

The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 3:

New Life

Plot Overview

The year is 2015. We're back in San Gimignano, in sunny Tuscany, at Annabelle and Alberto's estate. The original owners have long since passed away and, according to their wishes, their extensive property has undergone some changes. On the same road alongside the main house *Villa Annabelle* (which Alberto named after his wife), stands a nearly identical one built by their adopted sons, Adam and Alex, after their parents' deaths. Both houses are linked by an enormous network of underground tunnels and rooms extending, apparently, beyond the boundaries of the estate. The approach to the newer house has a gravel drive with a lift hidden underneath, which leads down into the underground network. Eighty-two-year-old Uncle Alex, a widower since the previous year following the death of his beloved wife, Catarina, lives alone in the new house, while seventy-seven-year-old Adam and Giuseppina live at *Villa Annabelle* with their granddaughter Chiara. Alex and Catarina also had an orange plantation in Sicily, which is now being managed by their adopted son Federico, an earnest, wonderful man (according to their devoted, long-standing servant Aldona). Near Alex and Adam's houses, closer to San Gimignano itself, their adopted sister Amélie (recently occupied on trips related to some family matters in France and Monaco), who is a woman over seventy, and also widowed after the death of her loving husband, Roberto, runs the only guest house in the area, *Chez Amélie*.

One day, a very distant relative, Janek, comes from Poland to pay his first visit to Adam's house, accompanied by his 15-year-old son Leo. Janek has to leave the estate after just three days, but his son, who is still somewhat intimidated by the new environment despite speaking Italian well, is to stay with Adam and Giuseppina until the end of the summer. The only person to greet them in their seemingly deserted home is fifteen-year-old Chiara, the hosts' granddaughter, who waltzes up to them, oozing confidence and openness. She is first to break the ice, initially helping the shyer Leo to settle into his own room, and then taking on the role of guide. Leo immediately senses the unusual atmosphere in the house and the surrounding area. Used to living in a Warsaw tower block, he's struck by the space at the house, the numerous oil paintings in the hall and his room; it's elegantly modest, clean, with a carved chair and desk and, fluttering in the window, which has a meadow extending behind to the horizon, is a light white curtain highlighting the multicoloured grains of pollen floating on the breeze. Chiara immediately acquaints Leo with the house rules. First of all, nobody imposes anything on anyone and no-one is forced to be sociable, a "homely" mess is acceptable, everyone is kind and open with each other, Grandpa Adam bakes his own bread in a special oven, and the servants are treated like family. After freshening up, and encouraged by Chiara, Leo goes for a walk around the neighbourhood with her, and the next day he uncovers the house's secrets. These include, hidden behind the library underground, a dusty red Ferrari convertible (a 250 Testa Rossa) waiting to be restored. This sends Leo, who is a fan of motoring, into a boyish daze, compounded when Chiara presses a button which, to her surprise, sends the car up two floors to the garage. Leo then has to use all his technical knowledge to calm the somewhat terrified Chiara down and bring the vehicle back to its original place. Another unique feature of the house is the vast size of its library, hidden in a mysterious basement, in which (unlike in the rest of the house) there reigns a pedantic

