

Clara Copley

(Season five of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 17 – Battle Skills

'Gen Debré had a job to do, which Nathalie had made sound like a quest. Who can resist a quest ? Gen definitely couldn't. Despite a late night, she was up and showered before Youcef and Akiva. What a pair they seemed to be, but beggars couldn't be choosers.'

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After Adelaide had asked for a menu, Laura realised how hungry she was. Then of course, Tim discovered that he was starving too. The menu was quite good for an all-night place. Much of it was probably frozen; defrosted and microwaved. There was no admission to that on the menu of course, but that had to be the way it was done. Not that Tim really cared about the logistics of feeding him in the early hours of the morning; he just needed food.

"Wow, this is really delicious." Said Adelaide. "A real gourmet meal."

"Has to be microwaved." Said Tim. "The only way they could do it."

"We know that, Tim." Muttered Laura. "Mentioning it though.....You're spoiling a great meal."

"Sorry." Said Tim.

Adelaide had a plate with veal on it and quite a lot of mushrooms. She moved the mushrooms about with her fork, as though thinking about what he'd said. She then gave a small shrug and carried on eating; so no harm done. Tim had to have a dessert and it was two hours before they left the all night diner. There was a mist in the air, which would be quickly burned away by the mid-morning sun.

"You two go through the hotel's front door." Said Tim. "I'll go back over the roofs, just in case the assassins are waiting for us to come back."

"That's a good idea." Said Laura. "If you find a bad guy, feed on him if you can. Leave a ragged wound and throw them off the roof.....Not that the cops look for vampire related deaths."

"Oh, I do envy you two." Muttered Adelaide.

"Being a vampire has its good days." Said Tim.

No going back through the night club, it was probably closed by now. One of the good things about being a vampire was the extra strength, speed and dexterity. Tim found an outside fire escape not that far from their hotel. There were locked gates and some of it was a little wobbly. None of it bothered him; the locks barely slowed Tim down. He was up on the roofs in a fraction of the time it would have taken a good cat burglar. A good job he'd thought of checking, there was a man lurking near a door that gave access to the hotel. He must have been up there for hours, without vampire physiology. His joints would be stiff; his movements sluggish at best.

"This one.....I will feed on." Said Tim.

Tim didn't have to select battle mode, or whatever it was called. As he moved towards the man, his feet seemed to almost glide over the walkway across the roofs. The amount of colour in his vision decreased, but he could see much, much clearer. His hearing too, changed to filter out traffic noise from the street, but increase the sounds around him. Tim could hear every step his feet made. Were there other battle skills he'd yet to learn ? Tim definitely hoped so. In turning him, Laura had given him so much.....If he ignored the whole Satan's favourite children business. That was probably all

nonsense anyway, like eating fish on Friday and half drowning babies in a font full of grubby water. His enemy had a gun down his belt, but would never get a chance to use it. Tim was on him, squeezing the man's throat to stop him yelling.

"Who sent you?" Asked Tim. "Give me a name and I might let you live."

It had to be quite a shock, having an incredibly strong person; seemingly appear out of nowhere. The man's arms were flailing about and there was no attempt to grab his gun. He kept muttering a name, which was just a garbled mess of words. Tim eased the pressure on the guy's throat.

"Again.....Give me the name?" Demanded Tim.

"Agnes called Jerome.....It's her fault that Jerome wants you dead."

Agnes was probably the lady who opened the door at The School of Esoteric Wisdom. As for Jerome? With a little luck Adelaide would know who he was, and where he could be found. The man coughed and there was a look in his eyes. He knew there was no chance of Tim letting him go, at least not alive. It would have been nice to taste his blood, but there were more urgent matters now. Adelaide needed to know about Jerome. There was a chance it might change everything.

"Jerome what?" Asked Tim. "He must have a surname."

The guy had probably decided it was a situation where he had to act. Tim realised the man would be expecting to die. His hand reached for the gun on his belt and Tim threw him off the roof. He went up and away like a javelin being thrown. It was long way to the ground, there was an audible thud as he hit the road behind the hotel.

