

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 2 - Malta

“Simon was thinking of Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir, the place of ancient shrines & burials; when a steady wind began blowing from the North. Not a wind strong enough to damage anything, but enough of a wind to get them to Malta in a few days; rather than a few weeks. Was it a coincidence ? Simon didn't think so, Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir was one of the most mystical places they'd visited. He was now determined to go there again.”

»

Simon respected Captain Galeoto, who knew his ship well and understood the prevailing winds across the Mediterranean Sea. Even the best captain couldn't conjure up a wind to get them to Malta quickly; so Simon became reconciled to it being a long voyage. Right down the length of Italy and then south across the Mediterranean, with the Mermaid tacking the whole way.

“It's as if the Gods don't want us to arrive too soon.” Said Giovanni.

Just the two of them looking at the flat sails and the almost perfectly calm sea. There was food in the hold below and a reasonable amount of drinking water. Simon had decided to accept the inevitable and arrive in Malta after a far longer journey than he'd hoped for.

“On the bright side, it has given us all a chance to get to know one another.” Said Simon.

“Yes, I'm quite impressed with Rosa.” Said Giovanni. “She's really good with that long sword of hers.”

They'd been practising with each other, sparring with sharp edged swords. Simon could see it all ending when Rosa was given a deep wound. Until then they both seemed to enjoy an hour or so a day, honing their skills.

“Hassan seems to have some good contacts in Malta.” Said Simon. “I'll look for decent lodgings where we stayed on our last trip to Malta, but Hassan can get us good prices on the supplies we'll need.”

“I'm intrigued by this Mia Cassar, a female in the Brotherhood.” Said Giovanni.

“Oh, there are more than you might think.” Said Simon. “Alberti made her sound interesting and perhaps willing to join us. Brotherhood agents are usually good fighters.”

“I'm surprised we haven't seen more of Karkengara.” Said Giovanni. “Just once on our first night at sea and that was for less than an hour. Do you think his heart is truly in our quest ?”

“Yes, he's totally dedicated to helping us.” Said Simon. “He's worried about being seen by those who might cause trouble. The last thing we need is the Inquisition coming after us. The bringer of fire will be there when we need him.”

Simon was thinking of Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir, the place of ancient shrines & burials; when a steady wind began blowing from the North. Not a wind strong enough to damage anything, but enough of a wind to get them to Malta in a few days; rather than a few weeks. Was it a coincidence ? Simon didn't think so, Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir was one of the most mystical places they'd visited. He was now determined to go there again.

“Yes, the Gods smile on us.” Yelled Cosimo. “A good wind at last and from the right direction.”

It was as if the Mermaid was leaping over the Mediterranean Sea. They had food and hadn't been likely to die of thirst, but the wind cheered everyone up. No one asked if it was likely to last, that would have risked bad luck. To Simon it felt as though the wind from the north had set in, to take them all the way to Malta.

"We'll eat in Malta the day after tomorrow." Said Captain Galeoto.

~ ~

Patsy noticed that everything in Malta seemed to revolve around the docks on the north side of the main island. Simon knew lodgings there, though they had to spread themselves between two different lodging houses. Supplies too were to be bought from a family friend of Hassan; and they too ran their business from the area around the docks. Weapons, booze and fresh water; all of it could be obtained within a stone's throw of the Mermaid. A strong arm needed to throw the stone, but nothing was that far away. Patsy had never seen so many large sailing vessels in real life; and sometimes it all felt a bit surreal.

"You've got that faraway look again." Said Simon.

"It all looks like a Disney movie.....A good Disney movie." Said Patsy.

"You'll soon get used to things as they are in this timeline." Said Simon, as he laughed.

"Who is this Disney?" Asked Giovanni.

"A very clever man who made a fortune from a talking mouse." Said Patsy.

Giovanni looked at her as if she was mad; until Simon assured him she was telling the truth. Then Giovanni decided Disney had to be a witch and best not talked about. Everyone else was in the town, leaving the three of them to meet the mysterious Mia Cassar. Her exact date and time of arrival was unknown, but Simon had said he was sure Brother Alberti would be watching the docks in some way. Once the Mermaid was tied up and beginning to load up on supplies, he'd send the red head who dressed in flamboyant clothes. She sounded good company for Giovanni, as long as Simon didn't get any ideas. He'd told her that Alberti considered Mia to be attractive.

"Ahhhh, this has to be her." Said Giovanni. "Making her way through the crowds."

