

Clara Copley

(Season five of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 19 – The Albrecht Family

‘Adelaide had seen many wonderful libraries, including a few belonging to colleges of Oxford and Cambridge universities. There was a little dust on the shelves, but in terms of size and the number of volumes; the library looked larger than any belonging to any university library she’d seen. She found it sad that no students ever got to sit at the dusty tables and read the books.’

»

Clara had no idea if Noah had recurring dreams, or even dreamt at all. That kind of information would come gradually, as they got to know one another’s little quirks and foibles. Whatever his dreams might be like, they’d be mild and pleasant, compared to the recurring dreams of a vampire. Simon used to dream of fighting during the First World War, specifically fighting in tunnels under no mans’ land. He’d sometimes wake with the facial expression of a crazy man, with a little wild animal in the mix. Occasionally it had taken him hours to return to being his usual self.

Clara’s dreams were sometimes violent and unpleasant, but mostly they were of her past; the childhood spent in an English village. She’d been born around five hundred and thirty years ago; even she sometimes had trouble remembering the exact date of her birth. A poor child from a poor village, yet she was never really that hungry and had never been dressed in rags. Not an affluent life, but far better than the childhood of many in that part of rural England. Clara curled up against Noah and one of her recurring dreams began. Not the most horrific, but it had been a while since she’d dreamt of her family and the burning mill. She had hoped that dreadful dream had gone forever.....

~

~

A recollection of Simon and that dreadful dream.....

Some people know when they’re dreaming, especially if it’s a recurring dream. For Clara it always felt real, always the same terrible dream of fire, death and becoming an orphan. Once or twice she’d woken up screaming, Simon silently holding her until morning. Most of the time she woke without making a sound, just the unusual sensation of her heart hammering in her chest.

Past trauma seemed to be the driver; Simon had his own recurring dreams. His were of bloody, brutal wars that weren’t even important enough to get into the history books. Apart from a dream of trench warfare in the First World War. That troubled him a great deal, though he had never given her many details. It seemed that trauma left its mark somewhere in their unconscious minds and vampires tended to live traumatic and violent lives.

Clara only had one violent recurring dream and she’d just woken from it, her breathing still too fast, her heart thudding in her chest. Her fangs had dropped, as if her body was trying to protect her from some unseen enemy. Clara held Simon, pushing her face against his cheek.

“Was it bad ?” He asked.

“It’s always bad !”

She’d been just a child, what would now be called a toddler. Able to walk and talk quite well, even understand what her family did to earn a living. Clara had to guess at her age, but thought she’d probably been somewhere between three and four years old. Her father and older brother worked the local mill, while her mother and older sister looked after their home and cultivated vegetable in

their garden. Life was hard, especially during a bad winter and the previous winter had been bitterly cold.

"God punishes us for our sins." Her mother had told her.

Clara had no real notion of God then and sin seemed to be something that only grownups understood. Her understanding of sin was soon to be greatly increased, but at the time of the dream, she was still an innocent human girl child.

The dream always started on that particular morning, a beautiful autumn day that was warm for the time of year. All her family helped when there was a large amount of flour to be moved and there had been two wagons full that day. Sacks of course, crude woven sacks that bled the fine flour through their sides. Her father must have known the dangers, yet that day had started off with such a carefree feeling.

"Don't get under our feet Clara." Her mother had told her.

The last words her mother had said to her and now Clara found it hard to picture her mother's face. Most of her memories were of the smell that came from her mother's apron. Wet flour, mixed with lavender and the sweat of hard work.

They'd all been there; her entire family and the farmer had brought his own children. There was almost a holiday feel to the day, at least for the young children. Clara had another child her age to play with, even if he was a boy.

He'd been there, a labourer then, easily carrying huge sacks out to the waggons. Called Daniel even then, though she doubted that it had ever been the name he'd been christened with. If he ever had been christened? Something about Daniel made her doubt he'd ever been a member of any God fearing faith.

"What a mess you're in." Her father had said. "Covered from head to foot in flour."

