

## Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

### Chapter 3 - Cyrenaica

**“They’d taken it in turns to return to the relative comfort of the Mermaid. To Juliana the ship meant a safe and comfortable bed, rather than sleeping in a bedroll under canvas. She’d woken up several times to find insects trying to join her in the bedroll. Creepy crawlies she called them and some she recognised, though some she didn’t. She’d have thought Captain Galeoto and his crew would enjoy a night or two onshore. Not a bit of it, they were no more keen on creepy crawlies than her.”**

»

Simon Atherton looked back at the Mermaid from the beach at Cyrenaica and it no longer looked like a humble hauler of general goods along the Italian coast. The armour plating made it look like a fighting vessel, especially as he could see the tip of one of the four newly installed deck cannons. Everyone seemed happy to be on a craft which could defend itself if attacked.

Besides the cannons, Giovanni had hired four tough looking pirates in Crete. Simon was still trying to remember their names, but the toughest liked to be called Koslas. Their new pirate warriors smelled bad and seemed to dress in worn out clothing. Not that Simon cared; he’d been told that the pirates on Crete all fought like tigers. The new crew members had been left on the Mermaid in case their ship was attacked.

“Admit it, the Mermaid looks impressive now.” Said Giovanni.

“She does, well worth the money spent on her.” Said Simon.

The beach was sand mixed with pebbles, which was a hard surface to walk on without wobbling around a little. At least it was a dry morning, there had been rain most of the way from Crete. His instructions for speaking the incantation were to say them well above the high water line. There were a few bushes growing just past where high tide dumped all sorts of old wood, rotting seaweed and other general effluvia. Past the bushes was an area of crab grass. Simon sat cross legged and Giovanni sat to his right, while Patsy sat to his left. Juliana remained by the bushes, ready and alert for any trouble. Mia was somewhere, though Simon couldn’t see her. She too was watching for trouble while Simon concentrated on the words he had to say. For the first time in a while, Simon felt he had enough fighters to efficiently watch his back.

“This looks as good a spot as any.” Said Simon.

Simon had been given a copy of the correct text; handwritten by a powerful dark magic user. It was accurate; he’d even been allowed to read parts of it aloud in Leptis Magna, but not all of it in the right order. It was powerful; whatever he was about to read in full for the first time. The best outcome was a long wait for someone to arrive. The worst outcome was being obliterated by the power he was calling upon.

“Din-Nahir Shallit.” Said Simon. “Osnin-Nahir Vandir.”

The words meant nothing to Simon, but there was a definite tingle in the air as he completed the first line. It was the language of the Old Gods; Simon had been told that. Simon felt like a child reciting words he didn’t yet understand. There were just four lines in total.

“Isna-Nahir Shenda” He said. “VahaNehun Zaphar.”

The ground shook a little, which Simon chose to see as a good thing. Giovanni and Patsy looked less sure about that.

Zahhn-Shallit." Said Simon. "N'Nam N'Ode N'Nahir."

Simon had his back to the ocean and he wasn't going to look behind him, or ask Giovanni what was going on. There were requirements about reading such ancient texts. One was not saying anything else until the incantation was complete. The other was remaining quite still until it was all over.

From what Simon heard of the conversation between Patsy and Giovanni, a cloud of darkness was rushing over the ocean, definitely heading towards the Mermaid and them. There was one last line of text to read.

"Neaven-Ahshir." Said Simon. "Neaven-Omsa Neaven-Sedit."

Simon noticed the light get a little brighter; the cloud of darkness had obviously dissipated. He sat there for moment, far too fatigued to stand.

"I need your help old friend." Said Simon. "I don't think I can stand up without a little help."

"Yes, of course." Said Giovanni.

Patsy helped too, to get him up. His knees felt so stiff, as if he'd aged a thousand years while sitting on that beach.

"Considering not much happened, that was impressive." Said Giovanni.

"What do we do now?" Asked Patsy.

"We make camp here and wait." Said Simon.

