

Clara Copley

(Season five of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 26 – Saving Simon

'Not all men would have adapted well to being the surrogate father of a 'special' child, but Noah seemed to genuinely love her son. Raine had her own issues, though it was obvious she'd give her life to protect Justin. It was a little strange, but their dysfunctional family worked well.'

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Laura couldn't quite believe they'd been in Bermuda for a week, without being called about an emergency. Tim's cell phone still worked, but hers didn't; which she considered a good thing. If anyone needed them, she'd given the hotel's number to a few selected people; mainly Clara and Nathalie. Ronnie had left her phone in London, but she had given Cyril H Carter the hotel's number, just in case. In case of what? Only two vampires vacationing with a female hard case could even begin to imagine what might cause someone to call. Of course all that sunshine wasn't all good news.

"Oh, I love this café; the parasols do give proper shade." Said Laura.

"Personally, I can put up with the sneezing and coughing for the views." Said Tim.

"For once I feel this humble human has an edge over you guys." Said Ronnie.

A café in a shaded spot on a wide stairway that went down to the ocean. Add the parasols and Laura's sneezing looked like simple mild hay fever. Tim had it worse than her; he hadn't had years for his body to get used to being a vampire. They were in Hamilton for their mid-morning coffee; the café had already become a regular thing. It was as if the stairway had been designed to give a perfect view of many swaying palms and the wonderful blue ocean.

"I must get a few pictures; it's a perfect sunny morning." Said Tim.

Laura had used her phone to take pictures, but Tim's phone automatically sent his pics to the cloud. He must have taken dozens of nice pictures and they still had a month left in paradise. Bermuda was one of those places where you could aim a camera anywhere and get a wonderful picture. Even the houses were a rainbow of bright colours. He went up the stairs a little way.

"Come on, pose for me." Said Tim. "Time for your close-ups."

Laura leant back in her chair, trying to look sultry. She had no idea what Ronnie was trying to look like, but being honest, she looked a bit tarty. No that it mattered; they were on holiday and no one else was likely to see the pictures. Tim looked likely to take hundreds and no one was going to wade through that lot.

"I need a couple of decent pics I can show my mum." Said Ronnie.

"Ok, sit up straight and look right at me." Said Tim.

Tim could take good pictures and the one of Veronica Neophytou sat under a parasol near Front Street in Hamilton, looked really good. Ronnie borrowed Tim's phone and sent the picture to her mum.

"She'll love that Ronnie, you look gorgeous." Said Laura.

"Do you have living parents, or is that an awkward question?" Asked Ronnie.

"Awkward question." Said Laura.

"Me too.....Definitely an awkward question." Said Tim.

“So, what are we going to do for the rest of the day ?” Asked Ronnie.

It was the same thing every day, they’d planned so much in London, yet hadn’t started any of the activities they’d read about.

“There are scuba lessons.” Said Laura.

“Yeah, you’re got to be really in the mood for those.” Said Tim. “Besides, we’ve got a whole month here still to go.”

“They seem to have a nice zoo.” Said Laura. “I saw a leaflet in the rack at the hotel.”

Laura had the leaflet, which she spread over the table. A small zoo, but they had some interesting animals. It wasn’t far and they had hired tourist bikes to get around. No worrying about finding a taxi and tourist bikes could be parked almost anywhere.

“Yes, I saw the leaflet on the zoo.” Said Ronnie. “Looks nice and it isn’t far. It’s right in the centre of Flatts Village.”

“Nice and relaxing.....We can look at scuba classes tomorrow.” Said Tim.

They all nodded, it was what holidays in the sun were all about; being lazy and generally relaxing for most of the day.

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If anyone had told her how her family was going to develop, Clara would have thought they were crazy. It was a rare thing for her and Noah to both be with Justin Ned Atherton during the day. Her child was still quite small, but definitely no longer a baby. He could eat solid food and speak a few understandable words. As with all vampires, taking him outside on a sunny day made him blink and sneeze. Raine was with them too, in the nursery which, all too soon, would become the bedroom of a young boy. After that ? Even Daniel wasn’t sure how Justin would develop; he was after all; unique.

“He eats everything I give him.” Said Raine. “He’s sure to grow up big and strong.”

“Thrive as Mabina puts it, he seems to be thriving.” Said Noah.

Not all men would have adapted well to being the surrogate father of a ‘special’ child, but Noah seemed to genuinely love her son. Raine had her own issues, though it was obvious she’d give her life to protect Justin. It was a little strange, but their dysfunctional family worked well.