The last words her father had ever said and he'd been laughing, which made the memory perfect. Clara found it impossible to see his face properly, the five hundred or so year in between had robbed her memory of those precious details. She saw his face in the dream, but the details were forgotten once she woke up.

There was no warning! Perhaps a spark at just the wrong moment? There had been a huge amount of flour in the air. Little breeze that day, to keep the dust moving, little humidity in the air to dampen it down. Clara had read up on flour fires once, surprised at how common there'd been in the old wooden mills. Not just flames and intense heat, but explosions too.

"Can I help?"

"No, it's heavy work."

The last words her brother had said to her. A bright light had dazzled her then, making her fall over backwards. Next he was on top of her, holding her down. Daniel, though she didn't learn his name until after he was called a hero.

"Stay down girl and stop struggling."

Daniel covered her completely, his hands pushing her down, his cheek hard against hers. Clara felt heat and heard someone screaming, but one specific odour always punctuated her dream at that point. Daniel burning, his skin blistering, his hair igniting, giving off that terrible smell. It felt as though he'd covered her body with his for hours, yet it could only have been a minute at most.

"Don't look child, don't look." He told her. "You'll be fine now."

Her dream didn't carry on for long after that, just the final shock that sometimes sent her screaming back into the waking world. Daniel turned his back to her and his skin was cooked. That was how

she'd thought of it as a child, the crackling on the pigs they ate at Christmas. Even at four years old she knew Daniel was dying, no one could survive those kinds of burns. But he did.....

Unfortunately her memories carried on after the dream ended; forcing her to relive events she desperately wanted to forget. Everyone at the mill that day died, apart from her and Daniel. Her father died immediately, but her mother died three days later. Her brother struggled on for nearly a week, screaming most of the time. There had been nothing left of the mill or the house where they'd lived. It was a superstitious age, there was no rebuilding or any other building constructed on the site of the great disaster.

A childless, middle aged aunt took her in and cared for her fairly well, though they both lived in poverty. Daniel was the hero of the village of course, though he was expected to die within days, maybe less. But he didn't.....

"Is she treating you alright?" His head nodding at her aunt.

"Yes."

It had taken him three months to be well enough to visit her and he still looked more dead than alive. Wearing a cloak and hood, but she could still see terrible blistering on his head and neck. He twitched after every movement, as if stifling a scream, yet he'd walked a good two miles to see her.

"Thank you for saving me." She'd said.

He'd smiled and promised to visit her again, but things became awkward for him in the village. A man surviving such horrendous injuries became suspected of being in league with dark forces, maybe Lucifer himself. Clara trusted him though, even after he'd betrayed her. A year later and he'd sought her out, finding her tending her aunt's kitchen garden.

"I'm so pleased to see you looking so much better."

"A few scars on my back, but no pain now, none at all."

They'd carried on meeting and she trusted him, there was no reason not to. Even fifteen years later, she saw no reason not to go with him, when he asked her to meet some of his friends. Vampires, one of whom had bled her almost dry and then turned her into one of them. Such a betrayal by someone she trusted! Not that she thought that now, but then she'd expected far better of people. She still trusted Daniel, despite what he'd done. There were drawbacks to being a vampire, but immortality paid for a lot of fairly minor peeves. Who wouldn't give up human existence to avoid being worm food by the age of eighty? A lot younger when she'd been a child.

So yes, she still trusted Daniel, but she still had no real understanding of why he'd given her to the vampires, to become one of them.

~ ~

Adelaide had prepared the ground a little, by a few emails to the custodians of the Albrecht family home. Still wealthy, the surviving descendants of Elias Albrecht; could have locked the doors to their mansion and ignored the world. One or two of them wanted the world to see their very opulent home. Plus, there were tax advantages to allowing the public to view their mansion. There was even a small entry fee, which Adelaide had taken care of for all three of them.

"It's very grand, but not a beautiful building." Said Laura.

"It reminds me a little of Buckingham Palace." Said Tim.

Tim was still flushed with success from his recent hunting trip for blood. Laura had told her how it had all gone through her eyes. To Adelaide it all sounded very exciting, but she was happy to be an ordinary human. All three of them were stood looking up at the Albrecht mansion, which might have been even larger than Buckingham Palace.

