there were the noises and smells of a busy port.

"Cook.....Where are you Cook ?" He yelled. "I have news for you, important news."

Once Cook knew, he'd tell everyone else. It was easier than holding a meeting with the entire crew in the main cargo hold. Less chance of error too, with the news going from the captain to just one other person. Like a flash, Cook was there, looking happy and eager; everyone on the Mermaid liked important news. Cook had a damaged ankle from events in Benghazi, but he still got around fairly quickly.

"Here Captain." Said Cook. "I saw the Brotherhood messenger arrive."

"Simon wants us to leave port in ten days." Said Galeoto. "Can all the repairs be done by then ?"

"Hmmmm, tight.....But we can do it." Said Cook. "Where are we heading ?"

Simon had mentioned their destination being confidential; for now. Tell Cook and he'd tell a few of his trusted friends among the crew. By nightfall all the crew would know they were heading for Mesopotamia. By the next day, most who worked in the docks area would know about Mesopotamia; even if they had no idea where it was.

"That's still being confirmed; just get us ready to leave in ten days." Said Galeoto.

"Don't worry, we'll be ready." Said Cook.

As Galeoto closed his cabin door, he could hear Cook passing on the good news to the crew. Most of them liked being at sea; problems tended to occur when they were in harbour for a while. Some had entire families living in Livorno and they weren't always happy families.

"Alright.....Mesopotamia." Muttered Galeoto. "I know you're on one of my charts."

Galeoto knew people in the military; it came with the territory if you delivered soldiers and their supplies to distant shores. He'd heard of Mesopotamia because there had once been fighting there. Over half his charts had come into his collection of such things, because someone was fighting there. He had a good idea which chart to look at and as usual, he was right.

"Hmmmm, Mesopotamia." Galeoto Muttered. "Where the river Tigris meets the river Euphrates. Not a nice place to get stuck in bad weather, lots of mud.....According to the soldiers I knew."

Galeoto looked at the chart for a while, until he found the ancient city of Nineveh. Once the largest city in the world; according to the same old soldiers. Galeoto used a magnifier to look at the chart in detail. He needed to be sure of where to go and what to expect, their lives might well depend on it.

"It's a long way from the sea." He mumbled. "As far as the Mediterranean will take us, then we go overland. A hell of a long trudge overland. Still, if it's where Simon needs to go; we'll get there."

Nineveh once being the largest city in the world, was feeding his natural curiosity. There could be all kinds of places to explore in a city that size, even if it was now an abandoned ruin.

"Might even be treasure to be found." He mumbled.

Besides provisions, ammunition for the deck cannons and a lot of clean, freshwater; Galeoto knew they were still two short of the ideal number of crew members. It had been the battles and some strange aggressive creatures on the Ivory Coast. Simon was paying families compensation, but Galeoto hoped the crew losses calmed down a bit. Some ships with a bit of a reputation found it hard to recruit good crew members.

"And I don't want the mermaid to be one of those ships." He muttered. "We'll wait until Malta and hire them there.....They think we're wonderful in Malta."

Paola was coming to stay the night and she was bringing a home cooked meal. Paola's company always put him in a good mood. If ever he seriously thought about getting married and settling down, it would be with Paola. He knew other captains who'd married their favourite girl from the house of ill repute in Livorno. It wasn't just sex that made her special, she cooked like an angel.

"I really do think I'm falling in love.....And at my age."

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Niccolò Machiavelli couldn't really get it done on his own. Everyone was in Simon's house for a night or two, the ideal time to arrange it. There could be no asking Karkengara for his help, they were barely speaking now. They could be at his house, do the deed and be back at Simon's house in no time. Timed right, everything illegal could be done during the hours of darkness. If it was illegal to burn down your own home ? Niccolò had shared his intentions with Juliana, who'd talked it over with Vittoria. It was currently about two in the morning in Florence and all three of them were looking at Niccolò's house. Not really his now, the local government had grabbed it as a kind of museum to the works of the late Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli; him.

"You're really sure you want your house burned to the ground ?" Asked Vittoria.