~ ~

They'd taken it in turns to return to the relative comfort of the Mermaid. To Juliana the ship meant a safe and comfortable bed, rather than sleeping in a bedroll under canvas. She'd woken up several times to find insects trying to join her in the bedroll. Creepy crawlies she called them and some she recognised, though some she didn't. She'd have thought Captain Galeoto and his crew would enjoy a night or two onshore. Not a bit of it, they were no more keen on creepy crawlies than her. Simon had the worst of it; he felt obligated to live under canvas until they arrived, whoever they were.

"It's Leptis Magna all over again." Giovanni had said to her. "We'll be waiting here for months, or until we run out of food and water."

"We did stock up well in Malta." Julianna had replied. "If he wants to, Simon could wait here for many, many months. I get a feeling though.....Whoever is coming will be here soon."

"I hope so, Juliana.....I spotted a scorpion in my tent last night." Mia had said.

No one died of scorpion bites, though Juliana had developed a worrying rash on her left arm, by the time they'd been waiting for seven days. That night, in the middle of the night; a man in robes appeared near their camp fire, which had never been allowed to go out.

"I am here, because I was asked to." Said the man. "There is one here called Simon Atherton."

The man had a deep sonorous voice and he was looking around him, as if trying to see the one called Simon Atherton. Juliana was crouched by the camp fire, where she preferred to sleep if the night was chilly. Simon came out of his tent, while trying to pull on enough clothes to be decent. He still looked scruffy and half asleep as he stood in front of the man in robes.

"I am Simon Atherton."

"You may remember me, I am Elder Tilder." Said the man. "Let us sit by your fire. My truth will be short and simple, but you need to hear it."

Elder Tilder sat quite close to the fire, but it was quite a cold night for North Africa. Juliana noticed that Elder Tilder was wearing light armour under his cloak and had to adjust a sword so that he could sit on the ground. It seemed that Elder Tilder definitely wasn't a pacifist.

"I don't remember you." Said Simon.

"Yet we did meet and we were friends, though that may have happened in a future you haven't visited yet." Said Tilder. "Do you recall Larthia, the witch?"

"No, I don't recall her either." Said Simon. "My future life is like a riddle to me."

"You and Larthia were good friends." Said Tilder. "I'm sure you'll enjoy meeting her at some point in your future."

"How friendly are they?" Asked Patsy.

"Nothing to worry about, Patsy." Said Tilder. "You're also good friends with Larthia."

"Did I.....Sorry, I mean will I know her?" Asked Juliana.

"Yes, but please.....No more questions about the future." Said Tilder. "Outside of a few specific areas, talk about the future is forbidden. May I trouble you for a drink of water? I have travelled a very long way."

Juliana took her water bottle to Tilder, mainly to get a good close look at him. He looked Italian, very similar to the friends of her parents. Lots of expensive rings on his fingers and what looked to be ivory dongles on his robe. Whatever he might be in the future, he was no pauper. He took her water and drank several mouthfuls, before giving it back.

"Thank you." Said Tilder.

"What have you come to tell me?" Asked Simon.

"Easier to show you." Said Tilder. "Do you need to prepare for a journey to a city south of here?.....You may be away for several days."

"I can go back to the ship for supplies." Said Giovanni.

"I'll help him." Said Mia.

"Get us enough food and water for a week." Said Simon. "Lamps too, we'll need decent oil lamps if we're exploring old cities."

"I have the key.....I'm assuming we'll need this." Said Simon.

Simon held up the key that been in the package left for him by a Djinn. Tilder changed, his expression became one of greed and avarice. Juliana could see he wanted the key for himself and he wasn't trying to hide his desires.

"No, put the key away." Said Tilder. "If I keep seeing it I'll have a need to take it from you. That definitely wouldn't please those who sent me."

He didn't say who had sent him. Juliana assumed that would all become clear when they reached the city to the south. There were a lot of ancient ruined cities in the deserts of Cyrenaica. Exactly which one they were to visit was likely to be clear when they got there. It took a while for Giovanni and Mia to return with enough supplies to last them for a week. Captain Galeoto had come with them, to stretch his legs as he put it. It seemed he quite fancied seeing a few ruins before leaving North Africa.