The extra height of being on the stern of the Mermaid was useful; they could see every ship in the port and everyone heading their way. A mop of red hair and a flamboyant dress, shouted out that the woman was the Mia Cassar they were expecting.

"This is exciting." Said Patsy. "How much money do you think Alberti has sent us?"

"A lot.....Alberti never does anything by halves." Said Simon.

"We could buy two deck cannons for the Mermaid." Said Giovanni. "The lack of defensive capability has always worried me."

Mia, it had to be her, sort of swaggered through the crowd. Her hair was the reddest Patsy had ever seen and her dress looked like something out of a stage play. For the period though, it wasn't too bad. Lots of primary colours, but no one was standing and watching her go by. A short blade on her hip and a huge smile on her face. Behind her came two very tired looking men, carrying a wooden chest.

"Our gold will be in the chest, bound to be." Said Simon.

"HmMMM, maybe we can buy three deck cannons." Said Giovanni.

"I'll give you this old friend, you're always predictable." Said Simon.

Patsy liked the look of Mia and decided then and there, to make her a friend.

"Hello, is this the Mermaid?" Yelled Mia.

"Yes it is, come aboard." Shouted Simon.

A bit cheeky to treat the ship as their own, but Captain Galeoto was conducting some personal business, in another part of town. A few of the crew were still on board, but they knew Simon pretty well by now. Mia strutted up the narrow walkway, as though she was the Queen of Malta. The two men behind her looked sweaty and very tired.

“Which of you is Simon ?” Asked Mia. “My name is Mia; I have a gift from your favourite brother.”

“I’m Simon and my friend here is Giovanni.” Said Simon. “The lady is known as Patsy.”

The two men were left on deck, but provided with beer. Simon and Giovanni carried the chest into the wheel house. Counting gold was a pastime best carried out in private. It had been agreed to keep the gold on the Mermaid, but very, very well hidden. Mia followed them into the wheelhouse. Patsy couldn’t stop herself saying it.

“I love your dress.” Said Patsy.

“Good.....I have a dressmaker in Naples.” Said Mia. “I’ve loved colourful clothing since I was a small child.”

Up close Mia didn’t look like a young girl, but Patsy would have put her age at no more than thirty five, definitely no older than that. The dress, the hair, the attitude.....If Mia was alive in modern day London, she’d have probably been some kind of television celebrity.

“Does the chest have a key ?” Asked Giovanni.

“No, just lift the lid.” Said Mia.

There was no huge gasp of excitement. There were several rows of rather boring green bags in the chest. Patsy couldn’t help gasping when Simon opened one of the bags. There had to be enough gold in that single bag to make a lot of her dreams come true and there a great many green bags. There was definitely enough gold to keep them supplied with food and water; and pay the wages of any mercenaries they might hire.

“Thank you, Mia.” Said Simon. “This gold will be put to good use, I promise you.”

Was it rude to ask ? Someone had to ask the question.

“How much is there ?” Asked Patsy.

“I’m honestly not sure; the chest has been in my basement for several years.” Said Mia. “One of those things Alberti mentions being needed one day and no one ever asks Alberti to explain himself. I only realised the chest was full of gold when Alberti told me in a dream.”

“Yes, that sounds like Alberti.” Said Simon.

Giovanni had been running some of the gold pieces through his fingers, as if trying to get a rough count from one green bag. He then counted the number of bags. Very quick and unscientific, but Patsy was sure he was about to come up with a rough number for their sudden wealth.

“All Florentine Florins, the best and most trusted gold coins.” Said Giovanni. “I’d say we have nine to ten thousand of them, which is.....Probably enough to buy anything we want.”

“That will really help.” Said Simon. “Do you need me to sign a receipt of some kind ?”

“No, Alberti will know you now have the chest.” Said Mia.

Simon was looking at Giovanni, who was sort of shrugging at him. It was so frustrating; they were likely to lose a good addition to their group because neither of them could decide.

“Will one of you ask her ?” Asked Patsy.

“Ask me what ?” Asked Mia.

“Alberti mentioned that you might join us.” Said Simon. “It might not be your kind of venture, but I think we could use someone like you.”

“Oh, don’t put her off.” Said Patsy.

Mia reached past Giovanni and removed one Florentine gold piece, which she held up in her fingers.

“Alberti told me a few things about your venture.” Said Mia. “The ultimate secret is so tempting. Call this florin my signing fee and I’m yours for a year; we can discuss my pay before you leave Malta. If we all get on, I may be open to extending my time with you. Is that satisfactory ?”

