

## Chapter 4: De'Vok the Librarian

I ran through the last conversation, which had taken place moments ago but tried to capture, departmentalize every brief word of it in my memory. The rules were simple. Keeping them straight meant the possible reclaim of my own life. It was the profound difference between being dead and alive. I ran the conversation through my mind over and over again so as not to forget.

For starters, good and evil, heaven and hell, enlightenment and delusion, whatever you wanted to call them were still at odds as they have been since the beginning of time. Recently, say the last three thousand years, the scales had been doing a gradual but sure tip in the favor of evil. Before leaving, the Divine had set up some safety nets for just such an emergency while away from Earth. The hard wired rules had been given to Michael, the archangel. He had been left in charge to carry out the Divine Law and see that the world's most powerful army won the battle for good in the end.

Lately, things on the front line had gone from bad to worse. War wasn't just between two armies or two countries any longer. It was in every corner of the cities, thriving in open fields in the countryside and sat complacently on the couches with suburbanites as if there were no weapon or authority that could pose a threat. That's, apparently, where I came in.

For every demon, soldiering on behalf of darkness, that I could defeat and destroy, I earned one piece of my life back. Of course, since this would be a messy and dangerous assignment, Michael had assumed an undead human with some past blood on his hands would have been the best candidate. He had noted that killing only gets easier after the first murder or two. The inscriptions across my back had lacked such experience and thus, he'd figured he would kill me and send my soul to heaven. But my impression of his vulnerabilities and my use of that information sent me on to be tested instead. The interview with Steven had been under the criteria of the Divine Instructions that Michael had to follow.

As we parted, I could see that he sent me out into Otherworld strictly on a leap of faith. Otherworld was the place where common living and Dark matter of the world of the dead converged. If my arrival had been no accident and my passing of the vampire test had proven my nerves, the rest was up to the Fates. Michael did want to stack the deck in my favor, thankfully. After all, any success I had only made him look good to his troops and the Powers that Be.

I looked down at his directions written on a small piece of parchment. "Alexandrian Library" Michael had written. "Ask for De'Vok. He'll be waiting for you with what I hope will be your type of arsenal."

*'My type of arsenal'* I read back to myself. *I don't know if I should feel insulted or wicked curious. How long has it been since Michael has been to the real world? The Library at Alexandria burned down centuries ago.* Michael left to meet with his generals and I didn't dare show how much I doubted the information he'd handed me. Standing outside of the military tent, I reluctantly stared down at the golden orb in my hand. Steven smiled at my discomfort. Apparently, he still held a grudge.

I refused to show him how afraid I really was. “How’s the after effects of the food poisoning?” I teased him. He wasn’t gripping his body in pain anymore but he still looked terrible. A small wave of guilt flipped my stomach as I rubbed the spot where my collar bone had been broken only hours ago.

“Let’s get on with it” he directed; ignoring my attempt to lighten the moment at his expense. He took my hand that held the orb into his and again showed me the proper way to hold it. “I promise it won’t hurt....much” he flashed his crimson eyes at me and revealed a terrifying set of perfect teeth as he hissed for me to hurry along.

As directed, I opened my hand and re-read the location on the parchment out loud, “Library at Alexandria”. The orb lifted slightly in my palm and began to hum quietly at first and then with increased intensity. As it grew louder, the orb’s vibration also increased until a split in the fabric of my surroundings shimmered in a wavering line like the edge of the water in a pool when the sun reflected off of it. Steven was shouting something over the noise but I couldn’t make out any of the words. His hair was whipping around his face so I couldn’t even conceive of reading his perfect lips. Finally, he took a graceful leap towards me, grabbed me by the back of my jacket and he shoved me through the wavering line that had only widened to a brilliant slice of light.

The trip through the tiny crevice cured me of any future problems I might had experience with claustrophobia. As Steven had pushed me forward, I expected the rip of shimmering light to widen but it remained thin to no avail. My head and face felt as if the skin were being peeled from the bone, leaving my eye sockets empty caverns. My teeth seemed to rearrange themselves with violent cracks under the strain. Breathing was impossible. I was suddenly sympathetic with every insect ever squished to death under a heavy shoe. Surely, I would join the splattered in the final resting place.

Light exploded before me and with a feeling as if I’d passed through plates in the earth near a fault, I fell into my new reality. Landing on the cool slate tile, I lay for some time catching my breath and checking for broken teeth. Incredibly, I had survived. My hair stuck out in every direction, my jeans and jacket, crumpled and ripped in a few places from the strain of the trip. I looked over at Steven and rolled my eyes.