"It doesn't feel like my house, hasn't for many years." Said Niccolò. "Time to get a new home to go with my new name. Not that I've thought of a new name yet. A legend I've been told is what crooks call it. A fake name and history, to escape the past.....I really need to escape my past."

"We could strip the place of all your things and leave it standing." Said Juliana.

"No, we'd miss something; something important." Said Niccolò. "It burns tonight.....I've made up my mind on that."

"I'll ask for the last time." Said Vittoria. "Do you want me to incinerate your old house ? Just a lot of ash and soot is all that will be left."

"Perfect, do it now." Said Niccolò.

He watched as Vittoria went around the outside of the house, touching the ground and muttering words he didn't understand. Locked doors and gates delayed them for just a few seconds. Vittoria was the best witch Machiavelli had ever worked with, he hoped Simon didn't get her killed in some ruined hell hole in parts seldom visited. After touching the ground outside, Vittoria moved inside, touching many floors and walls.

"I've collected energy, now I'm marking where it will become flames." Said Vittoria.

A little more touching of walls and they were heading out into the street.

"We need to be some distance away before I incinerate your house." Said Vittoria.

"Do it, make it massive.....Leave nothing but ashes." Said Niccolò.

Out of the front door he knew so well, through the garden he'd loved so much. Hoods up so as to not be recognised, they kept to the darkest shadows. Vittoria stopped walking a good hundred yards

from the house which had been his home for many years. It had also been a sanctuary for his ghost for many years after his death.

"I could dissipate the energy to the ground." Said Vittoria. "Last chance, Niccolò; do you want your old home to burn to the ground tonight."

Being asked so many times, it was beginning to annoy him. He knew his voice was clear and he wasn't prone to changing his mind. Still, Vittoria had left her bed in the early hours to do him a favour; so had Juliana for that matter.

"Are you really sure?" Asked Juliana. "Once it's gone, there's no getting anything back."

"Burn it.....Torch everything." Said Niccolò.

Vittoria leapt up into the air and remained hovering, her feet about three feet above the ground. She clicked the fingers of both hands, just the once.

"Sident." She shouted.

Niccolò had read a lot of forbidden texts, some from other worlds. Sident just meant let it happen, but it was a word with a lot of power and deeper meaning. As Vittoria floated to the ground, his old house began to burn.

"Wow, those are bright flames." Said Juliana.

Too far away to see the house in detail, but the many fires were beginning to light up the corner where his house had once stood. Soon the smell of burning reached them, along with the sound of cracking timbers. When rising smoke began to cover the stars, Niccolò thought it was time for them to leave.

"We should go before the city guard arrive." He said. "They're bound to come and investigate."

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Giovanni liked travelling on horseback and he was a firm believer that if something worked, don't fiddle with it. They had a horse drawn waggon with their equipment in it and a few personal supplies. Hassan was behind the reigns of the waggon, mainly because he had the most experience with that form of transport. It was the same way they'd headed for Livorno the last time; they were even planning a stop at the estate of the late Cosimo Pazzi. Hopefully things would have settled down since they'd been there before, the edge taken off any recriminations for Cosimo's death. The weather was drier than last time, more dusty. Most of them had scarves over their faces to keep the dust out of their mouths. Giovanni lowered the scarf from his face.

"Not far to the Cosimo Farm." Said Giovanni. "Well Simon, are you going to try and recruit a few good fighters while we're there?"

"Just one, Rosa had a sister; another native of Malta." Said Simon. "If we can persuade her to join us, she could help us find some additional crew members in Malta."

"What is this sister's name?" Asked Juliana.

"Agata.....The older of the two sisters by a few years." Said Simon.

Would Cosimo's people be happy with them recruiting another of their best people? It hadn't exactly gone well for Rosa and Cosimo himself. They knew the odds though; quests and adventures could be a good path to wealth, but that wealth came with a lot of risk.

"There.....I can see the top floor of the villa above the trees." Said Patsy.

It could go either way, with them leaving Cosimo Farm as friends, with Agata added to their group.

Or the tension over Cosimo's death might mean they were never allowed in the villa again. Giovanni hoped they parted as friends from Cosimo's people. From a purely selfish way of looking at it, the villa made a good overnight place to stay on the route to, or from Livorno.