"There are huge gardens, though we might not get a chance to see them." Said Adelaide.

"When do they let us in ?" Asked Laura.

"Now I think.....I can feel someone approaching." Said Tim.

The man opening the door looked vaguely military, but was dressed in the pin stripe suit of a banker, or maybe an accountant. He definitely didn't look like a tour guide. He smiled at them though, which Adelaide took as a good sign. It seemed the man was going to be with them until they left, but there was a little sweetener to them never being left completely alone.

"You may take pictures and I will endeavour to keep a little distance from your party. I do understand the need our visitors have for a little privacy. There will be refreshments provided at around eleven." Said their guide.

Their time to leave the home of the Albrechts was quite late. They had enough time to have a good look around, even if their guide was hovering around them.

"May we go anywhere ?" Asked Tim.

"Anywhere you like.....But no touching any of the exhibits."

He looked at them and they looked at him. If Laura hadn't reacted, they might have been stood there for a while. There really was a huge amount to see and so many doors they could open.

"The library.....Please take us to the library." Said Laura.

The man gave Laura a slight bow and said the library was a very good starting point. He walked towards the rear of the entrance lobby, with them following him. It took a while to reach the library and they still weren't at the far side of the mansion. Adelaide wondered how much the massive place cost to heat, especially in a bad winter. The doors to the library were in a dark wood, covered in carved animals; both real and fantasy creatures.

"The doors are.....Adorable." Said Adelaide.

Cheesy, but their guide actually chuckled; which made her happy. He opened the doors and beckoned them to step into the Albrecht family library. Adelaide had seen many wonderful libraries, including a few belonging to colleges of Oxford and Cambridge universities. There was a little dust on the shelves, but in terms of size and the number of volumes; the library looked larger than any belonging to any university library she'd seen. She found it sad that no students ever got to sit at the dusty tables and read the books.

"Wow, this place is huge." Said Tim.

"I can give you all the statistics, or stay out of your way while you look around ?" Said their guide.

"We'll look around on our own." Said Laura.

"Please leave any bags here and pick them up when you wish to leave."

Adelaide wanted to feel insulted, but some of the books had to be worth a small fortune. A few were probably worth a large fortune. She dropped her bag on the floor, though there was nothing in it to frighten their guide. They'd all known they might be searched before leaving the Albrecht mansion. Her gun and knives were in the room safe at the hotel.

"If you need me to explain anything, I'll wait right here." Said the guide.

There didn't seem to be any CCTV, or at least Adelaide hadn't spotted any in the mansion. They were often quite small now; few spotted her cameras at the Red Rose in Jerusalem. She thought it more likely that the family didn't want cameras all over their home. That just left the guide to avoid if they were lucky enough to find the journal of Elias Albrecht. The library seemed a bit too obvious as a place to hide it.....But Adelaide remained hopeful. Fairly quickly, they were quite some way from their guide, as he sat at a dusty table and patiently waited.

"There are so many books." Said Laura. "If the journal is hidden here in plain sight.....It'd take us weeks to find it, maybe months."

"I think our friend would get suspicious if we came back every day." Said Tim.

"Even if we could come back every day, we'd have to look at every book." Said Adelaide. "Do you have some super sense to spot the right book?"

"We're vampires Adelaide, not Librarians." Said Laura.

"Then this is impossible.....There was no point coming here." Muttered Adelaide.

She hated having her time wasted, though a single day looking around the mansion wouldn't waste too much of their precious time. They should have realised the task was impossible from the start....There were simply too many books, scrolls and huge epic tomes in the library.

"He said we can take pictures." Said Tim. "We can use our phones to take them.....Would that help?"

"No." Snapped Adelaide.

She hadn't intended to sound bad tempered, she quite like the vampire couple. It was just such an impossible task.

"I could help you."