“I’m quite excited about what my son may become.” Said Clara. “And perhaps.....A little nervous too. He is the first and only one of his kind. I’m sure he has a lot of surprises in store for us.”

“A pity Karkengara won’t be here to see Justin grow up.” Said Raine.

“He’s gone to help Simon, probably forever.” Said Clara. “A minion of the gods told me that, because Karkengara was told not to. I wish him well.”

“Yes.....I’ll miss his head appearing out of walls.” Said Noah.

Clara had pictures of the bringer of fire, for when Justin was old enough to understand and not show them to his school friends. Was her son going to be an immortal vampire ? That, as they say, was the sixty four thousand dollar question. Daniel was hedging his bets and saying maybe. Clara was sure her child would live a very, very long life and eventually die in battle; it was what tended to happen to the Nosferatu. Niña put her head around the nurse door.

“I’m just off to the supermarket.” Said Niña. “Does anyone want anything not on the usual list ?”
And.....Life was back to the usual business of the Hornsey house.

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Nathalie Aurigny had a burn on her wrist that wasn’t likely to go away soon. Not from the Neru word of power, but an unintended after effect from what should have been Incha the word of wisdom. Try to pull too many words of power out of sacred texts and it will be noticed by those who protect such power. Nathalie had learned another dozen words of power and all had unforeseen side effects.

Nothing dangerous, but she was determined to add Incha to her repertoire. As usual David and Moshe were with her as readers of the law. So far at least, neither of them had experienced any injuries as serious as the burn on her left wrist. They were in a room in the basement archive now, a soundproof room. It seemed people had complained about hearing her screaming, as the skin had burned off her wrist. They obviously didn't realise that all such forbidden knowledge came with the risk of pain, misery and maybe even death.

"You really want to try Incha again?" Asked David. "The wound you have refuses to heal. It's likely to remain livid and open; waiting to be infected for the rest of your life."

"Incha is wisdom David; it's the corner stone of all the other words of power." Said Nathalie.

"I understand what you mean, I really do." Said Moshe. "I still think you must be a little crazy."

"Well.....If either of you want to pull in Incha before I do?" Asked Nathalie. "It's said that wisdom gained from the words opens doorways to other worlds. And you can make sure it works this time."

"No, I'm not that brave." Said Moshe.

Poor David, she could tell he was in love with her again. He was brave too, but was he brave enough to risk a lifelong open burn wound for her? Even if he was, would she let him?

"I'll do it, but I want a promise from you, Nathalie." Said David.

Now he'd made the offer, she had to say yes. He knew what he was doing and her best clerics had agreed the minor change to the sacred text. David would be fine and then she'd pull in the Incha word of power and she'd be fine. Nothing to worry about, nothing at all.

"What do you wish me to promise?" Asked Nathalie

"That if I'm seriously harmed or killed, you'll stop this nonsense." Said David. "I want your word that you'll lock away the Albrecht journal and never use it again."

"That's a bit extreme.....I'm sure you'll be fine." Said Nathalie.

"I still want your word." Said David. "If I'm maimed or killed, you'll call an end to this."

"You already have a dozen words of power at your command." Said Moshe. "I agree with David, let that be enough. It's said that Joan of Arc only ever found half that number."

Part of her wanted to lock the journal in her safe and never use it again. On the other hand, there was her certainty that David would come to no harm at all.

"And they killed Joan of Arc." Said Nathalie. "Very well, David.....You have my word that if you're seriously injured or killed, the Albrecht journal will be locked away forever."

"Then.....Let's get this done." Said David Huynh.

They knew how it was done now, Moshe was the right hand repeater of the texts and she was the left hand. Moshe spoke the texts of sacred learning as they appeared on the journal. There was one minor alteration, which hopefully, would save David from a burnt wrist. The air in the room seemed to vibrate with ancient power.

"Now me." Said Nathalie.

Nathalie repeated the words, exactly as Moshe had read them. There was an odd sound as she finished, like chalk being run across a blackboard. That was new, it had never happened before.

"It's here and ready." Said Moshe. "The symbol for Incha is ready to be used."

There it was in the centre of the table, the symbol for Incha – Word of wisdom.

"I'm not greedy; I'll only take some of its power." Said David.

Nathalie watched as David held the word of power in his hands, absorbing some of its power. He only held it for less than a minute, before pulling his hands towards his chest. Why had Incha failed for her, leaving that dreadful burn? No one was completely certain, though they suspected it was

due to a poor translation somewhere in the ancient texts. David had gone very quiet, but at least he wasn't screaming.