"Now.....Are we ready to head south?" Asked Tilder.

"What is the name of this long dead city we're heading for?" Asked Simon.

"Just a city.....Still cloaked in something dark and powerful." Said Tilder. "Best if we don't speak its name."

Elder Tilder sounded pretty dark himself, but Juliana quite liked him. A man given the task of delivering some information to Simon, while showing him something in a ruined city. Personally, Juliana would have asked for a lot of money to be in his shoes. Even then she might have refused. Giovanni was looking at her and smiling, while nodding towards Tilder in a 'what a crazy' kind of

way. Their new friend being crazy would have been a relief. In her eyes he was as sane as any one of them. They'd been travelling by foot for around five hours and the sun was high in the sky.

"There, the ruined city we seek." Said Tilder, while pointing.

Still just about recognisable as a city, though centuries of wind, sandstorms and hot days had done their best to crack and ruin the stone buildings. Many buildings in a relatively small amount of space. The temples still looked like temples and Tilder became their guide.

"No names of deities." He said. "Definitely no names of demons. The temple we're heading towards still has the marks of blood on the walls. The blood has turned black now of course, but many died to satisfy the appetite of the one worshipped there."

"How old is this city?" Asked Captain Galeoto.

"No one is sure.....Has to be many centuries." Said Tilder.

"It feels old.....And Evil." Said Giovanni.

"Careful vampire.....There are still some there who'd love to taste your flesh." Said Tilder.

Juliana had been with Simon long enough to know the old legend about vampires being Satan's favourite children. As she stepped over the threshold of the temple Tilder had taken them to; she knew it had been built to worship something far darker and more powerful than Satan.

"I can give you directions, Simon." Said Tilder. "The chest you need to open is close, but I can't watch you use the key to open it. It must be opened though, or your quest will end here, today."

"Where is this chest that I need to open?" Asked Simon.

"Behind the fallen stone I'm pointing at." Said Tilder. "Pull it out of the temple, or you may be overwhelmed by the evil which still lives here. Once outside, the key will open it."

"What is inside the chest?" Asked Patsy.

"Everything to make your dreams come true." Said Tilder. "Or, maybe the stuff of nightmares. You'll know which when Simon opens it."

The chest was made of wood, very old and heavy wood. It hadn't decayed though, despite looking as ancient as the city itself. Juliana's hand brushed against the chest and she had a feeling of crushing despair. Simon and Giovanni did most of the work in dragging the chest out of the temple. Once it was outside in the bright sunshine, the old chest looked far less sinister, though Juliana knew she could never touch it again. It had felt like being struck by some kind of demon of melancholia.

"Now we'll find out what's in this chest." Said Simon.

Something howled as Simon put the key in the lock; though Juliana would have sworn it wasn't a wolf. Elder Tilder turn his back on Simon, to avoid looking at the key, which seemed to aggravate him in some way. Simon opened chest and dug through whatever was inside it. He then relocked the chest.

"We need to get the chest onto the Mermaid." Said Simon.

"No use, I can't resist the call." Said Tilder. "It must be mine, it is mine, it will be mine again."

Juliana had been watching Elder Tilder, sure that he was going to try something. Her hand had been on her short sword, as Simon and Giovanni picked up the chest. As Tilder hurled himself at Simon, his sword up and ready; Juliana plunged her sword into his throat. Once again, there was the sound of something howling, which wasn't a wolf. It was quiet after that, as quiet as the grave.

~ ~

Mia Cassar had felt it, as had the others. Something had followed them back from the city to the south; where they'd buried the body of Elder Tilder. It was still following them as they'd packed up their camp and returned to the Mermaid. Maybe it couldn't cross water? Mia had heard some

things of evil had trouble crossing moving water. Back on the Mermaid, the dreadful feeling of darkness was no longer with them.

“What did you find in the chest ?” Asked Mia.

There it was on the floor, in the middle of the cabin where Simon and Patsy slept while at sea. The chest seemed to have lost its sinister feeling, but still seemed to dominate the cabin.