"Probably for the best." Tim muttered.

No more henchmen waiting, but there was police tape over the door. Tim pulled it to one side and entered the hotel. Everything looked the same as it had when he'd been coming from the other direction. It was where the staff rooms were located, there was even quiet jazz music coming from one room. Tim wasn't sure what he'd expected, but the normality was surprising. He shared the lift with one young woman, a hotel employee judging by her dress. He nodded at her and she nodded at him. It was all so damn normal, but he was sure he hadn't dreamt it all. He knocked on their suite door, knowing Laura would sense it was him.

"You took your time." Said Adelaide; as the door opened and he went inside.

"Go easy, he has the feel of death about him." Said Laura.

The suite looked normal, though they'd had a while to straighten it up. No clothes strewn over the floor, no damaged cases. The normality about an abnormal situation, was beginning to be tiresome.

"There was one of them by the door on the roof." Said Tim. "He gave me two names, but then went for his gun. What's left of him is a mess on the road behind the hotel."

"Did you feed on him?" Asked Laura.

"No, other things seemed more important."

"Nothing is more important to a vampire than feeding." Said Laura. "Wherever we might be tonight, we're going out hunting."

"You mentioned names, Tim." Said Adelaide. "Tell me, I might know them."

"There was Agnes, who I'm certain was the lady who opened the door to us at the school. It seems she phoned someone called Jerome, who sent the assassins after us." Said Tim.

"I know of Jerome, he's rumoured to be a nasty piece of work." Said Adelaide.

"Did you have any problems with the hotel staff?" Asked Tim.

"No, it was as if nothing happened." Said Laura. "Though I'm sure the cops will eventually knock on our door. Ideally we need to be checked out and gone by then."

"I said I know Jerome, or at least I've heard of him." Said Adelaide.

A petulant comment, she didn't like being ignored. Tim saved that information up, just in case he ever wanted to wind her up. Ignore her for an hour or so and Adelaide was likely to go crazy. Tim gave her what he hoped was a playful grin.

"Come on Adelaide.....Tell us about Jerome ?" Asked Laura.

"Little is known about him, but he's the top guy in the Esoteric Wisdom Group. Sounds very academic, but they're basically clever crooks; very clever crooks. I never heard a second name for Jerome, but I heard one rumour from a source I trust. His family are Australian and he still has a slight accent from that part of the world." Said Adelaide.

So it seemed Jerome was an antipodean. Tim had met a few over the years and generally, they just wanted to have a little fun. Jerome sounded like one of the unpleasant minority and they could be extremely unpleasant.

"Anyway.....Pack everything, but be careful." Said Laura. "Look for tracking bugs.....Difficult to spot, I know. We'll do a proper scan later. I'll go downstairs and pay the bill. On the way, I'll let Nathalie know we're checking out."

"Where will we go ?" Asked Adelaide.

"Wherever Nathalie wants us to go." Said Laura. "I'm sure she'll tell me when I call her. The Bahamas would be nice, but I predict it will be somewhere cold and rainy."

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Gen Debré had a job to do, which Nathalie had made sound like a quest. Who can resist a quest ?

Gen definitely couldn't. Despite a late night, she was up and showered before Youcef and Akiva.

What a pair they seemed to be, but beggars couldn't be choosers. They were Nathalie's choice and probably just the kind of people the quest required. Personally, Gen was hoping that the ex-CIA lady was better, more the kind of person Gen had been expecting. Even if she ended up being a disappointment, it was another woman to talk to.

Gen had a note in her diary that, with luck, Sophia would arrive sometime during the day. Akiva Yatsko wandered into the kitchen, just as Gen was on about her third cup of coffee. The villa was old and tatty, but just about all the kitchen appliances worked, to a fashion. The dishwasher was useless, so it was back to old fashioned washing up by hand.

"Akiva.....Grab some coffee, it is fresh." Said Gen. "There's a pile of toast too and some bacon I just took out from under the grill. Not a brilliant breakfast selection, but my cooking has never killed anyone. Well, not yet anyway."