It was an apparition, floating with his feet about a foot above the ground. A man, dressed quite well, but his hair was a total mess; as though it hadn't been combed in a very long time. Adelaide had seen a few apparitions and usually they looked solid. She didn't recall ever meeting the rather old man with the bad hair, but his semi-nebulous condition; probably indicated that he was dead. Not necessarily a ghost, the dead had many ways of communicating with the living. Actually, she had met him before, but he'd been younger then and far less scruffy.

"A man I never expected to meet again." Said Adelaide. "Old Thomas.....I was genuinely shocked to hear of your death."

"Eternity is only for divine beings." Said Thomas. "We all die.....Though a few of us can occasionally cheat death, but only for a while; and in a very limited way."

"Thomas.....I saw your body, yet I knew you weren't dead." Said Laura. "Well.....Not completely dead. Erm.....You mentioned helping us?"

"Laura was really upset when she thought you'd died." Said Tim.

"I have died Tim, but I gave my word to Laura and oaths can cross over from the land of the dead; to the land of the living." Said Thomas. "I promised to aid her for a period of time and that oath hasn't expired. I'm here to fulfil my oath."

"I'll ask again Thomas.....How can you help us?" Asked Laura.

"Be careful, Laura." Said Adelaide. "He's a trickster.....Famous for it."

"But I always keep an oath." Said Thomas. "I can deal with your guide without doing him any permanent harm. I already recognise the journal of Elias Albrecht.....I can take you straight to it. Now.....Do you need my help, or are you releasing me from my oath?"

Adelaide didn't like the term dealing with, it tended to mean a nasty and premature death. She'd quite liked the guide in the pin stripe suit. He'd actually chuckled at one of her fairly bad jokes.

"What do you mean by deal with our guide?" Asked Adelaide. "Be very precise."

"Oh, as if I've ever done you any harm, or any of your kin." Said Thomas. "The guide is already asleep, with his head on the table. When you wish it, I can wake him up. He'll think he simply nodded off and had a bit of a nap."

"No more squabbling." Said Laura. "Please Thomas; take us to the journal of Elias Albrecht."

"Of course, this way."

It was a fair way from where they'd entered the library. Strange to see a nebulous man pointing to a library shelf, but Adelaide had seen far weirder things. Old Thomas was pointing at the top shelf.

"There, the red book." Said Thomas. "What you seek is behind the red book. You'll need to levitate, or use the library steps to get up there."

"We don't do levitate, I'll use the steps." Said Tim.

"Talk for yourself." Said Adelaide.

The look was priceless, as Laura looked at her as if she'd just brought a rabbit out of a hat, while simultaneously juggling six, or seven heavy plates.

"You can levitate?" Asked Laura.

"No, Tim will have to use the steps." Said Adelaide.

"Hey, you're growing on me." Said Thomas.

It was the very top of the library stack and the steps wobbled. Luckily Tim seemed fine with heights and wobbly steps.

"Don't damage the red book." Yelled Thomas. "It's a first edition by the famed Eliphas Levi."

"I won't.....Just reaching behind it." Shouted Tim.

Tim reached and his hand came back holding something which looked bound in yellow leather. Smaller than the red book, but it seemed to have a lot of pages. Adelaide couldn't wait to get her hands on it.

"That's it.....The journal of Elias Albrecht." Said Thomas.

"Bring it to me." Shouted Adelaide. "I'll be able to tell by the binding whether it's the genuine article."

Tim gave her the book and she instantly knew it as the right one. Antique dealers talk of poor copies biting, where the sharp edges nip at their fingers. Books were the same in a way, but the binding was old, smooth and soft to her touch. It smelled right too, that wonderful odour of a very old book. It had been a journal, which had been bound into being a book. Elias had them added pages as he went along, to create a wonderful chaotic mess of writing.

"This will take experts to sort it out." Said Adelaide. "It's genuine though, I'd stake my reputation on it."

"I told you, Nathalie Aurigny will love it." Said Thomas. "Or at least she'll love it or a while."

"Here it comes.....I told you this one is tricky." Said Adelaide.

"Go, take Nathalie the journal." Said Thomas. "It's genuine and worth a lot of money....But it won't tell her how to safely use the Hand. Might take her a year to work that out, but then.....She's not going to be very happy."