"I hope they like me.....Some people don't." Said Machiavelli.

Giovanni could understand that, the revived author and historian sometimes felt creepy to him. Simon should have agreed forbidden subjects for Niccolò to discuss with strangers. As things stood he might try to discuss being given four years life by a dragon deity, or burning down his own house the previous week. Niccolò wasn't just a little creepy; he had the potential to be a minefield of ideas and recent events. A horn sounded and Giovanni hoped it wasn't a sign that Cosimo's people now considered them to be enemies.

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Patsy knew that Mabina had a kind of thrall ability, a way of bending people to her will. Simon always denied having a similar kind of vampire skill, but Patsy wasn't so sure. It might explain how she'd almost instantly fallen in love with him, on their very first date. She still wasn't sure why she'd pursued him for a date after seeing him on a busy Piccadilly Line train. He wasn't her usual type and there had already been a man in her life. They weren't far from Livorno, after just a single night at the Cosimo Estate. Agata was with them plus a waggon full of expensive supplies. If it wasn't a thrall skill, Simon had other abilities he was hiding from them.

"I hope you're looking forward to an adventure, Agata?" Asked Patsy.

Agata was hanging out of the back of the Waggon, which was actually a fairly good way for Patsy to talk to her while on horseback. Agata's own horse had been left at the Cosimo estate as payment for a small debt. Actually more of a medium sized debt, as Agata had mentioned a few times. Whatever the truth, those who'd seen the horse agreed that it was a good looking beast.

"Oh yes, though I still have no idea how we'll get to Mesopotamia." Said Agata.

"The eastern end of the Mediterranean." Said Simon. "Then we leave the Mermaid somewhere safe and travel overland for around five hundred miles."

"Five hundred miles! That is quite a trudge." Said Agata.

"That it is and some of it over rough ground." Said Simon. "It could take from two to three months to reach Nineveh."

Patsy already liked Agata and her eager smile at having to trudge so far, just made her like their new recruit even more. They stopped near the start of the main road into Livorno. Close enough to see the masts of the Mermaid at the quayside. Last time they'd been able to see the city guard waiting to arrest them, or failing that; kill them.

"Nice to see no city guards between us and our ship." Said Giovanni.

"We'll go to the stables before dealing with the waggon." Said Simon.

The owner of the stables was honest and fair, he'd either buy their horses; or charge a reasonable amount to feed and keep them safe until the Mermaid returned. Like all owners of such places the man checking over their horses was full of local gossip. Apart from Galeoto getting rather fond of Paola recently, things seemed rather quiet in the Livorno docks.

"Apart from the Mermaid being made ready to sail, there's little going on." Said the man.

Patsy looked at Simon and pulled a face. Such news wasn't good; they didn't want their movements becoming the main gossip of the port. Still, what was done was done and they'd soon be a long way from Florence and Livorno.

"Are the horses with the waggon going with you?" Asked the man. "If not I can offer you a good price."

There had been a long talk about taking a team of horses onto the Mermaid. Galeoto wasn't keen because of the amount of waste they'd create, which would all need cleaning up.

"Horses can be a nightmare if we hit a bad storm." Galeoto had said.

Simon had told her he was still tempted to take them to pull the waggon, but the roads were supposed to be very rough. In the end they'd decided to sell the horses in Livorno and leave the waggon in the main hold of the Mermaid.

"What sort of good price do you have in mind?" Asked Simon.

For two horses with little history to go with them, it sounded like a very good price to Patsy. There was a lot of gold and horses changing hands, before they left the stables. It had been arranged to leave the horses pulling the waggon on the quayside when they were no longer needed. The stables had lads who'd come for them later.

"Well.....The weather is being kind to us." Said Juliana.

"Just hope it's good all the way to Latakia." Said Simon. "I've had enough storms on the Mediterranean to become heartily fed up with them."

There had been a lot of discussion about where to leave the Mermaid and begin their long journey by foot. Brother Alberti had been contacted in the usual strange way. He'd liked Latakia as being a relatively safe port on a coast with more than its fair share of troubles.

"So, you decided on Latakia.....Good choice." Said Mia.