His white shirt was crisp as if it had just been pressed. His suit, which in this light looked like designer Italian wool, reinforced his regal grace as his ran his fingers through his long hair. He looked me over from head to toe and smiled smugly. “You really should have waited until the gate widened my dear” he touched a wild lock of my hair. “While you do have a few drops of *my* immortality running through your half dead veins, I do suggest that you not push your luck.”

I stared at him furiously. “You pushed me!”

His smug smile widened but he protested regardless. “I did nothing of the sort. I think you take to exaggeration when it suits you.” He looked up beyond me. “Wouldn’t you say so, DeVok?”

I turned around to find myself standing in the most beautiful room I'd ever seen anywhere. De Vok, the giddy old man, was standing on a balcony just above the spot where we'd "landed". He was beaming with pride as he watched my face, awestruck and speechless.

"Welcome to the Alexandria Library" De Vok raised his arms to emphasize the expanse. Steven genuinely laughed despite himself as he watched the frail old librarian hobble down the stairs with excitement. "A tour, Steven! She must have a tour!"

"I'm still recovering" Steven sighed, smoothing his suit and walking towards to the inner chambers. "You give her the tour."

I stretched my back and legs in preparation for a walk. "Did you enjoy your first leap?" asked De Vok enthusiastically.

I clenched my teeth. "Steven shoved me through as soon as the line of light started to move in the darkness."

De Vok pursed his lips. "Oh no, no. You should have waited until the gate opened wide."

"Yes, I gathered that for next time" I nodded sarcastically. "So what *is* this place. Obviously it can't be the real Alexandrian Library. That burned to the ground centuries ago."

De Vok clapped his hands, thrilled to be able to tell me the story. His eyes sparkled at the thought of sharing his vast knowledge to someone new. His wide grin revealed a set of crooked, yellow teeth beneath a gnarled and unkept grey beard. "The Divine Law of the Universe states: Preservation through Time must be upheld when there is something of absolute benefit to the good of human kind. Furthermore, when that something is made from the cooperation and hard work of unselfish beings; then and only then, can that object be spared from its original demise."

I looked at him compellingly. "You mean the wood, the scrolls..." I twirled in a circle at the vastness of the place.

"All burned by human time but spared and preserved in this space and time set aside by the Divine" smiled De Vok.

"That's impossible" I shook my head.

De'Vok glared at me over his thin glasses with a delicious grin on his face. "Your time has presented the notion of Strings, has it not?"

I thought for a minute. "String theory?"

"Humph!" snorted De'Vok. "It's not a theory. It's been proven that Dark matter comprises ninety eight percent of the universe. It's also a fact that String Principle proves that Common matter and Dark matter can travel through alternate dimensions on the wings of Time."

"I'm lost" I admitted. I looked around the room, surrounded by grandeur. Exotic wooden shelves from floor to ceiling made up most of the inset walls.

Steven explained as if he'd been in the room the entire time. "Let's try it this way. This library was built and burned down. Divine intervention sent one time traveler back to prevent it from being burned and then moved it to another plane; or dimension if you will. And thus, you find yourself here among ancient knowledge that no one has considered for centuries."

"Let's get you packed up" De'Vok rubbed his hands with excitement. "You'll need a considerable amount of resources since you're a novice at this. It's obvious you'll need information about multi-dimensional creatures and time travel."

I squinted my eyes as I took in that information. There was life in other dimensions? I tried to take it all in. My whole world felt like it was being split open in two and spread out into infinity.

"What do you know about Doppelgangers?" asked De'Vok, peering at me from atop a shelf ladder.

"Nothing".

"Zombies?"

"Crave brain food?"

"Not funny, young lady"

I laughed. "Sorry"

"Centaurs?"

"Nope"

"Banshees? Jack in Irons? Wraith? Dragons?"

"Dragons? Dragons aren't really monsters, are they? I mean, really."

De'Vok and Steven exchanged a private laugh and the pile of books grew. With each monster that I admitted I knew nothing about, another book landed with a loud thud onto the table. I sat down and sighed; overwhelmed when De'Vok had finished. I felt overwhelmed.

"I'll be back" De'Vok announced.

"Where's he going now?" I asked Steven.