"Today might be the day." Said Akiva.

Akiva was quite good looking, in a scruffy, unkempt kind of way. He made a toast and bacon sandwich and bit into it. After chewing for a while, he smiled at her.

"Not bad, Gen." He said. "Not bad at all."

If anything, Youcef's breakfast attire, was even scruffier than Akiva's. They both seemed to think that tatty sweat pants and ragged T shirts, were a cool thing to wear for breakfast. Gen mentioned the toast and bacon to Youcef, who didn't seem to mind eating bacon. As Gen thought about putting on another jug of coffee, there was someone hammering on the outside door.

"I'll get it.....Must be Sophia." Said Gen.

"Not on your own.....I'll cover you." Said Akiva.

The handgun seemed to come out of the voluminous folds in his grubby, grey sweatpants. As Gen walked the length of the corridor, Akiva kept behind her and to her right. As she opened the door, the woman had her back to her. There was yet another different car parked outside, probably

Sophia's. It seemed the ex-CIA operative had money to spend; there was a fairly new BMW sports lined up next to the other, more humble vehicles.

"Yes !.....Who are you looking for ?" Asked Gen.

"You, I think.....I was sent an old picture." Said Sophia. "Are you Genevieve Debré ?"

"I am, but please call me Gen." Said Gen. "I'm assuming you're Sophia, though I wasn't given a second name."

Like the car, Sophia's clothes hinted at money, definitely a decent amount of disposable income. Just a light cotton jacket and long skirt, but Gen remembered seeing the same outfit in Italian Vogue. Sophia put her hand out and Gen duly shook it.

"I'm Sophia Lombardi.....Born in Italy and nearly died in Iraq." Said Sophia. "One time employee of the CIA, but please don't hold that against me."

"Iraq sound interesting.....What happened ?" Asked Gen.

"Could have been anyone's round, even American." Said Sophia. "Hit me in my chest, quite close to my heart. I'm here though, alive and well."

Gen had forgotten that Akiva was still there, still watching her back. He quietly walked towards her, letting Sophia see he was armed. Not that Gen thought Ms Lombardi was a threat, but Akiva knew the way things worked. Sometimes even a friendly operative, needs to be shown that you have sharp teeth.

"Sophia, this is....." Began Gen.

"Akiva Yatsko.....I've seen his file." Said Sophia. "And you have Youcef with you, and I've seen several files on him.....Including one kept by the Ethiopian police."

At that moment, Gen realises she didn't like Sophia that much, though it was hard to define why. There was an attitude, a huge amount of smugness. Gen reassessed her team and decided that Akiva came first, Youcef second and Sophia barely made third. Not that Gen was complaining, all three of them seemed tough and it was better than working alone.

"Come inside, Sophia." Said Gen. "You can hear about the quest over breakfast. I'm hoping you eat bacon ?"

"Yes, I love bacon." Said Sophia. "What is this quest ?"

"I wasn't told by Nathalie." Said Akiva. "Tell us all about the quest ?"

Gen felt back in control, as it seemed she was the only one of them to know their quest was all about alchemy. They'd take the mickey out of her of course, especially Akiva. They wouldn't quit though, Nathalie was paying them well. And there was the chance that in the villa somewhere, was an alchemical recipe for making lots of pure gold.

"First, we find the Philosopher's Stone." Said Gen. "Many of her best seers have told Nathalie that it is hidden here, somewhere in Westcott Villa."

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Niña was used to the regular weekly shop by now, the big shop as Clara referred to it. It was part of her duties and anyway, Niña enjoyed her weekly trundle around Morrisons with a trolley. The supermarket sometimes varied, but mostly she ended up back at Morrisons in Palmers Green. If she'd been missing, presumed trapped in the locked off rooms, Mabina would more than likely have been doing the big shop. As it was, Tempest had returned them to the dragon courtyard; and from there the teleport brought them back to the better known parts of the Hornsey house.

"Clara wants a few jars of baby food." Said Niña. "Just to see what he thinks of it."

"Bit early isn't it ?" Asked Ronnie.