“I’d be interested to know that too.” Said Captain Galeoto.

“I’ll show you, but I think you’ll be disappointed.” Said Simon.

Simon used the key to open the chest, the key which seemed to have driven Elder Tilder to homicidal violence and finally cost him his life. Mia didn’t know what to expect to see in the chest, gold maybe, precious gems. Definitely something most would consider to be treasure. Simon pulled out a large heap of paper scrolls and dropped them on the floor.

“Is that it ?” Asked Mia. “Tilder tried to kill you for this pile of paper.”

“I’ve known men die trying to obtain a single sheet of an incarnation.” Said Giovanni.

Mia had heard Brother Alberti go on about a newly acquired sacred manuscript, as though it was the most valuable thing in the world. She understood that a pile of paper might be just that, nothing but a pile of paper. Sometimes though, it might contain a priceless ancient text.

“I know it looks disappointing.” Said Simon. “I may be wrong, but I think this is what Elder Tilder was trying to obtain. He just needed me as a poor fool with the right key to the chest.”

Simon put his hand in the chest and pulled out a metal plate covered it words. Etched words that Mia couldn’t see, so she moved closer and touched the plate. No feelings emanated from the rectangular piece of metal and she still had no idea what the words meant.

“I have no idea what language this is.....And I know many old languages.” Said Mia.

“It must be important, a man died trying to obtain it.” Said Captain Galeoto.

“Don’t write off the paper scrolls yet.” Said Patsy. “My gut feelings aren’t usually wrong and I think we’ll need some of these ancient scrolls.”

“I agree.” Said Mia, as she touched one of the scrolls. “We need to respect these pieces of ancient writing.”

Every piece of paper or parchment went back into the chest, which Simon locked; the key going into his jacket pockets. The metal plate he was holding up for everyone to see.

“I agree, the scrolls may be important.” Said Simon. “These etchings into metal though.....They feel like what I was sent to acquire. We’ll remain here at anchor, as we have no idea where to go next.

Tonight when it’s dark, I’ll try to contact Brother Alberti.”

“Yes, he’ll know what’s written on the plate.” Said Mia.

~ ~

Simon had tried not to wake Patsy, but their bed on the Mermaid wasn’t that wide. Great fun for enjoying sex together, but there was no way he could get up without her knowing. He noticed that as he dressed, Patsy was dressing too.

“Don’t look at me like that, Simon.” Said Patsy. “Wherever you’re going to do this.....I’m going to be with you.”

“Being truthful.....It’ll be nice to have you with me.” Said Simon. “If Alberti pulls me into the vortex, you may be pulled in too. Just a warning.....”

“I know, I may see and hear some weird shit tonight.” Said Patsy. “I’m getting used to it.”

Patsy was now a long way from being the student who’d chatted him up one Friday night on the Piccadilly Line. Her manner and use of words was beginning to remind him of Clara. Maybe it was

him ? Simon had a sneaking suspicion that he brought out either the best in the women who shared his life, or the worst. Which of those depended on how you viewed it.

“We should be fine, but bring a blade.....Just in case.” Said Simon.

“Already thought of that.” Said Patsy, shoving her favourite assassin’s blade down her belt.

There would only be the two of them, he hadn’t told the others where and when he’d attempt to contact Brother Alberto in his vortex of energy. Just the two of them in the forward hold with the bolts pushed across the door.

“I think we’ll end up going overland.” Said Patsy. “Further south, much further south into North Africa.”

“At the beginning of this quest.” Said Simon. “Alberti talked about me needing to land from the sea on the Ivory Coast. I have no idea why, but I think that moment may have arrived.”

Patsy nodded at him, the nod that said she was now dressed and ready for anything. Of course Mia was outside their cabin, fully dressed and armed to the teeth. Simon was vaguely surprised that she was on her own and not accompanied by everyone else.

“I knew you’d contract Alberti tonight.” Said Mia. “Let me join you.....I’m sure I’ll be useful.”

“Well.....What do you think Patsy ?” Asked Simon. “Shall we take her with us ?”