order combined with sterile cleanliness, and all the books are bound in leather with the distinct symbol of a grasshopper on the cover. Chiara announces that the library is the love of Grandpa Adam's life; he reads a lot of books, but also writes a lot and sends them off *somewhere*. As Leo flicks through a few of them, he sees that they only contain facts, because, as Chiara explains, only dry facts, without further interpretation, reflect the historical truth. Leo begins to be so interested in all these secrets that he even begins to delve into them, especially since Chiara herself is uninitiated in these things and is looking for the right company to help her explain all kinds of strange phenomena. She tells him another story that fascinates her; how mysterious people in black clothes come to visit Grandpa Adam, and how they all disappear underground along with their cars, and how after every such visit Grandpa sits at night on a stool in front of the house and watches the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, having returned on their motorcycle from their latest trip, Adam and Giuseppina welcome Leo and his father like old friends, even though they're meeting for the first time. Grandma invites everyone to supper, including the other members of the household, Uncle Alex, who makes a welcome appearance, and even Aunt Amélie's guests. During dinner, Leo learns a few things that make him excited and convince him that he will have a very successful holiday. The first is that Uncle Alex, who he has just met, will (initially along with him) be renovating the unique Ferrari, which he'll let him ride in, and even take part in races, and the second is a trip to Venice with Grandpa Adam, Grandma Giuseppina and Chiara. During the first attempts to repair the car, Leo has the opportunity to get to know Alex, who is an avid motoring enthusiast. Alex is no longer in good mental or physical shape after Catarina's death, which he has not managed to get over, despite the principles he previously believed in. He has been locking himself in his room, walking around in his dressing gown all day, not wanting to do anything and rarely listening to anyone, even arguing with his faithful servant Aldona, who's been trying to get him to do his daily activities and has been wanting to clean up the apartment, bake a cake and make something good to eat. Alex, meanwhile, has been trying to claim that all this and everyone has taken away his right to peace and quiet, which has made the whole family worried and try somehow to pull him out of this state. Recently, however, to the astonishment of everyone around, four Norwegian children from Aunt Amélie's guesthouse have unexpectedly been visiting Alex. The reason for the visits are one of the Saltamontes Brotherhood volumes, which they've found in an old house (with a neglected garden and a broken statue in the middle, near a fountain) bought by their parents in faraway Norway.

The children have read in the book that Alex used to be a Guardian of the Brotherhood and have persuaded their parents to come to San Gimignano during their holidays to talk to him in person. All four of them soak up all the information about the Brotherhood and promise to keep it secret. Alex, surprised and also moved by the children's interest, explains to them that the Brotherhood was founded in 1097 to protect good people and the world from all evil, and in particular to stop violence and convince people that they are created to do good. He tells them that he is urgently looking for a second, stolen, book which holds the secret to how a person can become immortal and rich and broaden their current perspectives, as well as advice on how to open the door to a happier future. He reveals to them that he was, until his marriage to Catarina, the owner of a magic stone, which helped him read someone's thoughts, and also contact the dead and exceed human potential. He is sure that there are two stones, one of which is owned by his friend, the chairman of the Guardians of the Brotherhood, Tertius, in Venice, while the other needs to be found because only the two

stones joined together will allow people to have a new life without war and violence, but this transition is to be preceded by strange phenomena and great turmoil, which needs to be prepared for. At that moment there is a sudden storm outside the window, and a woman in a white dress appears. The younger guests also notice it and it reminds them of the old man's story. Alex also shows the children his library and books and the golden grasshopper (from the Spanish *saltamontes*), the symbol of the Brotherhood. The regular visits by the children help Alex slowly return to his daily duties and motivate him to keep up his interests, which has a wonderful effect on his mental and physical health, and also gives him the push he needs to take the car for renovation, because motor sport was once Alex's great love.

Meanwhile, Chiara lets Leo in on more secrets. It turns out that some mysterious guests have come to her grandpa's again in their black cars, but this time they've disappeared underground and have yet to reappear as they usually do. After taking the car down to the basement in the lift, Grandpa covers the spot with gravel, and then spends the night sitting in front of the house on his stool, watched by Leo and Chiara, who are hidden from view. Chiara is made more anxious but also curious by the discovery that Grandpa and the visitors spend the next night looking for something on the ground using mysterious objects, and then galloping off on horseback to San Gimignano. Chiara feels that she can trust Leo and that together they might solve these mysteries someday. Meanwhile, she takes him to a certain place in a meadow where, in a swirling mist, both of them suddenly find themselves floating to another era, and even try to make contact with the people living in those times. This experience frightens them but at the same time unites them in their hidden secret and brings them closer together. On the same day, Leo and Chiara visit the now abandoned house of Uncle Alex and Aunt Catarina which, also enveloped in a mysterious aura, begins to change shape before their eyes and a woman appears in the window. Finally, Chiara leads Leo to the local cemetery, where she explains that this is a place where the beautiful thoughts and noble deeds of dead people float around, so humans should try to live in such a way as to leave as many of these things behind them as possible. The next day, after these emotional experiences, Chiara and Leo leave for Venice with her grandparents. The purpose of Adam's trip is fourfold: firstly, to regain the stone from Tertius and bring it to Alex so that he can talk to Catarina; secondly, to introduce Tertius to Leo and initiate him into the idea of the Brotherhood; thirdly, to go on a sentimental short break, because it was in Venice that Adam first met Giuseppina, and while they are there show his granddaughter and their visitor the famous city on the water; and finally, to find the second lost book of the Brotherhood. While in Venice, Leo divides his time visiting the city with Tertius and wandering the streets, cafes and nightclubs with Chiara. On the first day, Tertius acquaints Leo with the problems of the Brotherhood, and shows him a ruby with magical properties (i.e. one of the stones being sought), and also shows him a large drawing featuring the alleged hiding place of the second stone. Here Leo shows amazing ability and intuition because, using the power of the first stone, he immediately declares that there is, in fact, only one stone. Grandpa Adam is astounded by this discovery, and says that the false information is the result of the Brotherhood's enemies. Leo pays Tertius one more visit, this time with Chiara, and both are amazed when Tertius lifts his arms up and causes a thunderstorm. While visiting Venice, Leo and Chiara not only have the opportunity to admire the magnificent architecture of the city (the Doge's Palace) but also experience strange mysterious events and phenomena that transport them to a different time and space. Leo experiences these feelings for the first time at a nightclub (Chiara loves dancing), when he