Giovanni nodded at Simon, who put his hand out towards Mia. She shook his hand, though it was obviously something she wasn’t used to.

“Welcome aboard.” Said Simon.

“When do we set sail ?” Asked Mia.

“It was going to be in two days.” Said Simon. “Now though.....I can see Giovanni wanting to install two or three deck cannons.”

“We can afford them now.” Said Giovanni. “Maybe even four deck cannons.”

“Don’t buy them here; the local sellers of such things will rip you off.” Said Mia. “I know people in Crete who’ll give you the best Deck Cannons at really good prices. They’ll even train the crew of the Mermaid on how to use them. Unless Crete is taking you in the wrong direction ?”

“No it isn’t, we’re heading for North Africa, Cyrenaica.” Said Patsy.

Giovanni was giving Mia a look, which kind of asked where she’d been all his life. They were all going to be glad Mia was going with them, Patsy could tell.

“Fine.....We’ll put off arming the Mermaid until we reach Crete.” Said Simon.

“My contacts in Crete are pirates, but I’ve never had any trouble with them.” Said Mia.

Four days later on a sunny morning, the Mermaid left Malta and headed east; towards the island of Crete. Why four days and not two ? Simon had wanted to visit Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir on Malta and that had taken longer than he’d expected.

~ ~

Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir, the place of ancient shrines and burials. Juliana had been there before and like Simon, she had a huge amount of affection for the prehistoric site. It was a truly ancient place, thousands of years old. The last time Simon had known a way to open up an underground pathway to a place of darkness. They’d survived and the place had opened their minds to the memories of everyone in their group. Her memories were opened up to everyone in the group and consisted of the usually nonsense a spoiled teenage girl gets up to. The things Simon and Giovanni had done as vampires.....The fact that they were vampires. It had taken her some time to forgive him for not telling her sooner. By the time she knew the terrible acts of violence he’d been involved in, she was in love with Simon Atherton. Beyond the place of rutted waggon tracks was a cliff. At the foot of that cliff was a large cave, if you knew how to open the way. Julianna was beginning to wonder if being there was a good idea. She was older now, her memories less innocent; and there were strangers with them. She wasn’t sure if she wanted Cosimo to know her most intimate memories. Actually she was sure, she definitely didn’t.

“I know we all agreed, Simon.” She said. “But now we’re here.....Are we really going to into the room where our minds are shared ?”

“I too have been wondering about that.” Said Hassan. “I’m not proud of some of the things I’ve done to put food on my family’s table.”

“Yes, we need to discuss this again.” Added Mia.

Simon was looking at the cliff, as if his destiny was there. The chambers in the caves below had changed him; they had changed everyone who’d been there.

“Do you remember the feeling of peace and tranquillity in the caverns, Juliana ?” Asked Simon.

“I do, but I also remember being attacked by nasty, brutal creatures.” Said Juliana.

“Not somewhere I’d choose to go.....But Simon seems to think it’s important.” Said Giovanni.

It was worse for the new additions to their group, who had no real idea what to expect. Juliana felt a kind of pull though, a desire to go down the cliff and into the caverns. It felt as though she was being invited to go home; a kind of spiritual home.

"Thank you Giovanni, I value your loyalty." Said Simon. "I never thought we'd be here again, but regaining that feeling of peace and tranquillity is important, for us as a team. We won't go past the sealed off chamber this time, there will be no sharing of minds."

"That.....Is a huge relief." Said Rosa.

Several people chuckled, obviously wondering what Rosa might have been up to. Juliana had killed for Simon since last being there and didn't like the idea of those memories being shared. It was a huge relief for her, to know that wasn't going to happen.

"We'll go to the first sealed off doorway and spend a night there." Said Simon. "I understand more about this place than I did when we were here before, though I still understand very little. One night, maybe two and we'll function better as a team."

"Sounds fine.....Let's get moving." Said Cosimo.

"I did wonder why we brought so much food." Said Mia.

The cliff was a tough gradient, rather than a sheer drop. It was an awkward climb, but they all made it down to the ledge in the cliff face without incident. Juliana was dreading the return journey and having to climb back up.

"Those with lamps need to light them now." Said Simon.

"Is it going to be safe in the caverns?" Asked Hassan.

"Being truthful, I'm not sure." Said Simon. "Be prepared, have your weapons ready."

Juliana remembered the way through the bushes up against the cliff, when Simon seemed lost for a moment. She took them all inside the wide first chamber and into the passageway beyond.