Steven was flipping through of the ancient scrolls, practicing his Gaelic. He ignored me. Too distracted to dig into my reading, I got up and followed the old librarian. I heard him rustling in a nearly cove made of tall wooden book cases. I read the heading and laughed out loud. "De'Vok, why does the History section also say it's the Romance section?"

“Because, they’re the same thing” said De’Vok matter of fact.

“No they’re not. You can’t be serious!” I argued.

“Really? Name one war in history that didn’t involve the love of some thing or someone or both!”

I opened my mouth to give an example to disprove his theory but abruptly closed it. I couldn’t think of a single war that contradicted his definition. Shrugging in defeat, I joined him. “What are we looking for?”

He handed me an armful of scrolls and sent me back to the table. He soon followed behind me with more books. I groaned. “De’Vok, do you have any idea how long it will take me to read all of these books and maps just once. I’m not even sure I would absorb it all to be effective in battle once I did. I might forget something.”

“Don’t be silly!” laughed De’Vok.

“Twenty first century thinking, what do you expect?” clicked Steven, never looking up from his scroll.

De’Vok took the golden orb I’d used to travel through the tear in time. Pressing the outside knob with his thumb the top opened. A small beam of glowing light emulated from within. De’Vok held the button and commanded “Upload”.

The books, scrolls and maps vanished from the table and a smoky thread from where they had once sat glided its way into the open light from the orb. When all of the information had been absorbed, the top of the orb closed tight.

De’Vok returned the orb to me. Now, the information will be at your fingertips. Just press the button and ask your question. If you find the orb does not have the answer, just say my name. You can always reach me here within these walls. Alexandria is my home.”

He described the miraculous library with such warmth that I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to run through the isles; exploring the shelves. There was so much knowledge in the books and scrolls that were missing from my world. I wanted to look up techniques from books written by gardeners of Babylonia. I wanted to discover ancient cures for common diseases. But he seemed to imply there was no time for self interest. I yawned and cracked my back.

“Who knew the dead got tired?” I laughed as I stretched.

“Oh the dead sleep quite often. They only appear when they’ve drawn energy from some source. And even then they don’t have complete control as to how they will manifest themselves” noted De’Vok looking over at my with sympathy. “To make matters slightly worse in your favor, you are not completely dead. I dare say, but your human side is showing.”

My eyes burned. “This sounds like a comedy....no completely dead?”

“When Michael choose you for the job, his offer gave you a tiny piece of your living self. Your acceptance also added to your life. Look at your left hand.”

There, in the Otherworld muted tones of light and dark was my left ring finger. My wedding band blazed against the back drop. For a minute, I thought I felt my heart stir even though I knew it wasn't possible that it should beat. A tear ran down my cheek. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to run home, dead or undead. I looked up at De'Vok as I choked down the rest of the tears.

“Why?” was all I could say.

De'Vok looked down at his hands and smiled sheepishly. He met my gaze but shook his head. Steven cleared his throat. “Perhaps in your modern world, your wedding vows are a fifteen minute formality before the rock and roll party” he was angry and I wasn't sure it was actually directed at me. “But here in the ancient world, an unending band of gold, blessed by promises of loyalty and devotion are sacred. In short, not only is your humanness showing, presently, so is your love.” Steven snorted. “What the hell is she doing here?” he stood up and began to pace. “This is never going to work.”

De'Vok spoke finally. This time, he seemed to have regained some of his cheerful demeanor. “I'll go and clear the room. She'll need to practice before she goes. I'll need your help, Steven.”

“I have to feed; regain my strength” Steven replied as if he was grabbing his keys and heading out for a burger. I turned my head and winced. “Sorry but facts are facts. If I am to be your practice dummy, I'll need all my strength back.”

“Practice? What am I going to practice?” I looked at the two and felt clueless again.

Steven smiled, handsome and wicked. “Why, murder of course!” He took an orb, similar to mine from his suit pocket. He held it in his hand like he'd shown me back at the tent. His smile never faded as he glanced at me over his shoulder. “Want anything while I'm out?”

The thought was revolting. I swallowed back the nausea; immediately rising to the top of my throat. He laughed knowing that his suggestion was successful. Holding out the orb, he spoke loudly as if to reassure me that he had no plans for dinner anywhere near my hometown. “I'm in the mood for Italian. Take me to Barcelona, 1987.” The thin line of light appeared, this time widening slowly as he stood waiting patiently. When it was the width of a man, he stepped into the bright sunshine from another place and time. The light snapped closed and I was again, plunged into the darkness.