"Are you alright, David?" She asked.

"Oh, Shit.....Look at his chest." Said Moshe.

David never screamed as he died, neither did she. Moshe did though; right up until the moment David had completely disintegrated. When David was just a few pieces of rancid looking gristle on his chair, Moshe became quiet. After a minute or so, Moshe looked at her.

"Keep your word." Said Moshe. "No one else must die."

"I will.....The journal will go into my safe tonight." Said Nathalie. "It will stay there, untouched and unused.....Forever."

She cried for David, she cried proper tears, her first proper tears in years. While she cried Moshe called for a clean-up crew to deal with the horrifying remains of poor David.

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Gen Debré had insisted that right from their first pound of gold, it was always placed in the cellar before they did anything else. Changing their clothes, having the almost obligatory coffee and nibbles; it all had to wait until that day's gold was placed against the cellar wall. The gold was why they were there, taking ludicrous risks with dark gods from other worlds. It truly was their *raison d'être*, their current reason for existing. Gen had stopped working out how much it was all worth, after the gold bricks were four layers deep.

"Wow, we've been busy." Said Akiva. "How much do you reckon is there?"

"I honestly have no idea." Said Gen. "It has to be worth several million dollars."

The late James Maynard had stored his gold against a wall in the cellar of Glade Hall. His notes admitted that he quickly lost any idea of what it was all worth, as the pile grew. He did eventually box it up to make it easier to move, which seemed a good idea.

"The big question is how we eventually move it." Said Akiva. "Gold is beautiful and wonderful, but it is so damned heavy."

"Heavier than lead." Said Gen. "I'm sure if I send Nathalie a picture of our pile of gold; she'll arrange for a well-guarded convoy of trucks to come and get it."

"Once over the border into Kenya it vanishes.....I get it." Said Akiva.

"I trust Nathalie; we'll all get our promised share of the proceeds."

"Yeah, she does seem to be one of the few honest people I've worked for." Said Akiva.

"Well.....I wouldn't go that far." Said Gen.

It was just them in the cellar, though Max and Anne occasionally came to drool over the pile of 99.9% pure gold. Transmutation of base metal to gold was an impossibility of course. But there in front of them was a lot of impossible gold. In many ways Akiva was carrying out the worst job of all, acquiring blood for the dark gods. She had to ask him.

"How hard is it to find the blood?" She asked.

"So far I can do it alone, but I might need help if we step up gold production." Said Akiva. "It's as bad as you can imagine, Gen. I go a long way from the compound and pick someone on their own. After making them unconscious in a variety of ways, I drain their blood into large plastic bottles. Trust me, that is as much detail as you want to know."

"Crap, those strange dark gods have made us all barbarians." Said Gen. "Just don't get caught.....I don't think I could bear that."

They were alone, so she hugged him and felt him hug her back. They'd gone from being good friends to having sex. Gen was sure a lot of the feeling between them was a need for companionship in a crazy situation. Akiva had told her several times that he wasn't like her.

"You know me.....If these ugly little gods want blood, I'll get it for them." Said Akiva.

"Tell me the truth.....Doesn't it bother you ?" Asked Gen.

"Do you want me to tell you about how I survived in Syria ?"

"No.....That can wait for when we're away from here." Said Gen. "There will be a fight with these gods when it's obvious we're packing up to leave. It will get nasty, very nasty."

"How did James Maynard deal with them ?" Asked Akiva.

Did Akiva need to know that almost no one survived the battle with the gods from another world ?

He was tough and unlikely to tell the others. If Mesfin Tesfaye realised they were going to pack up and leave, he and his people might become another enemy; and they were all well-armed.

"Fire, Akiva.....The purging flames." Said Gen. "Find some incendiary grenades from one of your iffy contacts. Maynard used fire, but almost no one in Glade Hall survived the battle with the gods.

When we go, we need use the grenades and go.....No messing around."

"Sounds like it could be bad." Said Akiva.

"It will be.....Just make sure we come out of it alive." Said Gen. "Nathalie will keep us producing gold until things get really desperate. Mesfin will know we have gold by then, a lot of gold. As soon as he sees us packing up and the trucks arrive to take the final load of gold.....I think he'll attack us."

"At least we'll have a while to work out a plan." Said Akiva. "Come on, it's getting late. Are we using your bed tonight, or mine ?"

He was taking her for granted, but that was alright. It was a stage in their relationship and she was taking him for granted too. It was nice to wake up and have him lying next to her. The sex was pretty damned good too.