"Not really and Justin isn't exactly the average child." Said Niña. "Besides, Clara will know if he's ready."

There was a long area of shelving full of the stuff, everything from baby's first Bolognese, to jars of over boiled vegetables. Bland, soft and probably fairly tasteless. Safe though and guaranteed not to give Justin belly ache. Niña could sense that no one was within earshot, as she chose a dozen jars, almost at random.

"It all sounds dreadful stuff." Said Niña. "But Clara will add a few drops of blood.....To slowly get him used to it."

"How to feed your baby vampire." Said Ronnie. "I just hope he's friendly when he grows up."

"He's Clara's kid.....He'll be great." Said Niña.

Niña had a list on her organiser, which she added to from notes Clara gave her. There were a lot of extras for the week; Ronnie had to get a second large trolley.

"Who likes shepherd's pie ready meals?" Asked Ronnie. "There are half a dozen on the list."

"Noah is addicted to them.....They'll freeze and last forever." Said Niña.

Clara had asked her not to say who liked what, but it wasn't exactly revealing state secrets. Everyone could list what they fancied and if Clara approved, it went on the shopping list and in the trolley.

Anything cooked in wine tended to be for Tim.

"Wow, someone drinks Jack Daniels." Said Ronnie. "Who ordered that?"

Which was exactly why Clara didn't want Niña to tell who bought what. It could quickly lead to resentment, or people trying to order the most expensive five items in the store. Answering one question seemed to have given Ronnie a little information feeding frenzy.

"What's this?.....A bottle of expensive champagne." Said Ronnie. "I have to know who that's for?"

"No, I'll not tell you anymore about who orders what." Said Niña. "Clara doesn't like it.....And I can see why."

"Oh, just give me a hint?"

"No." Snapped Niña.

There was a sporty Fiat on the way for Niña; it was just going through the usual paperwork. For now they were using Clara's car, as she was being driven around by Alex; one of the full time drivers employed by Cyril H Carter. Ronnie currently had a big chunky Citroen, which had the space for everything they'd bought.

"So, are we going exploring after we put the shopping away?" Asked Ronnie.

"Yes, I even called Mabina after breakfast." Said Niña. "She has a free afternoon and loved the idea of joining us."

"Hey, you kept that quiet."

"Did I? Sorry, Ronnie.....I've had a lot on my mind." Said Niña.

"Of course, you've got the builders to organise." Said Ronnie.

The builders were good; in fact Clara thought they were the best builders she'd ever known. That meant getting them to quote for more work, like turning the grubby basement into a nice clean space they could use. Of course, Clara wanted them to work without making a huge amount of noise. Noise woke Justin; who, if left undisturbed, seemed to sleep about as much as the average pet cat. Niña sometimes thought that finding good builders had been a very mixed blessing.

"The extra freezer was delivered." Said Niña. "It's in the downstairs dining room, for now."

"Good, we'll need it for all of Noah's ready meals."

The freezer would go in the basement once that had been remodelled and decorated. There were few quiet moments in Niña's life. Not that she was complaining, she liked being busy. They parked the car close to the front door and carried all the shopping through into the kitchen. Mabina was sat there, with a cup of coffee and a nice looking croissant.

"You're later than I thought we'd agreed." Said Mabina.

"You should see the amount we bought." Said Ronnie. "Morrisons shares should double after the amount we spent."

"Clara is back with Cyril full time." Said Niña. "We no longer have to watch the pennies quite so much, as Clara says."

"Well, I'm ready to roam through the locked off rooms." Said Mabina.

"Be merciful, I need coffee first." Said Ronnie.

"Me too.....A quick coffee and we'll begin." Added Niña.

The quick coffee became coffee and nibbles. It was another hour before they went through the doorway and into the first corridor of the hidden rooms.

"Clara told me some of these first few rooms, can be a bit gnarly." Said Mabina.

"Gnarly doesn't come close." Said Niña. "Screams so bad, you'd think they were being boiled alive."

"Can we go straight to the dragon courtyard ?" Asked Ronnie.

"Yes, we can." Said Niña.