observes how the walls of the nightclub fall down and the crowd, almost as if they've failed to noticed it, move onto the street. After a while, however, everything goes back to normal. Then they both experience strange feelings when they put on some masks Chiara has bought, and she feels older and it seems to her that she's a doctor working at a hospital. On a walk, they happen to enter a restaurant twice, where people from different periods are alternately sitting and disappearing, and the waiter hands out unnatural menus and meals. A similar experience occurs when they both have identical dreams at the same time, in which, from a balcony, they observe a mysterious city in an undefined past and a crowd of murdered or otherwise abused people who blame them for their wrongs, trying to make them realise that all people are connected by "invisible threads". The final strange event is another a dream, during which Leo "leaves" his body and goes into his future, led by an older Leo, who explains that a hotel, bought by Grandpa Adam thirty-six years ago, stands on the location of a portal that allows them to travel in time, and that everything is happening because Leo has an open heart and a fresh outlook. In the end, Leo and Chiara, who are often exhausted and scared by these events, decide to share their experiences, and conclude that nothing happens by chance and that the time is right for Grandpa Adam to involve them in all the strange events and phenomena associated with the Saltamontes Brotherhood. On the final day of their trip, Adam orders tickets for everyone to see Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* from a box at the Gran Teatro La Fenice. Chiara is enchanted by the splendour of the crystal chandeliers inside, and during the performance both she and her grandmother are moved by the heroine's fate. There are also some unusual events that take place during the journey to and from the opera: during the gondola trip to the opera house, a charming gondolier who speaks several languages and is in love with Venice regales them all with stories, saying that Venice owes its unique charm to the art and discipline of many generations; and another event that catches Adam and Giuseppina's attention is when one of the fishmongers suddenly begins to sing opera arias with the voice of a professional, which lasts a few minutes; then, on the way back, when they are walking back to the hotel, they are accosted by a young man (Leo recognises him as someone who was bothering him at the nightclub), who demands that Adam hand over the stone and maps of the underground network belonging to the Brotherhood. Leo unexpectedly defends Adam, who promises the attacker that he will meet him later, but on his terms.

Meanwhile, when Adam and Giuseppina are in Venice, seventy-five-year-old Aunt Amélie leaves for Monaco (her hometown, from where, as a little girl, she was rescued from an abandoned house by Annabelle and Alberto) in order to find and retrieve some chests filled with coins which were hidden by her father down a drain. This house, on the seashore, is of course now owned by someone else. The door is opened by a nice young man who has found himself in Monaco by chance and, equally by chance, has become the current tenant. The two of them very quickly hit it off, as a result of which Amélie gains unrestricted entrance to her former home. After hearing Amélie's story, Louis (the young man) shares his professional and personal problems with her and also offers to help her find the chests; they both feel that they are soulmates and despite the age difference they're already on first-name terms. After overcoming the technical problems associated with getting into the drain and several resulting amusing situations, also involving some friends of Louis and the police, he manages to extract the "treasure", which includes some family mementos. Unfortunately, contrary to expectations and also to their surprise, the coins have no material value, but once Amélie gets them back to the guesthouse, it turns out that they are made of some kind