"No need to keep it secret.....We'll soon be out at sea and on our way." Said Simon.

To say the Mermaid looked well cared for and loved, was putting it mildly. A happy looking Galeoto came onto the quayside to meet them.

"Wonderful job you've made on the repairs." Said Simon.

"And the refurbishments.....The Mermaid looks amazing." Said Patsy.

"Nothing quite like a little paint.....And varnish in the right places." Said Galeoto.

Their ship needed a little time in dry dock, they all knew that. Hulls needed regular inspections and hopefully that would happen in Malta. Their ship looked wonderful though, as though it hadn't been built that long ago. In truth, the Mermaid was getting on a little.

"Let's get the waggon into the hold." Said Giovanni.

The waggon was loaded with supplies and heavy, though probably not the heaviest piece of cargo the crew had brought on board. The waggon was attached to a winch and a crane device. Up it went and then over and down into the main hold. Patsy noticed the look on Agata's face, the expression of surprise and excitement.

"Are you ready to leave harbour captain?" Simon asked Galeoto.

"We'll be ready to set sail on the morning tide."

"That sounds perfect." Said Simon.

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Juliana felt guilty and embarrassed, but she and Hassan had left it for quite some time. There was something about being at sea, where anyone in her family was a long way away. They'd been close to it a few times at Simon's house, but that had stirred up memories of romantic nights with Simon. They'd reached the point where they'd done just about everything sexual either of them could think of, but not full penetration. Hassan was being wonderfully patient, but sooner or later he'd find a girlfriend who didn't pull a face and say no, every time he tried to make love to her. No, she never had thought of Niccolò Machiavelli as a potential lover; he was just an interesting man to talk to. Tonight was the night though, with Livorno many miles behind the Mermaid. She'd even seen Vittoria for something to avoid her getting pregnant. Vittoria had rubbed her bare tummy and muttered for a while.

"There, no unplanned babies for you, Juliana." Vittoria had said to her.

"Wow, that was quick and easy." Juliana had said.

“And it will last for a year.”

So embarrassing that Juliana still felt her face go red when she thought about it. Better than getting pregnant though and far less embarrassing. Her family were the sort of people who might get her excommunicated for having a child outside of wedlock. Hassan was aware that she intended that night to be ‘the night,’ but there was one other person to talk to.

“So, you’re asking me to move out of our cabin for the night ?” Asked Mia.

Yes, they were sharing again; the Mermaid wasn’t a huge ship and there were quite a few of them to find beds for. Mia could be nice if she’d didn’t feel put upon. Juliana knew that asking her to sleep on a bedroll in the hold; was definitely putting upon Mia Cassar. There was an intensity in her gaze, that wasn’t pleasant. Juliana didn’t cry, but one or two tears did dampen her cheek.

“Please, Mia.....This will be our first time.” Said Juliana.

Mia actually hugged her and patted her shoulder.

“Have you taken precautions ?” Asked Mia.

“Yes, Vittoria did it for me.....I’m safe for a year.” Said Juliana.

“Crap.....Who am I to stand in the way of true love ?” Asked Mia. “I’ll get my things and get a key to the forward hold. You’ll owe me for this Juliana Colombo; you’ll owe me big time.”

“Thank you Mia, this means a lot to me.....To us.” Said Juliana.

Once Mia had gone, Juliana put a few personal things on the bedside table. She also sprayed a few places with her favourite and very expensive perfume. By the time Hassan knocked on the door, the small cabin looked like a romantic trysting place, maybe a lodging house room for lovers to meet. She felt her cheeks blushing again. Ridiculous really, she hadn’t been a virgin for quite some time. Hassan had to know that she’d shared a bed with Simon.

“Did you ask Mia ?” Asked Hassan.

“Yes, she’s in the forward hold for tonight.” Said Juliana.

Some of her clothing had come off before the cabin door was locked. Once it was locked it felt like the world was being kept away by a magical barrier and nothing could see them, hear them, or hurt them. Juliana pushed Hassan onto the bed and removed his trousers.

“I noticed you laughing with Machiavelli.” Muttered Hassan. “I was unsure if.....You might like him more than me.”