Would Mabina be awkward for the sake of it and insists on entering a few rooms containing tortured souls ? Niña was ready for an argument if it seemed necessary. It was her exploration after all, hers to decide on, as Clara kept saying. Mabina just nodded at her and let it go.

"Where is the teleport disc ?" Asked Mabina.

"Right behind you." Said Ronnie.

The yellow disc on the floor was actually pulsating. It was one of those things that was easy to find, once you knew where it was. There was no going through one at a time. Press the button on the dragon statue close to the door and.....All three of them were stood in dragon courtyard.

"I like that.....Definitely the way to travel." Said Mabina.

"Are we going to see if we can find Tempest ?" Asked Ronnie.

"If we see him, we'll talk to him." Said Niña. "But.....I have no intention of seeking him out."

"Tempest is the male minion ?" Asked Mabina.

"Yes, they're rare.....Rarer than unicorn droppings." Said Niña.

Again, Mabina could have argued about looking for Tempest, but she didn't. Niña knew the 'it's my exploration' card, could only be played so many times. It was nice that Mabina wasn't being awkward.

"Very much your coin in the slot, Niña." Said Ronnie, "Where are we exploring today ?"

There was something, a trick really that Clara had told her about. Maybe something unintended by whoever had setup the rooms, it was guaranteed to take them somewhere interesting; or so Clara had said.

"This might be a trick, or luck.....Or something else." Said Niña. "Stay where you are, I'm going to activate the dragon in a way no one fully understands."

She slapped the marble dragon statue hard across the face and then did it again. The statue became almost real, as it screamed and flew around dragon courtyard.

"Oh, what have you done, girl ?" Asked Mabina. "I sense danger and many other things, few of them good."

The courtyard vanished, as did the seemingly upset dragon. Niña could see an ocean in front of her; a sandy beach under her feet. In the distance and a long way off, were what looked like storm clouds.

"An ocean.....I'm sure Clara said there were no oceans inside the hidden rooms." Said Niña.

"There are none, it's impossible." Said Mabina. "We're no longer in the locked off part of the house.....We're somewhere else."

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Laura had predicted that Nathalie Aurigny would send them to somewhere cold and rainy. The actual weather forecast for their destination was warm and sunny; at least according to the screen she was looking at. The Lufthansa plane taking them to Vienna in Austria, looked fairly new; everything was clean and shiny. One day it'd be relegated to package holidays, full of kids with sticky fingers. Tim was sat next to her, but as the booking desk had said, they'd booked that morning and couldn't expect miracles. Adelaide was three rows behind them and they were all travelling economy.

"I've never been to Vienna before." Said Laura. "If there's time, I'd love to do a bit of being a tourist and see the sights."

"I worked in a hotel in Vienna one summer." Said Tim. "The job was crap, but I fell in love with the city. I guarantee you will love the place."

"I keep forgetting you worked in a hotel when we met." Said Laura. "See.....I took you away from all that pain, horror and weird hours."

The pilot gave the weather for Vienna, as he announced they were just a few minutes from landing. It was still warm and sunny in Vienna, with a temperature of twenty two degrees. After a chilly, wet night in Munich, it sounded like paradise. They hired a car at Vienna International Airport and the drift into fake identities began. From using genuine names on the plane, Laura was the first to use a fake UK driving license under the name of Joyce Lovett. Nathalie had provided all their 'alternative' documents and the Silver Dawn always provided good fakes.

"We need a car that will easily carry all our gear. A decent sized SUV would be ideal."

Laura had told the man behind the SIXT Desk. It seemed the perfect SUV for them was just being prepared to go out again. They had to wait for nearly an hour, but the black Dacia Bigster looked perfect for their needs. Laura paid for it with a credit card for Joyce Lovett and they were soon driving the twenty kilometres or so, into the city itself. Tim was driving and according to the fake driver's licence in his pocket, he was Adam Lovett, Laura's brother.

"Is there enough on the cards for a good hotel?" Asked Adelaide.

"Enough for five stars and twenty four seven room service." Said Laura. "Don't worry, Adelaide; we're not going to be roughing it."