“I do believe I promised you a tour” De'Vok snapped me out of a spike of homesickness. He thumped the cypress table for good measure. “How often does a person get a tour of the greatest library of all time?” It was giddy with the thought that he might show off his beloved treasure. I pulled myself together as best as I could. I stood up and faked a half smile.

“Have a little faith. There's a reason for all of this” De'Vok smiled with kindness behind his eyes.

“I’ve never been a firm believer, I’m afraid” I admitted.

“You seem to believe in one thing, I’ve noticed” countered De’Vok. “You have an absolute belief in the writings of others.”

“Books” I said simply.

“No matter their source or time period, there isn’t one you feel unimportant. Am I correct?”

“How would you have guessed that about me?” I asked, curious.

“You bet your very life on it when Steven lunged for you in the testing room. And, I might add, it was a book even I would not have considered a worthy source had I not seen its truth for my own eyes.”

I remembered the role playing game book from Josh’s get togethers. “I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“Then you see?” De’Vok was beaming as he watched my epiphany unfold. “There is still hope. There is always hope if you believe in something worthy.”

I wasn’t so sure I shared his optimism but it was an interesting observation. The two of us started to make our way through the tiny departmentalized rooms of the Alexandrian Library with De’Vok in the lead. He called out each section as I did my best to keep up and make mental note.

“Here we have the Natural History section dating from roughly 100 BC to 2098 AD”. Deep, built-in shelving lined the walls where narrow windows broke the linear vastness of the bookcases containing piles of scrolls. Perpendicular to the built in cases were free standing book cases with a newer finish. These shallow shelves held rows and rows of books. Some of the spines were obviously made of natural fibers that had yellowed over the centuries. Some had wide, uneven stitching suggesting it was a hand sewn book or perhaps someone’s journal from the field. I was puzzled by the translucent squares that mixed in with the other copies of writings I recognized. I stopped to pull one such square from its shelf and De’Vok watched with an amused look on his face.

I held the square at arms length as an image formed at its edges. The image was no sooner filling the disk than it was flying off of it and standing upright before me. A woman, dressed much like the Black Boots I’d seen in Michael’s headquarters stared at me. “Plant Respiration and Dark Cycle in Gravity Free Oxygen Chambers by Dr. Mathilde Smith. International and Planetary Union Copyright 2071. Please declare command for individual chapter or book in its entirety, please.” The woman stood patiently, smiling and waiting for me to interact with her. I was at a loss for what to do exactly.

“Dr Smith, thank you so much for joining us. I’m presently giving a tour to a new visitor. Might we join your lecture a bit later?” asked De’Vok. “Please forgive the interruption” he added.

Dr. Smith smiled kindly to the librarian but as he turned to continue the tour, she glared haughtily at me. I mouthed the words “sorry” in her direction to which I thought I noticed that she

rolled her eyes. The image of the doctor jumped back into the translucent square where it went from a solid color image to absolutely clear in seconds.

“Books from your future are a bit sophisticated. That is not to say you are forbidden to use them, but let’s have a tutorial about them later, ok?” De’Vok asked sternly.

“Ok” I whispered. “I’ll just go and put it back where I found it.”

“NO!” shouted De’Vok. “I said to leave the book right where it is!!” he thundered. I stopped, and raised my hands in surrender. Embarrassed, he composed himself and continued quietly, “My lovely assistant re-shelves all books she comes across. She is absolutely accurate and I wish for her to take care of it.” He turned and hurriedly continued with the tour.

“Now, this next section is the War History and Romance Section and down here we have an entire room dedicated to languages.”

“Excuse me, but why is War History and Romance in the same section? Shouldn’t they be separated?” I asked.

De’Vok stopped so abruptly that I nearly crashed into him. He turned on his heel and stared down at me. “Tell me right now, what war in all of the centuries that hasn’t been fought over the love of some thing or some one!”

“Uhh..uhh. Honestly, I don’t know but I’m no war buff. I mean I think there must be one somewhere.”

De’Vok sighed in disgust. “I’ll separate the two sections when any historian can prove to me otherwise!” He swung back around and continued to walk, this time considerably faster.