"You bastard.....I knew it." Said Adelaide.

"I gave you what you were looking for." Said Thomas. "Besides the journal, Elias Albrecht kept a wonderful codex. That.....Is truly priceless, but I can help you find it. Once Nathalie has the hand, the journal and the codex; she can make anyone her obedient servant.....Anyone."

"What do you want to help me?" Asked Laura. "I'm guessing it can't be money. No ghost has a use for money, not even the ghost of Old Thomas."

Adelaide knew a few tricks to dispel troublesome spirits. She was tempted to use one on the trickster, but he might then be cast into the void forever. Laura might not like that, so she held her tongue and bided her time.

"When you have the journal, the codex and the Hand." Said Thomas "I wish to use them just once, to invoke something only the hand can invoke. Then I'll be gone and it's unlikely we'll ever meet again.

I'll need help holding them for the invocation.....Being fairly un-corporeal has its drawbacks."

Probably a waste of effort to say it, but Adelaide felt it needed saying.

"Laura.....You can't trust him."

"We'll never find the codex without him." Said Laura. "One spell doesn't seem much to ask.....Better than handing Nathalie a Hand she can't use; at least not safely."

"Not a spell.....I wish to invoke something." Said Thomas. "Just so you know, I have no intention of telling you what I wish to invoke."

Adelaide suddenly knew for certain, who Old Thomas wanted to invoke. Some called it a who, while others thought it to be an angelic being; and yet others thought it a demon straight from hell. The Hand had belonged to it for far longer than Elias Albrecht had possessed it.

"I can guess, Thomas." Said Adelaide. "You want to summon the demon Choronzon. Do that and we'll all die."

"Is this true, Thomas ?" Asked Laura.

"Yes, I wish to summon Choronzon, but few think him to be a demon." Said Thomas. "I prefer to think of him as a divine being. He can cure me of my current problem of being dead. Not fully cure it of course, but I'll be able to live a relatively normal life for quite some time."

"Don't agree to this, Laura." Said Adelaide.

"I think we should let him use the three items, just the once." Said Tim. "He died helping us and besides.....We'll never find the codex without his help."

"Tim is right; Thomas did die trying to help us in Jerusalem." Said Laura. "I intend to let you use the artefacts, Thomas. You may use them once and then they're mine to give to Nathalie. Do you agree to that ?"

"You're a fool, Laura Selway." Muttered Adelaide.

"I agree, Laura.....One use and then the items are yours." Said Thomas.

"So.....We're all buddies again; so where is the codex ?" Asked Tim.

Old Thomas told them and Adelaide was even more sure that they were all going to die. Not that she was going to remain in the hotel that night. If Choronzon was being invoked, she wanted to be there to witness the event. No wonder Nathalie had sent the Genevieve girl to Ethiopia. Travelling with Tim and Laura did seem to be incredibly dangerous.

~ ~

Akiva believed Gen when she told him the faded words on yellowing parchment; could make anyone staggeringly wealthy. As long as they were clever though and had their own philosophers stone. They'd need some knowledge of basic chemistry too of course and a decent laboratory. Apart from that, anyone could use the alchemical formulas to create as much pure gold as they wished. They'd need to be able to read that section of the Psochic bible too. All Akiva could read were the footnotes in scribbled Hebrew.

"All The requirements.....It's hardly easy money." Said Akiva.

"We could sell the formulas for a fortune, or a percentage." Said Gen. "Not that we're going to do that."

"No, we'd never do that.....So, now we need to find Samuel Westcott's philosopher stone." Said Akiva.

"I mean it, stop giving me little smiles." Said Gen. "We'll make some gold if we can, but the formulas, the gold and the philosophers stone. It all goes to Nathalie in Brittany. You must realise why ?"

Of course he knew, Nathalie was famous for not letting anyone screw her; even for fairly small sums. Try to rob her of unlimited gold.....She'd send an entire team of her special ops people after them.

"The smiles were me just kidding." Said Akiva. "I'm on the run from a lot of people and have no intention of adding Nathalie Aurigny to that list."