"Straight to the sealed off tunnel, Simon?" She asked.

"Yes, if we're likely to meet any nasties, it will be there." Said Simon.

It was a long passage, with an even longer passage leading from it. It was all a longer trudge across the wet tunnel floor than she remembered. Had it taken them this long before? It obviously had, she recognised the solid wall which had taken them so much effort to open. No dreadful creatures with tearing claws and hate filled red eyes. Though there was a dead one still halfway through the wall, where they'd left it.

"Our friend here has rotted away to nothing but a few bones." Said Giovanni.

"We'll still need to set a watch when we sleep." Said Simon. "There may be more of them about."

"I don't like the look of those claws." Said Gabriele

"Nearly all of them will be sealed up behind the wall." Said Juliana. "Most of them.....As Simon said we'll need to set a watch tonight."

"Where do we relieve ourselves?" Asked Mia.

"Anywhere you like, but never go alone." Said Simon.

"Let's get settled.....I'm already hungry." Said Patsy.

"Now you mention it, so am I." Said Cosimo.

"Before we all do our own thing." Said Simon. "I'd like you all to give your total allegiance to me and my quest."

"I'm not totally sure what your quest is." Said Hassan.

"Doesn't matter, you can still swear allegiance to me, or return home." Said Simon. "Sorry to drop this on you, but I believe it matters."

"You have my total allegiance, I swear it." Said Juliana.

"Mine too of course." Said Giovanni.

"Me too, of course I do." Said Patsy.

Everyone swore their allegiance to Simon, apart from Cosimo. He was a tough fighter and they needed him, but Simon was right; everyone needed to swear allegiance to him. There could be no one half in as a member of the quest; they had to be all in. Lots of faces were looking at Cosimo.

"A bit unfair to drop that on us in Malta." Said Cosimo. "But yes, you have my oath of allegiance to serve you and give the quest all that it takes to succeed."

There was actually a little cheer, as everyone went for the bags of food they'd put together that morning.

~ ~

"Wake up Mia." Said the voice.

"It's not my watch yet." Said Mia,

The conversation was in her head, probably a dream. She turned over in her bedroll and there were the others, their faces lit up by the small camp fire they'd lit before settling down for the night. Only Cosimo was awake and pushing more wood onto the fire.

"They're almost here, you must wake up." Said the voice.

"But.....I am awake." Said Mia.

"No.....You're not."

It had to be a dream; the creature talking to her was a very strange looking female. Mia had never seen a ghost, or a Djinn, or even knew anyone who claimed to have seen one; at least not anyone she believed. There in the cave, less than three feet from her was a tall woman dressed in a red robe which glowed in the dark. Her arms were a little too long, her eyes a little too wide apart. When she smiled her teeth were a little unsettling, but Mia couldn't work out why.

"What are you?" Asked Mia.

"I am a Djinn.....You must wake the others." Said the Djinn. "Do it now Mia, or your friends may be hurt, perhaps even killed."

Waking herself from a dream was something she'd done before, though usually from nightmares when she'd been small. There had been a recurrent nightmare of watching as her father had been killed by an assassin. On one particularly bad night for nightmares, her father really had been killed. An assassin had crept into their home and slit her father's throat. Screaming in her sleep had always woken her out of those dreadful nightmares. Mia screamed and the world around her changed.

"Why are you screaming girl?" Asked Cosimo.

"The creatures.....They're almost upon us." Yelled Mia.

Everyone reacted, though some moved faster than others. Juliana had a sword ready before Giovanni seemed fully awake, which was a surprise. Simon was up, sword in hand, before the echo of her scream had stopped rolling through the caves.

"What is almost upon us, Mia?" Shouted Patsy.

"They're here." Yelled Mia.

There had to be over a dozen of them, coming from the passage that came from the cliffs. The only explanation was some kind of hidden doorway somewhere along the length of the passage. Large creatures, like bears with longer claws and sharper teeth. They roared too, which Mia found quite unsettling. There was a smell about them too, the odour of mould mixed with decaying flesh.

"Kill them.....Or they will kill us." Shouted Simon.

The light from the fire was their only light at first, until someone managed to light a couple of their lamps. The creatures were large and scary, but they didn't move that fast. Mia was surprised how

easy it was to kill one of them. Her blade had slid into its skin and then into its heart. Cosimo yelled. As one of them ran its claws down his arm. How long it took to properly wake up seemed to matter more than an individual's fighting skill.