of metal which is unknown on Earth, and which gives off an unearthly glow. So where is the real treasure? What life's real treasure is and where it should be sought is explained in a letter left to Amélie by her father. While she's still in Monaco, the current owner of the house confesses that he has long been waiting for the rightful heiress to return, and hands her parents' house back to her. Later, while Amélie is walking along the streets of Monaco with Louis (on her way back to her guesthouse), they come upon a time portal, and suddenly it seems to her that she isn't speaking to Louis but to her father (who turns out to be a member of the Brotherhood, an association working to bring peace and goodness to the world, and who somehow, only he knows how, managed to get Alberto to come to Monaco and visit the house in the spring of 1946), while Louis has the impression that he isn't talking to an adult woman but to a six-year-old girl.

A similar adventure involving the stopping of time and moving to another place happens to Jessica, the mother of the four Norwegian children visiting Alex, while she is in the car on a shopping trip to San Gimignano (the town and its surroundings are famous for legends of hidden underground cities and for time travel portals). On the way there with one of her younger daughters, she sees her grandparents, and once in town in the car park under the supermarket, people suddenly disappear, time stops and she is invited by a nice old man into some wine cellars that lead to a library underground. There she and her daughter learn the secret of the whole Brotherhood, which is that technical civilisation and new inventions arise thanks to people with open minds, and the misfortunes of this world lie in the fact that the present-day world is not using these inventions for the good of humanity, hence wars and other unfortunate events, and the Brotherhood was created to overcome all this by opening the door to a new future with new life.

Meanwhile, after returning home, Chiara, Leonard and Adam all come to the conclusion that, following all their amazing, but not uncoincidental experiences, it's time for the youngsters to become involved in the Brotherhood and see all Grandpa Adam and Uncle Alex's treasure hidden under the house. However, before this goes ahead, a few strange things happen there. Leo, who has never learned to play the piano, sits down at it and produces the most amazing sounds, in time to which some multicoloured butterflies that have landed on Giuseppina and Chiara flap their wings. On the same day in the meadow, the two teens again float into space, where they see an image of an ancient ruler, Cyrus the Great who, in a fiery speech, expresses his satisfaction that he has managed to lead his country to unimaginable economic prosperity without having to coerce his people and has created a sense of joint responsibility for these successes among each and every citizen. Chiara and Leo also meet his family, and even manage to start a conversation with his fourteen-year-old daughter Helena, who feels their presence as future spirits and impresses them with her wisdom, instilled by her parents, that the most important human value is an open mind and heart, and not a person's royal origin. In Adam's library, Chiara and Leo share what they saw with him and he tells them a lot about Cyrus the Great, who really existed. Next, Chiara and Leo begin visiting the library and the underground network. There they learn not only about the books and rooms, but also about the supernatural properties of the treasures hidden there, in particular a mirror that shows figures from the past and the future. Leo sees a very shocking picture, in which he recognises himself as a little boy at a station, held close by his mother with his baby sister in her arms, pelted with insults by an aggressive crowd because he is homeless and different from other people, and a man who not only defends her, but who will also become his adoptive father. In the next picture, he sees himself as winner of a car race

and Chiara congratulating him with a quiet whisper that “this is just the beginning”. Chiara then sees herself for the second time as a doctor, a paediatrician. In the next room there’s a watch lying on books indicating a past time which shows an image of a man selling a gold watch to buy a little boy some food. Then, in a glass case, there are some moving stones which, as they stare at them, bring on the familiar feeling of floating up again. Adam now explains to them that the most important thing at the moment is that the power of these stones and the one obtained from Tertius comes from the fact that each of them has a number assigned to it and that they have to be configured to make the number 9, which will open a gate to a new life in a better world, where people guided by love will use all their energy, powers and abilities for the good of humanity. However, this gate can be only opened by a chosen few with good hearts and open minds. Leo has already guessed that Adam’s hopes lie in him and his friend Chiara, to whom he feels not only affection, but had already begun to have feelings for when they were in Venice.