As we walked, he pointed down long hallways tiled with mosaics where the Geography sections gave rise to Astronomy and Mathematics. Non-fiction was less a section than a small room filled with desks and lanterns for research. Ancient, modern and futuristic instruments lined the walls of the Music section where thin sheets of parchment sat on hundreds of stands and countless scrolls and books filled wooden cubes of even more pieces of work. I stopped and stared at the harp and the piano before realizing that De’Vok’s voice was growing faint.

We stopped at a huge set of intricately carved double doors. I was speechless as my eyes took in scenes I’d only pictured, previously in my mind. The sailing ships from “The Iliad” came out of the bottom while waves from another one from a thousand sea stories depicted a sea captain at the helm in a storm. Mermaids swam through embossed vines that lead to woodland stories like “Alice in Wonderland”. A Victorian era sky line in the back ground was superimposed with depictions of children and adults walking through cobble stone streets. When I looked closer, an obscured shadow stood in the background and I wondered if the scene might be something from a Dickens novel. As my eyes made their way to the top of one door, the characters and scenes bunched together. Two figures riding a raft down the Mississippi River stood out next to a large farm scene with a man and woman looking

towards a train somewhere in the distance. A Native American chief looked on as cavalry men rode up near a mountainside. Near the handle of the door, a man and a woman embraced under an arbor of delicately carved honeysuckle. I put my hand on the knob unable to hold my curiosity for the contents inside when De'Vok held the door shut.

"We're not going in?" I asked, upset at the thought.

"You already know the stories of that world. The stories and characters and morals of those tales have been with you since you were a child and grow ever more with each turning of the page."

"Exactly. Let's go in!" I agreed enthusiastically.

"There is another room that requires your attention right now." He turned to face across the other side of the hall. Across from the familiar scenes of the light oak double doors stood another set of doors very different from their neighbor. These doors were wrought iron with pointed spires at the top. Around each door's handle sat a dragon, entwined with his teeth barred and his tongue in a perpetual hiss. A fearsome woman with the hair like Medusa sat perched on the left door, daring anyone to pass over her threshold. While, on the right door, the tiny faces of cherubs with empty sockets for eyes stared from their perches as if they were tiny, blind bats listening for the click of the tumblers of the lock. I shuddered as a chill ran down my neck and spine.

"No thanks. Whatever's in there can stay in there" I told De'Vok as I took four steps backwards and ran into something. I turned and screamed.

"Boo!" whispered Steven. He laughed and held my shoulders reassuringly. "Easy now, my dear. It's just a door. You might consider it a work of rare artistry, really. The faces are actually cast in bronze. The craftsman was truly a master."

I was shaking. "It's not the door. It's the feeling come from inside that door."

Steven gave a quick glance over and De'Vok. "Very perceptive. But you must understand. If you believe that books and writing on a whole has a power. Then, the tales told behind those doors see you as their enemy. You are here to put those tales and their inhabitants to rest. While the rest of the world goes about their day saying that monsters aren't real. You, in contrast are here to tell the very words on the page that they are real and you are here to destroy their makers."

I stood with my feet glued to the floor. I wanted to run but couldn't find a way to make myself move. Steven touched my face. "You're getting pale."

"Would the two of us have brought you here if we thought any harm might come to you inside that room?" De'Vok asked as if he were speaking to a small child.

"I'm here to help you. The books within are filled with the knowledge you will need when you meet the real demons of the world. I'll help you prepare for what is coming but I promise, no harm will come to you" Steven said sincerely.

“Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?” I drew my left shoulder from his hand.

“I don’t work with Michael the Archangel for nothing. I joined the side of good long before your grandmother was born. But I am, after all a vampire and I don’t easily accept it with a human woman outwits me her time...how do you Americans say it?.....up to the plate?”

I smiled a little.

“Besides, who can be in a bad mood after dining on the gourmet delicacies of the Italian bounty?” Steven smiled wickedly.

I closed my eyes and tried to erase the picture that came to my mind. De’Vok patted my arm and whispered in my ear, “He only dines on the condemned, the convicted or the terminally ill.” I tried to chant that mantra over and over as I heard Steven’s voice.

“Permit us into the fine weaving of your tales, Renenutet” commanded Steven. The double, wrought iron doors slowly opened, revealing a circular room lined with cobwebbed shelves and dimly lit candles. Steven sighed and started to take off his suit jacket. De’Vok held the door for me to go in front of him and I met Steven in the center. I stared up at him.

“What are you so worried about? You’re supposed to learn how to kill demons and monsters by practicing on me! The last time we sparred, you held me at a bare thread next to death” Steven said this less to me and more like an announcement. I heard gasps from around the room.