"Just keep picturing yourself being skinned alive." Said Gen.

"Alright.....Alright, I was only joking." Said Akiva. "Come on then.....Where do we start looking for Westcott's philosopher stone ?"

"Sophia and Youcef are both looking for it in different parts of the villa." Said Gen. "Sophia has the brains, but Youcef seems more determined to find it. My worry is that they might both combine against us."

"Come to think of it.....It's been a while since we've heard, or seen either of them." Said Akiva.

"I noticed the perfect place to hide the formulas." Said Gen. "After that we go to.....The ground floor rooms where Sophia was heading towards the last time I noticed her. She was telling Youcef to stop looking at her backside."

"Not a good sign." Said Akiva.

"Let's give Youcef the benefit of the doubt, for now." Said Gen.

There were a lot of empty, grubby rooms in the Westcott Villa. Gen took them to one with a lot of scuffed boot prints. The pattern on the soles of the boots, matched the prints Youcef had been leaving all over the villa. There were also a few chalk marks on the doorframe. They seemed to be the way the ex-CIA operative was marking where she'd been and probably searched.

"Unlikely they'll search here again." Said Gen. "If they do, it'll probably be quite a cursory search."

She didn't send him away, which was a nice sign of trust. Gen moved a cast iron doorstep to reveal an area of wall, which looked much the same as any other bit of wall. She then pulled out two orange bricks and pushed the alchemical formulas into the wall. By the time Gen was finished, the wall looked just like any other wall in the villa.

"Scuff our shoe prints a bit and.....No one will find the formulas." Said Gen.

"You've obviously done this kind of thing before." Said Akiva.

"My parents sent me to an all-girl boarding school." Said Gen. "Those girls could have taught Nathalie a thing or two about plotting and scheming."

As they reached the rear of the villa, there should have been the sounds of searching gong on; maybe even the voices of Youcef and Sophia shouting encouragement to one another. Youcef's boot prints were still there, always in the centre of the hallways and always slightly scuffed; as if he'd been running. It looked as though neither of them had entered the side rooms, or even opened their doors.

"This is weird; as if Youcef has a purpose.....Somewhere he's going." Said Akiva.

"Sophia was with him, I've noticed a few of her chalk ticks." Said Gen. "We could shout out their names and see what happens. What do you think ?"

"You'll give away our position, but you are the boss." Said Akiva. "It's your decision.....Personally I'd say let's go for it and shout."

"Sophia.....Sophia." Shouted Gen. "Youcef.....Youcef."

"Youcef.....Sophia; where are you ?" Akiva yelled.

It sounded feint, but not because it was a long way away. The sound of a woman yelling, maybe for help.

"Is that Sophia ?" Asked Akiva.

"Difficult to tell." Said Gen.

"Sophia, is that you ?" Shouted Akiva. "Shout loudly, we can barely hear you."

The voice came again, not that much louder than before. Whoever the voice belonged to, she sounded as though she needed help. There was something about her friend being hurt. Would Sophia describe Youcef as a friend ?

"That might not be Sophia." Said Akiva.

"But whoever it is needs our help." Said Gen. "Come on.....I've a good idea where she is."

~

~

Niña had ended up at the back of the group, with Ronnie carrying a burning branch at the front. The passageway had collapsed, which meant there was a clamber up to the surface, or give up and return to the ruins. It would be a wet clamber; the storm hadn't let up in the slightest.

"Looks a bit risky, but if as long as we're careful.....It's climbable." Said Mabina.

"Doesn't look right up there." Said Ronnie. "Further up the rocks aren't wet and the sky.....Bright sunshine out there. Something definitely isn't right."

"I have to work tomorrow." Said Mabina. "We could admit defeat and shout for the dragon to come and rescue us ? For all we know, that might be what we're expected to do."

"He's not a dragon." Said Ronnie.

"I know, but he looks like a dragon." Said Mabina.