"I think.....My bed tonight." She said.

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Giovanni was surprised to see the head of a dragon in the house, just a head. The beast was obviously alive though and called itself Karkengara, the bringer of fire. Giovanni had seen so many strange things during his travels with Simon, that a dragon wasn't going to cause him to panic. It seemed to be on their side, with Karkengara breathing cool fire over him. When it was finished, Giovanni no longer felt weak from the loss of blood.

"Thank you dragon, I feel so much better." Said Giovanni.

"I'm a deity not a dragon, but we can have that discussion another day." Said Karkengara.

"But you look like a dragon." Said Juliana.

The bringer of fire growled, but it sounded more like frustration than anger to Giovanni.

"Don't tease him, or he might eat you." Said Patsy.

"Rescuing Simon comes first.....Then I might eat someone." Said Karkengara.

"He's at the headquarters of the city guard." Said Patsy. "Once they realise who he is, they'll be here in force. We need to get the servants packing our things, but where can we go ?"

"My father has a house we can use; I'll give the servants the address." Said Juliana.

"Is it safe ?" Asked Giovanni.

It seemed the key question if they were going to have their things sent there and take Simon there once they'd rescued him. It never occurred to Giovanni that any quest he went on would end up as anything other than a complete success. He'd been trained as an assassin for the Medici of course, who never tolerated the slightest failure.

“Perfectly safe.” Said Juliana. “My father hasn’t been there in years. I think he’s forgotten half the property he owns in Florence. It will be clean though, the servants have a rota to clean the unused houses and make sure the beds are aired.”

“So, where do we pick up the rest of our fighters ?” Asked Karkengara.

“This is us, there are no others.” Said Patsy.

“Anyway, we have you now.” Said Giovanni.

Karkengara made his frustrated growl again and Giovanni realised they couldn’t expect him to breathe fire over their enemies and do all their fighting. That would have been nice, but it was probably too much to expect of the gods. It was obvious the rather grumpy dragon had been sent by one of the gods.

“I can knock in heavy doors you can’t open.” Said Karkengara. “I can fight those unpassable magical adepts. But you’ll still have a hard fight rescuing Simon. There must be others good with a sword you can send for ?”

“There’s just us, but we always win.....Always.” Said Patsy.

“We love Simon and we shall rescue him.” Said Juliana. “Though your help would be appreciated.”

The dragon growled again, but he hadn’t seen Patsy and Juliana fight side by side. There was still tension between them; they did both love the same man. Most of that tension went into being better with a sword than most.

“Very well, you won’t see me, but I’ll be with you all the way.” Said Karkengara. “I’ll watch you and help where I can. If you’re stuck anywhere, call for my help.....Come on, let’s go and rescue Simon.”

“Yay.” Yelled Patsy.

There was no running; people running at night brought the attention of the city guard. They walked, trying to keep to the shadows where possible. That was good as Giovanni still had some healing to do. There was a stitch in his left side, which would have been agonising if they were running.

“Are we sure they’ll have taken him to the headquarters of the city guard ?” Asked Juliana.

“Yes, I was watching right up until they took him inside.” Said Giovanni.

The city guard building was round, strong and had been used for many things over the years. It had started as part of the treasury, until the Medici saw the value of having the city guard located close to the centre of Florence. Giovanni knew the inside of the building well, part of his job was to take captured malcontents there. The cells were at the lowest level, as cells usually are. Getting inside when he had no reason to be there wouldn’t be easy. He decided to call for help.

“Karkengara.....Please open these doors.” Giovanni shouted.

“I can’t even see him.” Said Juliana.

“You can trust Karkengara, he’ll be watching us.” Said Patsy.

Red painted doors with metal banding to strengthen them in many places. Doors that looked as though they’d resist a battering ram during a siege. They never saw the bringer of fire, apart from his front claws and his fiery breath. There was fire blowing across the doors until the wood was crumbling. Karkengara’s claws then ripped and tore until the doors were just a pile of debris.

“Come on.....Inside, I know where he’ll be.” Said Giovanni.

Giovanni had never felt guilty about delivering people to the building; it was part of his job. Simon was different though, a fellow vampire; almost a brother. They and their group of friends would have to leave Italy of course, but there was a ship waiting at Livorno. The Mermaid and Galeoto its captain, waiting there to take them to Cyrenaica and the next step in Simon’s search for an answer to the ultimate question.

“Left here.....Down the stairs.” Said Giovanni.