Looking up, I walked round the room, then back at Steven. He watched me with intense curiosity. I took a candle from one of the shelves to give myself a better look at the room. There was no one but De’Vok and Steven. A few of the bindings of books lining the odd shaped cases caught my eye. I held the candle closer to get a better look.

“Witch! Get that flame away from me!” screamed a voice. I jumped back and nearly dropped the candle and its holder.

“See what you’ve done?!” hissed another voice, high pitched and screeching from the other side. “You made her nearly kill us all!”

I ran to Steven who remained at the center of the room. “What the hell is going on?” I demanded.

“Michael was right. These are your type of defense” Steven explained. I looked at him confused. “The books only speak to those who can hear them. De’Vok and I know there is a legend of those who can hear the tales a book truly has to tell but he and I have just witnessed legend into fact.” He paused to wink at De’Vok who looked painfully jealous. “So, we’re dying to know. What are they saying to you?”

“You can’t hear them? That’s ridiculous. All you have to do is open them up and read them for yourself. You don’t have to hear what they’re saying, do you?” De’Vok looked so hurt. I was trying to explain away what the two men thought such a grand ability.

De’Vok took my hand. “A book’s writing is what an author has to say with his pen and a reader has to take in with his eyes. But to hear a book is to know what it has learned and seen and felt through its whole life. Imagine if the books in the oval office during FDR’s terms could tell you how he developed the New Deal to pull the people from their poverty. Imagine if the original works of Arthur Conan Doyle could tell you how he wept in his heartbreak over the loss of his child.” De’Vok pointed around the room. “These are the originals of those who have seen the birth of the cursed, the blood of the innocent spilled by the deranged but they have all come here willingly. Why, I don’t know. Gabriel said this was your kind of weaponry. Maybe you can enlighten us.”

Again, standing still as a stone, I was at a loss as to what to do next. Talking to books felt ridiculous. Asking books, these books in particular for help seemed impossible.

“I’m giving you three minutes” Steven announced rolling his neck and shoulders as if he were preparing for a sprint to the finish line, “then, I’m attacking.”

“What?!”

“Tick, tock” Steven answered pointing to his watch.

I ran to a random book. Pushing aside the feeling of absolute idiocy I took it from the shelf and opened it to a random page, “What did your master teach you?”

An earsplitting howl erupted from the page. Soon it was joined by a pack of howls, crying out and buckling my knees. I threw the book to the floor and the howling stopped. Steven looked sympathetic but pointed to his watch; raising two fingers in his count down. I ran to the next book and opened it. “Can your life with or away from your master help me to defeat a vampire?”

Steven flashed a look. Part of him seemed impressed that I would ask such a direct question. The other part revealed a spark of worry. I had to remind myself that he couldn’t hear the book’s answer. Similar to before, a wailing so filled with pain flooded my ears and reverberated through my body until I had no choice but throw the book to the floor.

Satisfied that I had learned little, Steven ran right for me and easily pinned me to the floor. “You have to find a better way to summon your protection than grabbing them off a shelf and asking for help. Honestly, if that’s what Gabriel meant then you’re truly never stepping out of the library.” He let go and helped me to my feet. “Try again. This time, approach it from a different angle. You have three minutes”.

“Slipping my hand into my pocket, I took out the orb remembering that De’Vok had filled it with some books earlier in the day. I held out the orb and asked, “I need protection. Can you help me?”

From the center of the golden ball flowed a light that had become familiar to me. It cast a ray into the dimly lit room and a stack of books sat floating in the air.”

“Wonderful!” clapped De’Vok. “Now how can you manipulate them?”

Steven took De’Vok’s question as an invitation, forgetting his three minutes. Again, he ran for me and I yelled out “Block!” Stunned, I slowly came around to find myself again, flat on my back, arms pinned to the floor. “What did the books do?”

Steven looked over his shoulder. “They’re still floating midair.” I groaned in frustration. Steven laughed.

“The theory is that one can only speak to books in their native language. Most of the ones present were written before the birth of your English language” De’Vok explained.

“You might have mentioned that before I tried to make demands” I griped.

“Again, it was a theory. It had to be tested” De’Vok remarked scientifically.

“I’m no lab rat!” I spat.

Steven could barely contain himself. It took no effort for him to laugh hysterically while holding me in his iron vice grip.