They started squabbling about what to call Karkengara, while Niña looked at how difficult the climb out was likely to be. She still thought her leader of the expedition card would work, she hadn't overdone it; or at least she thought she hadn't. It was definitely sunny and dry out there, which she could use as an encouragement. That was forgotten, as she spotted something out of the corner of her eye.

"No, dragons were made to look like Karkengara." Said Ronnie.

"Hey, you guys.....Stop arguing before someone gets hurt." Said Niña. "There's a pyramid out there, a genuine stone pyramid. If I lean over just right; I can just about see the top of it."

"That changes things.....Let me have a look." Said Mabina.

Niña pointed where to look and there wasn't a dissenting voice. Everyone agreed that it was the top of a pyramid. There was a lot of speculation about where they might be. Mabina thought they might actually come out in Giza, Egypt. Not exactly Niña's idea of home, but at least it would be their own world.

"I'm climbing out.....Follow me, or stay here." Said Niña.

"No need for that tone.....I quite like the idea of seeing the pyramids." Said Mabina.

"That girl has changed since Clara made her leader." Muttered Ronnie.

Once the rocks were dry, their feet stopped sliding about. No bones were broken and by the time all three of them were on the surface the air was dry and a little too warm for comfort. The ocean had gone, the storm had gone and there seemed some doubt about where they were.

"HMMMMM definitely not Giza." Said Mabina. "No tourists, no car parks.....Nothing really, apart from beautiful pyramids."

"Are we at Giza, but at a time different to our own ?" Asked Niña.

"No, the pyramids at Giza are placed differently to these." Said Mabina. "I have no idea where we are, but I don't think we're on our own world."

"Maybe now is the time to yell for the bringer of fire ?" Asked Ronnie.

"We've shifted worlds at least twice now." Said Mabina. "I doubt if Karkengara will be able to hear us, or find us. I think we're on our own."

"Sounds like we need to explore where we are." Said Niña.

"Fine, but I'm a belt and braces kind of girl." Said Ronnie.

Niña went in front, with Ronnie at the back; yelling for Karkengara at least fifty times. The bringer of fire didn't arrive; Niña hadn't expected him to. Her expedition of three were definitely on their own. There was a narrow river between two of the pyramids, which seemed to finally kill off the idea that

they were in Giza, but long ago. Vampires can usually get away with drinking anything, but Ronnie drank from a bottle in her pack.

"Out of the tap in Hornsey.....Can't beat it." Muttered Ronnie.

"The food and water we're carrying is yours when you need it." Said Niña. "I'm sure Mabina won't object ? We can live without it for quite a while, but you'll die without it."

"Of course I agree." Said Mabina. "I still think this is Clara's idea of a fun test for us. It can't go on too much longer."

Supposing it wasn't a test and the local population had long gone ? There was no sign of whoever had built the pyramids; their entire population might have moved elsewhere, or become extinct. Not that Niña felt like saying that to the others.

"Supposing this all has nothing to do with Clara ?" Asked Ronnie.

"Then we find a local town or village." Said Niña. "Come on.....We need to keep exploring."

There was an idea in all their heads, that Clara had sent them all on a test of some kind. Niña refused to believe that any of them were in any real danger; or at least no risks they couldn't deal with.

Ronnie must have believed that too, or she wouldn't have been alert enough to see the painted scrawl. The scrawled words were next to a narrow passageway, which led into the largest pyramid.

"Look there.....I can see her name." Said Ronnie, pointing.

"I just see a lot of carvings in a language I can't read." Said Mabina.

"No.....Look.....Painted in blue, right over the carvings." Said Ronnie. "Really faded, it must have been painted decades ago, maybe centuries."

"Now you've said that, I can see it too." Said Niña. "A blue 'Clara,' with an arrow under it, which points at the door. It all has been a test by Clara, I knew it."

"Maybe.....Maybe not." Said Mabina. "At least where we go next is fairly clear."

"Into the pyramid." Said Niña.

Just a passage into the pyramid, a dark and quite narrow passage. Dark but not totally dark, there were occasional gaps in the brickwork, which let in enough light to avoid bumping into the walls.

~ ~

© Ed Cowling ~ November 2025

~

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

~