“Yes, another sword might be useful.” Said Patsy.

They passed two of the crew of the Mermaid, keeping watch. There was an exchange of grunts, before Simon headed down to the forward hold. Not a word was said until they’d bolted the doors shut and hung an oil lamp on the wall.

“No drawing a circle on the floor, I’m going to attempt to contact Alberti directly.” Said Simon.

“Are you sure ? I heard that was impossible.” Said Mia.

“Alberti and I have achieved a few impossible things since the quest began.” Said Simon.

“Just be careful.” Said Patsy.

Simon had the metal plate down his jacket. He removed it and held it in his right hand. With luck Alberti would be able to read the language of the etchings. With even more luck, he’d be able to give Simon another place on the globe to head for. Simon quite missed the speed of air travel, but there was a certain something about travelling across the world on a sailing vessel. No cell phones had been a nuisance at first, but now he viewed it as taking back control of his day.

“Keep clear of me unless I ask you to do something.” Said Simon.

“Remember the first rule of adventuring.” Said Mia. “Don’t get killed.”

“I’ll try my best.” Said Simon.

Simon Atherton sat cross legged on the grubby wooden floor of the hold and closed his eyes. He’d been linked to by Alberti so many times, but had never tried to reverse the process until Leptis Magna. When he’d tried it in Leptis Magna and it had worked, he shouldn’t have been surprised; but he had been. Since then he’d initiated quite a few links via the vortex. After Simon felt calm in himself, he pictured the rather old looking face of Brother Alberti. He imagined the words without saying them aloud.

“Brother Alberti.....I need your help.”

Sometimes it took a while to connect and once it had totally failed, but Simon wasn’t easily discouraged. He listened to the gentle noise of the ocean swell against the side of the Mermaid. When it felt right, he tried again.

“Brother Alberti.....Please connect with me.”

It happened after the third attempt and there was no voice in his head, Alberti was there. Not really there, more like the magical equivalent of face time; there he was sat behind his desk in the centre of the vortex. Patsy and Mia could see him too, that was obvious.

"Simon, wonderful to hear from you." Said Alberti. "I see that Mia is there.....Did you receive the gold?"

"It did and as you can see, Mia has joined my quest for a while." Said Simon.

"Hello." Said Mia.

"Hello from me too." Said Patsy.

There was a lot more general small talk, including Alberti mentioning his garden doing well in an early spring in Florence. It also seemed that the recent troubles with the Medici were over. Alberti was no longer on the run from the city guard and the Medici family.

"You must have need of my help." Said Alberti. "Ask anything of me Simon; I'm in the mood to grant just about any favour."

Later Simon realised that to have been a missed opportunity. When Alberti was in the mood to grant favours, no sensible person said no, or let the moment go by. Simon held up the metal plate, as close to the image of Alberti as he could get it.

"I believe this is important." Said Simon. "Elder Tilder tried to kill me to obtain it."

"Elder Tilder.....Now that is a truly unpleasant individual." Said Alberti.

"Was an unpleasant individual." Said Simon. "He attacked me to get at the chest and Juliana killed him."

"Tell Juliana I'm impressed." Said Alberti. "Now.....Let me look at this plate you're showing me. Written in the oldest language of the dark deities, even I have trouble reading it."

Alberti didn't have computers of course, no keyboard to enter the text into. Simon had a suspicion that if Alberti lived in the twenty first century; he'd still be old school. Alberti scribbled with a pencil onto a pad of yellow paper. He then muttered a lot, before appearing to look at something over Simon's shoulder. No one interrupted his pondering, mainly out of a certain amount of fear.

Eventually Alberti chuckled, which broke the silence.

"I knew it.....I told you once, Simon." Said Alberti. "I can't order you to go anywhere, it is your quest. But if you want to find the ultimate truth? You need to travel to the Ivory Coast; the Côte d'Ivoire. Old tomes and scrolls will tell you the Romans never inhabited that part of West Africa, but I know better. There is a hidden city, a kind of shadow city. Very dangerous there, but you'll find the next clue to your quest. A huge clue by the way....A clue you really need. So, are you going to the Côte d'Ivoire?"