“I think you’re actually enjoying this” I grumbled as I shoved him off of me.

“I will have to thank Gabriel for this assignment” he gloated.

“Shut up and let me think” I snapped at Steven.

“Yes, but of course” he snarled with sweetness “because all evil will surely stop when you ask it to. Sure, I’ll wait here patiently whilst you rethink your plan for my demise” he mocked. He started circling me now, never letting me completely focus on the orb in my hand or the books on the shelves. “Is that what I should tell your children, your husband when they ask me how you really died?”

I completely forgot about everything around me. “Why would you go to them at all? They already think I’m dead in a hit and run” my voice cracked in anger.

He didn’t answer. He kept circling with an intense smile on his face. I felt overwhelmed with anger infused with worry. He wasn’t just hunting me in this room. He was planning to hunt my family. I had grown to appreciate Steven at arm’s length. Although, I couldn’t forget who and what he was, I was sure he knew that I would feel this way. How could I be sure he was only saying it to make me fight? Logic demanded that was the case. Still, logic could not completely over ride my emotional need to protect my family.

Heat and blood raced to my face. I was surprised at how much easier it was to focus when I let my anger flow through my mind. It ignited my instinct to find his weaknesses. Grabbing a small,

decorative knife from the wall, Steven upped the intensity of the fight. “Some of them have weaponry as well” he noted, rolling the blade across his knuckles like a coin.

I ran to a shelf and grabbed a book. As soon as I opened it, the screaming started again. I ignored the wailing. If Steven planned to plunge a knife into me, maybe I would have reflex enough to use an open book as a shield. As predicted, he ran forward and sprang like a cat at the last moment. I raised the book over my head and the pages erupted from bindings. It wasn’t what I had planned, but it did take Steven by surprise. The onion skin sheets flew into the air like a flock of birds.

A calm, flowing memory played suddenly in my otherwise racing mind. It was a cool, autumn day in the woods. A large grackle was flying over head squawking and diving at erratic intervals into the thin branches of the tree tops. My memory widened to reveal a flock of tiny sparrows, emboldened by their numbers, attacking the grackle, chasing him from their nesting grounds. A rustle of the leaves near me averted my attention to an old woman standing next to me. I was back in my old fourth grade class room. The nun, dressed in starched black and white was reciting tenses of verbs with our class in Latin. She was pointing to the sky where I had just watched the birds. Suddenly, my mind put all the tiny clues together.

I looked at Steven’s face as he turned around again, preparing for another swipe at me with the knife. The correct steps to turn the fight in my favor became easy to see.

“Charta Falco!” I shouted.

The onion skin papers which, seconds before had been feathery scraps falling to the floor immediately became rigid. They folded themselves in shapes similar to origami birds. I waived my arms in the air like an orchestra conductor and directed them in Steven’s direction.

“Incurro!” I commanded.

In military fashion, the paper birds formed a V shaped formation with the largest bird at the lead. They climbed high to the vaulted ceiling of the circular room and then dove ninety degrees straight down. They zeroed in on the top of Steven’s head.

With each dive bombing bird, Steven ducked. I could feel the wind from the flapping of their wings on the droplets of sweat on my skin. With each yelp from Steven, I felt more in control of the situation. He rolled under a table the rested against the wall. My flock seemed confused. He sprang again, this time with his knife thrashing back and forth in the air; taking the birds by surprise. With each slice, the flock broke formation and eventually into shreds on the floor. Steven rounded on me again.

“Surely, you don’t think I’d let good meal go to waste once I kill you myself. Surely you don’t believe that mere books can save you or your little living brood.” He was walking slowing again, his words terrifying and seductive. “I’ve been watching that lovely family of yours. I think I might just kill off the men. After all, I can’t have anyone better looking than me kept alive” he fixed his collar as if he were primping in a mirror. “But your daughter” he paused mid-step ensuring he had me complete attention. His words thickened as his speech became less like a man, more like a snake “now she is a

likely candidate for induction into my own family. After all, by then, she'd technically be considered an orphan."

The room went red. A thousand screams split my head in two. Everything happened so fast I wasn't sure if I was in control of the situation or merely a spectator. My arms felt as if they were long enough to touch the circular room from end edge to edge. The screams turned into voices filling my head and gave suggestions, I took each one in stride and commanded in turn, each voice taking their post and working in relation to the others. When I opened my eyes, I jumped back unsure if I should be laugh or scream.