"Don't be squeamish about it.....Go for their eyes if you have to." Yelled Giovanni.

They weren't having it all their own way. The fighting was going on with them all still together; where they'd put their bedrolls down for the night. Patsy couldn't move backwards quickly, Rosa was behind her. She let out a yell as a claw went down her face. Mia was impressed when Patsy instantly fought back. She plunged her sword deep into the belly of the beast, leaving its entrails spread across the floor.

"Well done, Patsy.....Well done." Said Juliana.

Mia cursed herself for paying too much attention to the others and not enough to her own skirmishes with the creatures. A large clawed hand almost took out her left eye, but she saw the movement just in time. She backed away, before thrusting her sword into her enemy's throat.

"Sometimes.....They're surprisingly quick." Said Mia.

"Just don't get killed.....Brother Alberti will never forgive me." Said Simon.

Cosimo killed the last of the creatures and by then; most of Simon's party had a wound or two. Nothing that serious, but they all needed to be treated by a healer. Mia opened her food bag and took out the water bottle, which she drank from until her thirst was eased.

"I hope we're not staying here another night." Said Juliana.

"No.....I was sure the good winds were trying to bring us here." Said Simon. "I can see now that I was mistaken. We'll go back to our lodgings tonight and head for Crete on the first suitable tide."

"I need the services of a decent healer." Said Cosimo.

"Most of us do." Said Rosa.

"I know someone." Said Mia. "If you're not scared of being treated by an old lady who many call a witch?"

"No problem, they make the best healers." Said Simon. "We'll eat first and then go and find Mia's witch."

"Don't call her that, she might turn you into something unnatural." Said Mia.

The food tasted good, a ridiculously early breakfast. As everyone got their things together, Simon asked the question she'd been expecting for some time.

"Why did you scream, Mia?" Asked Simon. "It's a good job you did, but what alarmed you?"

"There was a very strange looking tall woman." Said Mia. "A Djinn she called herself. She said I needed to wake up and raise the alarm, or some of us might die. So I began screaming."

"Did this Djinn have a name?" Asked Juliana.

"I didn't get a chance to ask." Said Mia. "These dreadful brutes arrived and the Djinn vanished."

"Now I'm wondering if the Djinn had something for me." Said Simon.

"Did the Djinn mention the name Samnuha?" Asked Giovanni.

"No.....As I said, thing became very frantic, very quickly." Said Mia.

"I was told by Laura that Samnuha had died." Said Simon. "We may never know the name of the Djinn who helped us tonight."

Mia was beginning to feel guilty, though she had nothing to feel guilty about. There had probably been no longer than three minutes from the Djinn warning her, to the attack. Not exactly time enough to have a proper conversation.

"Not that I'm blaming you, Mia." Said Simon. "If you hadn't woken us up, we might all be dead by now."

“Yes, well done Mia.” Said Patsy.

Was it shallow to feel so much better because of a little praise ? Mia didn’t care if it was shallow, she felt better than she had since the fighting had stopped.

“Cosimo.....Your wounds are still bleeding.” Said Juliana.

“It’s nothing, I’ll be fine.” Said Simon.

“No being a hero about wounds.” Said Simon. “Not when Mia knows a friendly witch. We’ll go now and hope it’s not too early, or too late to see her.”

“Must still be the middle of the night.” Said Hassan. “It definitely feels like the middle of the night.” Gabriel spotted the package, left against the wall just before the entrance to the caverns. He looked quite shocked as he held out the cloth wrapped parcel to Simon.

“It’s for you.” Said Gabriel. “For Simon is written on it in a curly feminine hand.”

“Maybe Samnuha did survive.” Said Simon. “Some of us have wounds needing treatment. I’ll open the package when we’re back at our lodgings.”

“She died Simon, so many saw it happen.” Said Giovanni.

“Who was Samnuha ?” Asked Cosimo.

“A conversation for another time old friend.” Said Simon. “When we’re laid up in Crete for Giovanni’s deck cannons to be fitted to the decks.”

“Deck guns.....Now there’s something that makes me smile.” Said Giovanni.

It was close to dawn when they’d clambered up the cliff. A quite respectful time to call on the old witch; who Mia knew got up before the birds. Everyone seemed happy now that their time in Misraḥ Għar il-Kbir, didn’t appear to have been a total waste of time. Simon had a mysterious parcel, which had obviously been left for him by a Djinn.

“Too early to visit the healer ?” Asked Simon.