Tim suggested using the hotel he'd once worked at, but there was a slight chance that someone might recognise him. Nathalie had suggested the Hotel Imperial and when by pure chance they drove past it, Laura decided to think of it as a good omen.

"Nathalie loves the Hotel Imperial." Said Laura. "What do you think guys?"

"Looks great.....Beautiful building." Said Adelaide.

"Yeah.....I never remember hearing anything bad about the place." Said Tim.

"Then, dear Tim; go around the block and get us to the Hotel Imperial."

The main lobby had an old world feel to it, which was a nice change from the usually identical hotel chains. Laura quite liked chains, you knew what to expect. Sometimes though, somewhere like the Imperial was a nice change. Laura booked one suite, with more than enough space for all three of

them. For the moment it seemed safer to keep together. Tim had been startled by the price of the suite and he was still looking startled as they stepped into the elevator.

"Wow, I hope Nathalie doesn't go crazy." Said Tim. "That was really.....Really expensive."

"Nathalie will be fine, as long as we get back with the Hand and the journal of Elias Albrecht. We'll still be her favourite go to people."

"If the journal actually ever existed." Said Adelaide. "There is some doubt about that. Old Thomas used to say it was all nonsense."

"That's it.....A nice inspiring idea." Said Tim.

Adelaide grinned at Tim, who grinned back at her. If the famous journal of Elias Albrecht was nothing but lies and misinformation, they were screwed. They'd have the Hand, but no reliable way of using it; or even touching it. That was the whole idea of coming to Vienna. Elias Albrecht had once lived there, in the Albrecht family home. According to Nathalie and her Silver Dawn archivists. If the journal of Alias Albrecht was anywhere, it would be in that house. As Adelaide opened the door to their suite, Laura had to say it.

"Wow, that is a lot of suite.....Amazing." Said Laura.

"If they do cheeseburgers at three in the morning.....I want to move in." Said Tim.

"When this is over, come and spend a while at the Red Rose." Said Adelaide. "I'll show you what food should taste like.....Cheeseburgers indeed."

"You know we're going to take you up on that ?" Asked Laura.

"You're both welcome for as long as you want to stay." Said Adelaide. "We're more of a restaurant than a hotel, but my people will make sure you're comfortable."

Laura looked out of the window and they weren't high enough to get an interrupted view of Vienna. It still looked impressive; she was tempted to get Tim to point out all the landmarks they could see. She was hungry though and there was the long overdue job of taking Tim out to hunt and feed. All his extra powers had to be within him by now. Before that though, there'd be a room service meal with Adelaide.

"I'm hungry; and both of you must be hungry too." Said Laura. "Let's order something amazing from room service. Then I have an essential piece of Tim's vampire education to take care of."

"Yay, we're going hunting." Said Tim.

"Can I go ?" Asked Adelaide.

"Sorry, vampires only." Said Laura.

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Akiva Yatsko had once not only been employed by the Psochics, he'd been one of their special projects. They'd turned him into something a bit more than human; a kind of Human+ as it was called in all the reports he'd seen. He moved fast, had more strength than most humans and he healed fast. It all sounded pretty boring, but that combination had kept him alive through many battles. He knew about the Philosophers Stone, there were mentions of it in the archives of the Psochics and the Silver Dawn. It was still nice to sip his coffee and listen to Gen tell them the usual text book version. There were other versions, but he hadn't been hired to improve her education. "I have been told the Philosophers Stone is in here, within this villa." Said Gen. "It may literally look like a stone, or it may be a powder. There isn't just one of them of course; many alchemists have claimed to have their own Philosophers Stone."

"Keep it simple.....What does it do ?" Asked Youcef. "Is it a weapon ?"

"Not a weapon, never a weapon." Said Yatsko. "Its main use has been in transmuting one substance into another; mainly base metals into pure gold."

"How much gold ?" Asked Youcef.

"As much as you like." Added Gen. "Though wealth isn't why some have looked for it. Used properly, the Philosophers Stone can make an elixir of life.....It can grant immortality."