He was glorious and terrifying all at once. Layer by layer, shred by shred, held together by one common thread that was an extension of myself. Piling themselves geometrically in every fathomable combination, they rallied in unison. First the legs formed. Then the trunk, full and thick with multiple volumes formed an impenetrable wall. The smaller, handmade books donated their bindings and wrapped themselves to form the arms. Finally, the last remnants of papyrus, onion skin and linen fibers circled to form the head. He bounded from the center of the room and grabbed my attacker with a giant hand. I heard Steven crash into the floor in a huge cloud of pulverized tile and masonry. Holding Steven down with one giant foot stood what Gabriel must have known was somehow at my command all along.

Steven groaned in pain. His voice was muffled under the giant's weight. "What the hell is it?"

"It's a golem" De'Vok declared, astonished.

"Actually, it's a Book Golem" I smiled. "And I think I'll call him Frank" I added triumphantly.

"Uggpph, could you tell Frank to get his bloody foot off of me?" came the muffled plea of Steven.

"That depends. How do you feel about American film maker and professors as take out?"

"Never to pass my lips for a million years" replied a desperate Steven.

"And as for my daughter" I was about to say by De'Vok chimed in. "I will tell his wife if the notion ever crosses his mind. Nadia could do far worse to him than a Book Golem ever could."

"Frank, let him go" I directed. Frank looked at me defeated. "Good job! But we have to let Steven go. He was just playing."

Frank lifted his massive foot and Steven was blur of muted color stopping at the other end of the room. I took my orb from where it had fallen in the fight onto the floor. "Go home, Frank. Everyone can go home now. Frank, a living, breathing beast of paper and bindings erupted into a thousand pieces of paper; some reforming into the books and back to their shelves, others into the orb from where they had originally been summoned.

“Alright. I am impressed and mystified. How did you do it?” Steven inquired sauntering back to the center of the room when the coast was clear.

“I didn’t. You did. When De’Vok said those books came here willingly, I should have known. But it wasn’t until you called Libby an orphan than you struck the common chord. From what they tell me, all of these books have been abandoned by their owners. They are, technically, orphans.”

“Why help you? They hated you when you came in” Steven argued.

“I didn’t ask them to help me as one warrior defeating a monster” I replied. Steven cocked his head slightly at the word “monster”. “No offense” I patted him on the arm. “I called to them as a mother protecting her child.”

“You’ve lost me” Steven said flatly.

“The orphans have found their new mother. They will do anything she asks and protect her now that she has shown she will protect those dear to her” De’Vok explained.

A mother to orphans. There was Motherhood rearing her beautiful wicked head again in my life. How long had I been gone, I wondered? Time was so different here in this other world. Days? Weeks? Months? In an instant I was hopelessly homesick for my family and my own comfortable place there.

A blinding flash of light pulled me away from my thoughts. Stepping out of the thin line, Michael had sliced open a portal through space and time to the Library at Alexandria. His Gladius in hand, he wasted no time or words. “Ready or not, your first assignment is gasping her last.”

“You can’t possibly expect her first time out to be among the living. You don’t even know if she’s strong enough....” Steven argued but stopped.

Michael had already rounded on me as if Steven had never said a word. “Your body is between two planes; that of the living and that of the dead. The dead care little for appearance or physical manifestation. Here, it’s your ability to manipulate energy and your environment. Half of those who exist here in Otherworld are completely invisible. In the plane of the living, that is quite the opposite. You will have to find a way to pull enough energy out your environment to manifest yourself and help your first client before they fall prey to the evil that fights to take her life. Since your body is comfortable here in Otherworld, your time among the living will be short. Act quickly and get back here to report to me.”

He turned to Steven and continued with his orders. “You will clear the area ahead of her. She may have trouble manifesting for the first time. Set your orbs for these coordinates” he handed Steven a small piece of parchment with a date in time and a location. “Your first case is a woman possessed by a demon. He needs to be separated from the innocent soul and either captured or eradicated.” Michael sighed. “We were double crossed. Thought he was on our side and now he knows too much to take

back to the Evil. He needs the host to grow stronger before he can make the trip back. Kill or capture before he jumps hosts and takes a soul in the process.”

Steven dropped an orb in my hand and the beam first erupted from his and then from mine. He stepped through effortlessly. I waited until the opening was comfortably the size of my human form and stepped through; all the while my mind a flood of impossible scenarios.