Simon could actually feel an unbidden smile growing across his face. The next big clue in a shadow city which Alberti considered dangerous. After the relative tranquillity of Malta and Crete; it sounded wonderful.

"Of course I'm going to this shadow city." Said Simon. "Does it have a name?"

"Urbs Umbrarum, the City of Shadows." Said Alberti. "It must have had a proper name once, but occultists have always referred to it as Urbs Umbrarum. Some call it the place of perpetual darkness."

"That sounds a fun place." Said Patsy.

"As I've told Simon many times; if it was easy, everyone would be doing it." Said Alberti.

"You've told me that.....Far too often." Said Mia.

Simon liked the humour; he joined in with the laughter. But if Alberti said Urbs Umbrarum was very dangerous, it would be an exceeding dangerous place to visit.

“You’ll need a witch; you can’t go to the City of Shadows without a competent witch.” Said Alberti.  
“I used Lučija of Malta as a healer.” Said Mia. “She’s one of the best healers I know and a very skilful witch.”

“Get her to go with her, but don’t try and force her.” Said Alberti. “Trying to force a witch to do anything they’re not inclined to do; never works out well. Flatter her and bribe this Lučija. From my experience, witches are very fond of money.”

Simon had seen Alberti in full flow before and he could talk for hours. It was likely the sun would rise soon and their connection would be lost. It was time to move the conversation at a faster pace.

“Where is this Urbs Umbrarum ?” Asked Simon. “And how do we find it ?”

“I was wondering that.” Said Mia. “The Ivory Coast is said to be a large and wild place.”

As if to remind them that the link to Alberti was a fairly fragile thing, it winked out of existence for a minute, before Alberti appeared again. Even he seemed to feel a need to hurry.

“Daylight is against us.” Said Alberti. “The witch will sense the position of Urbs Umbrarum; as long as you come ashore at the right place. A few days before you arrive at the right place, I’ll visit you every night and give you all the information I possess on the City of Shadows. I’ll give you the day, place and best hour to come ashore. After that you’ll be relying on the witch called Lučija.”

“But what do we do when we get there ?” Asked Patsy.

It was unusual for Patsy to sound so frustrated and Simon felt the same way. Sometimes getting solid information out of Brother Alberti; felt like pulling teeth.

“I have the same worry.....Where exactly will we find this new super clue ?” Asked Simon.

“Patience.” Said Alberti. “By the time you’re walking up a beach on the Ivory Coast, I’ll make sure you know everything you need to know. For now.....Keeping this link going is very tiring.”

Alberti went, leaving them looking at the walls of an empty hold. There was always a slight hum connected to the vortex and now that was gone; Simon heard someone outside the door.

“Did you hear that ?” Asked Mia.

“Yes, someone was spying on us.” Said Simon. “After them, we can’t allow a spy on board all the way to the Ivory Coast.”

By the time Simon unbolted the door, the spy was just a red patterned shirt going up the stairs. He had a vague memory of one of the pirates hired in Crete, having such a shirt. A fairly recognisable pattern of red squares over a dark blue background. Mia knew him, she was better at remembering names than he was.

“I see you, Antonis Aresti.” Yelled Mia. “You can’t escape us.....It’s too far to swim ashore.”

Was it ? Simon had the feeling that if the pirate was desperate enough, he just might make it to the beach at Cyrenaica, even in the dark.

“Spy.....Stop the spy.” Yelled Patsy.

“It’ll go bad for you if you keep running.” Shouted Simon.

They arrived on deck to find the last watch of the night, prodding at the dead body of Antonis Aresti; once a pirate from Crete. Giovanni was there, bleeding a little from an arm wound.

“He came at me with a blade.” Said Giovanni. “I snapped his neck.....I hope I didn’t ruin some kind of plan ?”

“No old friend, though it would have been nice to interrogate him.” Said Simon. “As it is he can feed the fishes.....Get him over the side lads.”