“No, she tends to rise with the sun.” Said Mia.

The old lady was indeed up, though she knew what payment she required for healing adventurers in the early morning; and she wasn’t budging on her price. She gave her name as Lučija (Lucia), though Mia knew others called her by different names. A good healer; probably the best in or around the Mediterranean. About two hours after meeting Lucia they were all at their lodgings and hoping for at least a little peaceful sleep. Simon had sent them all off to their beds with a few words, which were more inspirational than he probably realised.

“I’ll go through the package during the voyage to Crete.” Said Simon. “We may have a Djinn on our side and they are extremely powerful beings.”

~ ~

Captain Galeoto had approved every alteration Giovanni had wanted to make to the Mermaid. From four lethal deck cannons, to reinforcing parts of the superstructure with steel plating; which acted as armour plating. It would make the Mermaid heavier and make her lower in the water, but it would help keep her crew alive in a fight. Galeoto’s vessel was going to look very different by the time they left the shipyard in Crete. A pirate shipyard, though no one was making a huge fuss about that. Simon had already found four pirate fighters who he was quite keen on joining him in his quest. Although Captain Galeoto gave orders to his crew, it was generally accepted that the Mermaid belonged to Simon and was important in completing his quest.

“Even if you don’t see me, I am watching.” Said Karkengara. “I’m very impressed with what’s been done to the Mermaid.....Very impressed.”

No one among the new people had seen Karkengara, mainly because he’d had bad experiences in the past. It seemed that most of the crew of a tea clipper bound for London, had drowned after

seeing him. They'd jumped overboard, rather than dealing with the situation rationally; according to the bringer of fire. Giovanni thought going overboard because there was a dragon on board sounded quite rational, but he wasn't going to say that to Karkengara. He'd just get the speech about him not being a dragon. For now at least, Karkengara was only appearing to a select few. The lucky few tended to meet in the forward hold of the Mermaid, which was designed for expensive contraband; and had a strong lockable door.

"We'll soon be ashore at Cyrenaica." Said Simon. "I thought it was time to open the parcel the Djinn left for me."

"Past time.....I thought you'd look at it on our first night here." Said Juliana.

"I was nervous and being honest, I still am." Said Simon. "This package may have been passed from person to person, heading towards me since the dawn of time."

"You were never this dramatic in London." Said Patsy. "Just open the package."

"I tend to agree with the lady.....Open it Simon." Said Karkengara.

Giovanni was just as nervous as Simon, though he was better at hiding it. He'd seen some very strange and dangerous things since becoming a vampire. Few of those had the potential for an unpleasant death as a package left by a Djinn. Some Djinn were reasonably pleasant, but many were homicidal monsters. The real trick was getting to know the difference and Giovanni had never mastered that skill.

"May I borrow your small blade, Juliana?" Asked Simon.

"Yes, here it is." Said Juliana, as she passed Simon the blue steel blade.

"Damn, I'm feeling nervous now." Said Patsy.

Simon slashed into the cloth, which had writing woven into it. Karkengara gasped, not an easy thing for half a dragon head sticking out of a wall to do.

"Careful, you're cutting into the language of the Gods." Said Karkengara.

"Why would that be used in cloth wrappings?" Asked Giovanni.

"I don't know everything." Said Karkengara. "The most likely reason might be to hide the contents from those trying to steal it. Or ward the contents against being destroyed.....Either way, it's very rare."

Simon carried on slicing into the wrapping, but with much greater care. The wrappings actually sparkled as they were dropped on the floor.

"Never a dull moment with you, Simon." Said Patsy.

In the centre of all the wrappings was a brown paper envelope. There was printed writing in English on the envelope.

"Worsley's Clock makers. Established 1707." Said Simon. "There's an address in Edinburgh. There's something hard and quite small inside the envelope."

"A key, I bet it's a key." Said Giovanni.

There was a key and a handwritten note that had been folded many times. Simon flattened the note and read it to them.

"Simon, I'm sorry about not being much use on your quest. I hope this note redresses my neglect of my favourite hero. When you see the Elder Tilder in Cyrenaica, he'll know where to use the key. You can trust him, most of the time. Warmest regards, Larthia."

"Who the hell is Larthia?" Asked Giovanni.

"Who is the Elder Tilder?" Asked Juliana.

"I truthfully have no idea who either of them is." Said Simon.

Karkengara snorted something about loving a good adventure.

~ ~
© Ed Cowling ~ April 2026
~

'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.'

~