“Shut up.” Said Juliana.

She tasted him, the first man she’d tasted since Simon. Slightly salty, with a definite scent that yelled sexually aroused male. Hard and just the right shape, liking the shape of a man’s private parts was essential to her. Juliana kept licking and sucking at Hassan until he was close to losing control. That would never do, he had to be inside her before she let that happen. She climbed onto him and moved around until he entered her. It was a need, something she’d left for far too long. The thrusting, the heat of their bodies, the wonderful feelings. It was beyond simply satisfying a need, it was incredible. When he thrust in really hard, she knew he’d got there.

“Jesus.....That was amazing.” Said Hassan.

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For a long time, Karkengara hadn’t had any minions. Actually it had been for many millennia. No faithful worshippers calling his name and the minions had slowly drifted away. Had that happened to other deities ? He suspected it had and that those deities had faded out of existence. After all, what was the purpose of a deity with no believers ? The bringer of fire hadn’t faded away, he’d just kept to his temple in Duat for a very long time; sleeping on a plinth. Like a huge feline, he’d often slept for twenty, or twenty one hours per day. He hadn’t faded though and suspected that the multiverse had

plans for him. He was more active now and there were those who believed in him as a deity. Slowly the minions had returned to look after him and tend to his temple. Lots of female minions in long lilac robes. There were times when he was amazed at how many minions surrounded him when he called for them.

“Niccolò Machiavelli would be devastated if his farm was destroyed.” Said Karkengara. “On the other hand he accepts that the link to Duat, the Underworld; must be sealed shut.”

“There are different ways of sealing entrances to the Underworld.” Asked a Minion. “How solid and permanent do you require the seals to be.”

He looked at them; over two hundred of them were there to do his bidding. They might look harmless, but two hundred minions could destroy worlds. Not that they ever did, or at least only rarely.

“I want the seals to be immovable, unbreakable and last forever.” Said Karkengara.

There was a lot of muttering, but they were nodding their heads at him. Simon had needed to persuade Machiavelli to allow his farm to be sealed off from the Underworld. He hadn't been keen and might yet change his mind. Not that he could change his mind if the seals were solid and designed to last until the end of time. One of the minions waved her arm at him.

“We can do as you ask.....Would you like us to do it now ?” She asked.

He knew her but couldn't remember her name; even deities sometimes had problems with fitting faces to names. He had known a huge number of people over a long period of time.

“Yes, now would be perfect.” He said. “I can help if required.”

“We should be able to do it without bothering you.” Said the minion.

She'd been a high priestess of Horus, he recognised her now. Being a minion of the Gods could be hard work, but immortality tended to come with the position.

“Now then.....Do it now.” Said Karkengara.

They didn't run, but neither did they saunter. The minions split into several groups and they rushed in a fairly leisurely way. He was with them on the lowest level basement below Niccolò's farm. The minions began pointing down stairways and everywhere they pointed, there was an explosion. Explosions cause rubble, which the minions were spraying with fire, intense fire. Rubble melted and began to resemble volcanic magma. Karkengara enjoyed the heat; he rested back on his huge tail for a while. Once the molten rubble cooled, he knew every set of stairs down to Duat, would be sealed forever, or as close to forever as mattered.

“A wonderful job.....A truly wonderful job you've done.” He kept muttering at the minions.

His minions, he kept forgetting that. When one of them brought him cool drinks on a tray, he remembered they were his to command. He could even use them to fight his enemies, which had sort of slipped his mind. It really had been a very long time since he'd started doing everything himself. Now he had faithful minions at his service; it was worth remembering if Simon got himself into what appeared to be an unwinnable situation.

“Is everything to your satisfaction, mighty bringer of fire ?” Asked a minion.

“Yes, but don't go away too far.” Said Karkengara. “I may need your help in Nineveh.”

Magitte, that was her name; the minion nodding at him. Magitte had served Horus for countless millennia and tales of her efficiency were widespread. Why had she left Horus ? Switching deities happened occasionally and was one of the private things that was never discussed.

“If you need us just call.” Said Magitte. “Nineveh is a particularly dangerous place, even for deities.”

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'Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.'

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