"I've heard it can also rejuvenate the old, diseased and injured." Said Sophia.

"Now I'm official interested, very interested." Said Youcef. "Where do we look for this thing ?"

Akiva knew the answer, but poor Gen was looking a little miffed; they'd all stolen her thunder in one way or another. He decided to be firmly on team Gen; which might bring rewards at a later date.

"No idea, but I bet Gen knows." Said Akiva.

"It's a case of you'll know it when you see it." Said Gen. "In this case it is said to be true. Albertus Magnus put it in several of his scrolls. Even normal mortal humans will have a feeling they're in the presence of the Philosophers Stone. It may be a good feeling, or a feeling you're being threatened; or even a glow coming from a part of the room you're in. That glow will tell you where to look."

"And this Albertus.....He was a really clever guy ?" Asked Youcef.

"He was, very clever." Said Gen. "Albertus Magnus actually witnessed the creation of pure gold by transmutation."

"Time to start searching." Said Youcef.

"Take it slowly, no rushing." Said Gen. "You need time to sense the Philosophers Stone. Rush along and you may miss it. When you feel something out of the ordinary, come and get me."

Youcef was gone, heading towards the part of the villa where Samuel Westcott was known to have had his study. Sophie wasn't far behind him, though she turned towards the stairs and the upstairs bedrooms. When he was sure they were alone, Akiva spoke to Gen.

"Youcef already has an idea that the Philosophers Stone is the path to riches." Said Akiva. "Once he realises how much it's worth.....You can't trust him, Gen. He'll start viewing you as an obstacle in his way."

"I know, Akiva.....That's why I'm glad you're here." Said Gen. "I'm sure I can rely on you to watch my back."

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It wasn't that Clara wouldn't have listened to advice on bringing up her child; there simply wasn't anyone to ask. As far as Clara knew, she was unique; the only full blood vampire to have a child that lived and thrived. There was that Mabina word again. The whole house was using thrived to refer to her rosy cheeked son. Only Justin shouldn't be looking like that, no vampire should look like that. Mabina had a few theories of course, lots of them; probably all wrong. Daniel sent her copies of ancient texts, full of gruesome stories about female vampires who'd produced dead horrors from their wombs. Even then it had been considered a miracle that they'd ever managed to conceive.

"Be grateful, Justin is thriving."

Daniel would write, using that word again. Was her child really thriving, or was he gradually becoming a normal human child ? A woman at the corner shop had actually called him a lovely bonny child. It worried Clara and there was no one to talk to, not really. There was no Benjamin Spock book on bringing up a vampire baby, the only living vampire child there had ever been.

"If it's too soon, he might throw up." Said Raine.

Raine was an old friend, one of the few people in London, or anywhere else for that matter, who owed Clara a debt of gratitude. Raine was also the closest thing Clara had to being an expert. Raine had lost a child, a dreadful and sudden death in his sleep. Cot death the papers called it, which sounded so mundane. Although the term vampire had never been used between them, Raine was aware that Clara was more than just a normal human.

"I did try him with a tiny piece of fruit." Said Clara. "He was fine.....Justin seemed to love it."

"Cooked fruit I hope ?" Asked Raine.

"No." Said Clara.

She felt guilty, despite knowing her son was immune to just about all human infections and just about all tummy bugs; or at least he should have been immune to them. Clara was beginning to wonder if she could assume anything about her bonny child. He was half her though and half Simon, so she'd always love Justin Ned Atherton.

"You have to be careful.....They're so delicate at this age." Said Raine.

"Only cooked food.....I get it." Said Clara.

Raine was an ex-Psochic, but that didn't make her a threat. Simon and Clara had once been friends with the Psochics, actually they'd been allies. Raine had been injured in a battle with rivals in the Middle East. A long and involved story, which had meant Clara getting Raine to London and setting her up with a new life. Raine was not only one of the few in her circle who'd had a child, she also owed her. No matter what Justin might be about to do, Raine was a safe audience. Clara unscrewed the lid from a jar of baby food.