Meanwhile, Amélie returns from her trip, and pulls out the late Barbara’s letters, previously brought from Paris. Adam brings the stone he has obtained from Tertius. Everyone gathers in the living room at Adam’s house in which, mainly thanks to Giuseppina, an apartment has been arranged for Alex, so that he will not feel lonely and can be close to the underground tunnels. Alex and Adam finally pluck up the courage to open the letters, from which they learn about their exact age and origin. Both were born in Szczecin – Adam is Polish, born in 1938, and Alex, born five years earlier, is the son of a German man and Romanian woman. Then Alex takes the stone to the meadow where he meets Catarina. He reveals his fears to her, as to whether she fulfilled her mission on earth and had an alumnus (disciple). Catarina allays his fears and also assures him that their son Federico will come back to him, and then they both declare undying love for each other. The reunion of the loving married couple is extremely moving, soothes Alex’s pain and touches the whole family (the reader too).

While all this is going on, the Brotherhood is meeting in San Gimignano to finalise its mission to open the door to the future. Adam and Alex’s entire family are there, along with all their friends whom they have let in on the secret. The meeting is led by Alex; however, it is torpedoed right from the off by several unknown hooded persons seated in the first row who cause confusion and arguments about unimportant issues using well-known tricks of psychological warfare. Having fallen under their control, Alex resorts to Adam’s help, who “sends” the troublemakers, by means known only to himself, to Livorno. It turns out that they are probably not from the Brotherhood, and have been inspired by a man who knows where the second lost book of the Brotherhood is to be found and is the same man who bothered Leo at the nightclub and Adam in Venice. For this reason, Leo and Chiara undertake a mission to talk to him in order to regain the second book with its valuable knowledge. They assure Adam that they’ll manage. After arriving in Livorno, where the man is supposed to be, they meet Tertius, who directs them to Norway, telling them that they have only an hour to get there. Tertius also gives them the valuable information that the man’s real motive is the harm he suffered in his childhood and that in order to make positive contact with him and win him over to the Brotherhood, they need to send the unfortunate man back to the time when he was abused. The brave young people are transported to Norway in the middle of the night, and although in the dark, and in a strange place, they manage to reach a dilapidated old house with an overgrown garden and a broken marble figure by a well. The entire property is reminiscent of the house bought by the parents of the children who visited Uncle Alex. Despite difficulties, Leo manages to light a small fire in the cold and dark house,

and Chiara, with her simple gentleness and kindness, gains the confidence of the old man who wants to heal his own heart and break with the mistakes of the past, and who returns to his childhood and, like a little boy, takes his saviours by the hands and travels back with them to the warmhearted people waiting for him in San Gimignano. They thus complete their task and with time to spare. Enlil (the small boy's name), who still has the awareness and manner of expression of an adult, informs those gathered that there is no second book, because it has gone missing, but that he remembers it all, and so there is only one magic stone, but from the number assigned to it and to an ordinary stone divided in two comes the number 9, which opens the door to a new age. Adam and Alex decide that Leo and Chiara will be entrusted to open the door. After receiving the necessary instructions, the young people go separately by a lift hidden behind a curtain into a terrifying galactic space (with thunder, rain, lightning and the staring eyes of wild animals), in which Leo lands with a thud in front of large metal gates on which there is a grasshopper, and presses the number nine. This leads him to enter a bright space where he can only spend one hour (as told to him by a friend of Tertius – a handsome young man now, but who was once found as a sick and miserable homeless old man under a bridge in Venice) and where people, including Chiara, are floating around. Above him is the blue sky and inside, he has no awareness of the passage of time, ageing or pain and wants to stay in this blissful land forever. He meets Chiara, who shares something she has found out from someone in this land (Aldona, who is already on the other side), that only moments associated with love are remembered from our earthly life, and the future is bright progress, new technologies, tolerance, beauty, freedom of thought and acceptance of diversity and turning human energy into good. Subservience and fear in turn give rise to weakness. For Leo, however, awareness of what can be wins out, because Tertius' friend, who let him into the land, shows him an inscription in the heavens that the most beautiful planet in the universe is Earth, with its unique human race. Leo and Chiara take each other by the hand again and, overwhelmed by a great desire to act, regardless of age, with people with good hearts and open minds for the benefit of future generations, wake up on Earth in front of Giuseppina and Adam.