The last watch of the night went through his pockets, taking anything vaguely useful. They then threw him over the side of the Mermaid. It wasn’t a nice ending, but Antonis Aresti was a spy and no one likes a spy.

“Rot in hell, Antonis.” Muttered Patsy.

“Amen to that.” Said a man of the watch.

~ ~

Being becalmed had been awful, tacking for days and days; trying to use every tiny bit of wind. As the Mermaid left a sheltered bay in Cyrenaica, Giovanni was pleased to feel a decent wind to take them in the right direction; back to Malta. Captain Galeoto had muttered about ideally needing a little more wind, which might have been a mistake. Giovanni was a pagan at heart, he believed in a whole pantheon of deities; who looked after just about everything. Maybe they’d taken Galeoto’s words as an insult ? It definitely seemed that with wind on the open sea, there really was too much of a good thing.

“I didn’t think there were major storms in the Mediterranean Sea.” Said Giovanni.

“There are, some really nasty ones.” Said Galeoto. “They spring up fast and tear the sails apart, before disappearing just as quickly. This looks likely to be a bad one.”

There had been minor storms coming down the coast of Italy, when they’d first been passengers on the Mermaid. This storm was different though, as if it was being created to impede their journey. The daytime sky was as dark as night, the lightning flashed above the tops the Mermaid’s masts. The torrential rain had turned the deck into a slippery nightmare. Giovanni had fallen on his backside once and he was being much more careful how he walked. Galeoto wasn’t being exactly encouraging.

“Trust me.....This will get worse before it gets better.” Said the Captain. “The thing to avoid is losing a mast. If one of them breaks we’re really in trouble.”

“Isn’t there some way of avoiding the worst of it ?” Asked Giovanni.

As he asked the question, Giovanni realised how it gave away his general lack of experience on sailing vessels; and ocean storms in particular.

“I mean.....Is there a safe harbour somewhere nearby ?” Asked Giovanni.

He didn’t have the right words and that sounded just as bad. Luckily, Galeoto wasn’t looking at him as though he was that novice, the one no experienced captain wants to take out to sea.

“This is still just a bit of a blow.” Said Galeoto. “If the ship looks in danger I’ll give the order to head for Benghazi. There’s safe harbour there, but it’ll take us out of our way.”

The storm got worse, there was the sound of cracking wood at one point, but the masts were still in one piece. Giovanni had begun making sure there was a rope to cling to, on the few occasions he moved away from Galeoto and the crew member holding onto the Mermaid’s wheel. How bad did it need to get, before the Captain issued the order to run for Benghazi ?

“I think.....We’re seeing the worst the storm will get.” Said Galeoto.

The Gods had to be listening, Giovanni was sure of it. Even Simon said that predicting what the Gods might do to with the weather, could be taken as a challenge. The wind did get worse, much worse. There was a scream from high above them and one of the crew must have fallen from the rigging. He landed on the edge of a hatch and Giovanni knew he was dead. Galeoto waited for one of his crew to check the man over for a pulse, or signs of breathing. He was dead, officially dead and two of the crew dragged him away.

“The time has come.” Said Galeoto. “We’re going to try and run ahead of the storm.....We’re heading for Benghazi.”

Giovanni had heard of the coastal town and knew of its reputation. It would shelter them from the storm, but they might end up fighting off the locals. The immediate danger always wins your attention though and the Mermaid coming apart in a storm was more immediate than the bandits of

Benghazi. In theory vampires couldn't drown, but all their friends could. There had been a conversation once with Simon, about the likely outcome of a vampire dropping to the bottom of a deep ocean.

"I have no idea of what might happen.....But it's best avoided." Simon had said at the time.

Giovanni wasn't really into deep and meaningful conversations. If Simon thought dropping to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea was best avoided; Giovanni was going to avoid it.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Asked Giovanni.

Captain Galeoto slapped him on the back before answering.

"No insult intended, but the best thing is to stay out of the way of the crew." Said the Captain.

"No insult taken.....I'll stay out of their way." Said Giovanni.

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ April 2026