There was the occasional living guard, but most of the guards seemed to have been dealt with by the dragon. Lots of ripped apart bodies and piles of charred remains. As for the living guards, Giovanni gave them a lesson in swordsmanship. Not that Patsy and Juliana let him have all the fun.

“Karkengara has prepared the ground for us.” Said Juliana. “Will he be coming to Cyrenaica with us?”

“I’m not sure.....I hope so.” Said Patsy.

The two women got on, which Giovanni regarded as a miracle. Juliana was still friends with Simon, but they were no longer lovers. Patsy now shared his bed, though she went out of her way to be kind to Juliana. It was weird, but it worked.

“How much further to go, Giovanni?” Asked Patsy.

“Not much deeper.....I once spent some time in the lowest cells.” Said Giovanni. “I upset a friend of the Medici, an important friend. We’re friends now, though we might not be after this.”

The bars on the cell were thick, but they’d been bent as though they were made of straw.

Karkengara again, he’d left a gap in the bars large enough for them to rescue Simon.

“I’m so glad to see you all.” Said Simon. “The dragon breathed on my wounds. I feel so much better and he told me you were on your way down to rescue me.”

Simon’s clothing was covered in blood; he’d obviously been given a beating. Their kind were tough though, more than capable of surviving a beating which would kill most men. The two women were fussing over Simon; Juliana had even brought him a clean shirt. What heinous crime had caused the city guard to come after them in large numbers? Simon was known to be a senior member of the brotherhood, reporting directly to Brother Alberti. At the moment the brotherhood were out of favour. It was the perfect time to head for Cyrenaica on the North African coast.

“That dragon seems very useful.” Said Giovanni. “I hope he stays with us or a while.”

“I’m not a dragon.” Said Karkengara. “I’m a very ancient god, a deity.”

The head appeared out of the wall, along with a tiny part of its body. It still looked like a dragon to Giovanni. Dragon statues on plinths were all over some of the places he’d already explored with Simon.

“Dragon, or deity; we need your help.” Said Simon. “Will you go with us to Cyrenaica?”

“Of course I will, that’s why I was sent here.” Said Karkengara.

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Close to a year after Gen had first been sent to Ethiopia

Nathalie looked at the two people the other side of her desk and realised how much a year can change some people. Maybe not Akiva, there had always been darkness within him; he’d probably been born with it lurking inside him. Gen though, that was a shock; she looked so hard now, eyes made of granite as they say. Nathalie eased her own conscience by thinking about how wealthy she was about to make them. She pretended to read Gen’s final report on the compound and what had happened there. She already knew most of it by heart.

“Exactly how were Max and Anne killed?” Asked Nathalie. “It’s not mentioned in either of your closure reports.”

They looked at each other; Nathalie had noticed them doing it a lot. As if they had some kind of telepathy and were agreeing on answers to questions.

“I’m not sure, everything happened so fast.” Said Gen. “Did all the gold get out of Ethiopia?”

“It did, every single ounce.” Said Nathalie. “I’m about to send your share to your respective bank accounts. I hate to go over the point; it must be a painful memory. How did Anne and Max die?”

They were holding hands now. Were Gen and Akiva lovers? It seemed very likely they were.

“I need to know for their families.” Said Nathalie.

“Did they have families?” Asked Akiva.

“Don’t be silly.....Everyone has some sort of family.” Said Gen. “Those terrible dark gods took Anne and Max, swallowed them in front of us, though I expect they’re not really dead. You can hardly tell their families that.”

“Only Gen and I left that place alive and we’ve no idea why they let us go.” Said Akiva. “I think the gods from another world liked us.....We had given them a lot of blood.”

Nathalie felt like vomiting and Gen was right; there was no way the families of Max and Anne could know about their fate. Swallowed alive, yet not really dead. Nathalie decided to invent an end that was heroic, quick and painless.

“You’re both guaranteed senior positions with the Silver Dawn.” Said Nathalie. “If you want them of course, you may have your own plans. You are now both very wealthy.”

“We have our own plans.” Said Gen.

There was that looking at each other business again. Nathalie would be glad to get them out of the building. There was something very strange about them. Gen had given her a leather briefcase with everything in it, every item and text needed to transmute lead to the purest gold. It was nice to have it all, but Nathalie was determined never to use it again. Looking at the expressions on the faces of the two people in front of her....The price was often too high.

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From here we move onto Simon’s book, the 6th vampire book in the London’s Night Stalkers series. The book will of course be called ‘Simon Atherton.’