"Lots of really soft boiled vegetables." Said Clara. "Perfect for him."

"Yes, he'll love that." Said Raine. "Can I feed him a little of it ?"

"Can I trust you, Raine ?" Asked Clara. "I know there's been trouble with the Psochics, but really.....Can I trust you ?"

"Of course you can.....I owed you my life; so does Yosef."

Yosef, the father of her poor short lived child. He'd been a security guard and Simon had dragged him out of a burning building. Clara brought a small bottle out of a drawer; the same size bottle that tends to be used for eye drops. The liquid in it was blood red, because it was fresh blood. She used the dropper on the bottle to drip three drops of blood into her son's baby food meal.

"What is that ?" Asked Raine.

"You know what it is.....I think my son is ready to taste it." Said Clara.

Nosferatu had been the term used by the Psochic Order when Sam Isaacs had been their leader. Nosferatu, the drinkers of blood. Raine nodded, she understood. Clara used a spoon to mix the tiny amount of blood, into the mushy, overcooked vegetables. She then picked up her son.

"Please.....It's been so long since I held a child." Said Raine. "May I feed him."

"I'm not sure how Justin will react to the food." Said Clara.

"I don't care.....Please, Clara." Said Raine. "I need this."

Was Raine now too old to try for another child of her own ? Clara did the quick math in her head and decided it was close, but she was unlikely to get pregnant ever again. Clara passed her son to Raine and he seemed content to be in her embrace. Raine filled the spoon with the boiled vegetables.

"Here you go, Justin." Said Raine. "Eat it all.....It's good for you."

He nibbled at the food, until he must have tasted the blood. It was Clara's blood, fresh from a cut she'd made just before Raine had arrived. She was alive, so there shouldn't be any bad taste to it. Could a vampire child feed on the blood of its mother ? The way he emptied the spoon, he was definitely enjoying it. Then his eyes changed colour and took on a red(ish) tinge.

"Careful.....Do you want me to take him ?" Asked Clara.

"No, he's fine.....Maybe if I gave him another spoonful ?" Asked Raine.

Her son growled and then there was no second spoonful of baby food, laced with blood. He bit Raine's arm, but luckily for her, he lacked the skill to hit a major blood vessel. Her arm still bled though, there was quite a bit of blood. Raine looked in pain, but didn't scream. That impressed

Clara; it impressed her quite a bit. No trying to get her child's jaws apart, that might make him bite harder, and deeper. Clara talked to her son, in what she hoped was a soothing voice.

"Raine is a friend, Justin." Said Clara. "Stop biting her.....You're hurting a friend."

Clara needed to say it three times, but eventually her son's eyes lost the red tinge and he stopped biting Raine. Justin ran his tiny hand through the blood on Raine's arm and the bleeding stopped.

The deep bite in her arm healed so fast, it seemed to instantly vanished.

"He's still learning.....He knows you now." Said Clara. "My son now knows you're a friend."

The healing skill was unexpected and Clara was already wondering how useful it might be as he grew up. Poor Raine still looked concerned, but she'd dealt with it all very well.

"He healed my arm." Said Raine.

"Thank you for not screaming, Raine." Said Clara. "There are builders in the house."

"Did you see ? He healed my arm."

She said it the way people probably say they've been healed at Lourdes. To Raine her son was now a magical child, who could heal deep wounds. She was looking at him as if he was capable of miracles.

"I saw him heal you.....He likes you." Said Clara.

"Can I come again ?" Asked Raine. "I could help you look after him. It must be difficult, with a full time job. As you say, he knows me now."

There was that look, as Raine held her son's tiny hand. How many years had it been since her son had died ? It was a long time, probably with little contact with babies. If Raine thought Justin might rip her throat out, she'd probably still be pleading to look after him. From Clara's point of view, Raine would make an ideal nanny for Justin.

"At first I'd need to be here." Said Clara. "When I think it'll be safe, I'll let you come here on your own. There will always be someone to let you in."

"I'd never hurt the boy."

"I know, Raine.....I meant when I'm sure you'll be safe." Said Clara.

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