

Chapter 6: Revenge

Insomnia is the special kind of torture reserved for the souls doomed to over analyze, to scrutinize a looming decision and to repeatedly replay scenes of the past. In extreme cases, the victim falls prey to a light, shallow sleep where the painful events of the past play out and then rewind themselves over and over again. Each time the scene unfolds, a slight variation occurs. In my case, each attempt to sleep revealed a fresh new nightmare.

I closed my eyes and drifted into a mock sleep. The faint images of the peeling face of Mrs. Miller slowly intensified over the course of the opening frame. Her screams combined with that of the demon inside of her made my real self hold on to my small mat where I lay in the circular room on the floor. My dream self shivered in fear, my physical self detected a sudden feeling of cold.

Relief covered me like a warm blanket when the possessed face of the aged Mrs. Miller changed into one I attributed with safety and security. My dream self tucked into Gabe's arms. There I willed myself to stay until the dreamed played out in detail taking stock of a host of fears from my yesterday. Security in his embrace was bitter sweet. There was a strong part of me that knew I was living in the depths of illusion. The other weaker side didn't care. I was ashamed to admit it, but I would take illusion over reality if it meant to see his face, to feel his kiss on my lips once more. I tossed and turned on my mat as the scene melted away until there was just him and me. Security turned into shock, shock emulsified into the intense need to flee. My heart pounded in my ears like a siren. I tried to scream. As I opened my mouth, I relived the revolting feeling of the demon's kiss. As I tried to free myself from the weak grip of sleep, I swore I heard the hiss of rage from somewhere in the darkness.

I awoke with beads of sweat running slowly down the sides of my face and a longing for the honest peace that only a deep sleep could bring. I tried to clear my head and think of something else. My first thoughts flooded my head with images of my children. I missed them so much. It seemed so wrong, looking back now, to have ever questioned motherhood. I guess it is true. We never really appreciate what we have until we lose it.

The flickering light of the torches played tricks on my weary eyes and I thought I saw a large shadow move quickly from one book shelf to another. I should have been alarmed but there was an old, familiar feeling of deprivation that tried to soothe me back to sleep. I tried to forget the horrors of the day by counting the mosaic pieces of tile in the relief near my mat. It didn't work. Instead, I thought I saw the twisted faces of those in pain or driven mad. I rolled over on my mat and remembered an old game I once played with myself as a child.

I willed a song to flow through my mind. At first it was faint like droplets of water falling onto tender leaves. I felt my body begin to relax. I focused harder. The trickle turned into a gentle stream. My memory played "Bolero" by Ravel. Once the tune was fixed into play, I took to the task of scoring the music for my ethereal conductor. I started at the top of the melody with the harps and violins.

Next, the middle sections with clarinets and violas. By the time I'd scored the cellos I felt myself drift. The percussion section would have to wait. A blanket of darkness fell over me.

I drifted back into some kind of sleep to find the old woman's face was now strewn with blood that flowed steadily from her the place where her bright blue eyes had once stared into my own. She had torn them out in her feeble attempted to rip the demon from within her. The blinded old woman screamed in her own self induced agony. Her eyes were not the only part of her face that she had ripped apart. Mrs. Miller pulled her hair out in clumps, leaving her scalp completely bald in patches. She pitifully tried to cry as the demon took stock, squatting within her, waiting for his next chance to strike. Then, she began to tear away at her face again as she ground her yellow teeth in agony. The dream woman seemed to notice I was there as she turned her bloodied face towards mine. A smile graced her thin lips as a change began to come over her once again. The demon had found his time to pounce again in to the form of my living husband.

The demon's kiss then played out again. I knew it was coming. My dream self scurried around the hospital room looking for some way out. I checked my pocket for the orb. Nothing. This time, I was sentenced by the judges that rule over the thin veils between asleep and awake to play out my worst fear. The kiss was inescapable. I couldn't get away once it started. My frustration grew when I couldn't break free from his vice-like embrace. Trapped again. My dream self's scream became that of my own. My awake senses detected a faint laugh from somewhere near my sleeping body.

In the dream, I began choking and gurgling, my eyes bulged at the violent invasion of his tongue. I gagged. My eyes watered and I heard myself weeping as the demon slithered slowly out of the fused illusion of Mrs. Miller and Gabe. He plunged himself into my throat, filling it with his slow crawl. Gasping and reaching for air I began to tear at my own face.

Steven shook me back to reality. I was trembling uncontrollably. He held me in a protective embrace while his eyes darted from shelf to shelf in the circular room. Scooping me up from my mat, he wrapped me in my thin blanket and whisked me from the room at a speed that made my head feel faint. As he ran effortlessly, I was alarmed to find that my blanket's edge was soaked with my own blood. It hurt to move my eyes or to blink. Realization washed over me combined with immense gratitude for Steven's impeccable timing. Steven seemed to be holding his breath and covering me with my blanket tightly.

We arrived in a small, cozy room filled with wall and floor tapestries somewhere near the back of the Library. The smell of cinnamon and cardamom drifted in the warm currents from the small fireplace near the corner of the room. Steven placed me gently on a floor cushion as De'Vok poured me a steaming cup of tea.

"Alandrea is here in the shadows. When I found Louella, she was gouging her own eyes out in her sleep" he snorted as he paced angrily across the carpets of the tiny room.

“That’s her trade make, for sure. I knew they would seek retribution but never imagined they would find her so soon.....and here of all places!” De’Vok pulled his tunic tighter around his thin frame. “The books....”

Steven struggled to take a breath with his mouth open. He looked at his own trembling hands which I noticed were covered in my blood “There’s only one book and one keeper whom she seeks” he turned his gaze from De’Vok to me. I couldn’t help but notice the strange expression on his face as he met my eyes; intense, strained.....hungry.

“I have some questions” I said plainly, trying to ignore the growing feeling that I was someone’s prey. My body shuddered with another concentrated blast of cold but my voice was steady thanks to De’Vok’s tea. Steven raised a finger and looked at me with ferocity blazing in his eyes. He raised his other hand to openly reveal it covered in congealing blood. I touched my face to confirm. “Mine?”

Steven nodded but said nothing as if to open his mouth might bring him more pain that I could fathom. He sprinted to the door and held its lock. “Keep her and the book in here” he directed De’Vok. I have to go to the surface and feed....properly if Michael expects me to let our heroine bleed all over me” he spat angrily.

My stomach flipped. I felt tremendously thankful, eerily terrified and completely confused as I touched the seeping, sticky wounds of my own face. Steven must have been able to read my expression. He gripped the door tighter as he started to tremble from the continued exposure of my blood. “I’ll explain...” he broke off, breathing with more difficulty, “.....as soon as I return.”

He was gone. From outside the door, I heard Steven reciting something but I couldn’t make it out. The wooden door slowly liquefied before me, emulsifying with the plaster of the walls and our exit to the Library was magically erased. De’Vok regarded the wall as if a disappearing door were a common, every day event. He winked at me and handed me my orb. I sighed with relief. “Not all doors have handles, remember?” he cooed.

“I’m not so great with small spaces” I confessed.

“Ah well, then it is an absolutely excellent time to go over your strategy and execution of yesterday’s successful release of Mrs. Miller’s soul.”

“Ha!” I laughed. “You might say I’ve been doing that all night.”

“Well, you’ve been under the powerful suggestion of the ghost witch, Alandrea. In life, she took her revenge on the judges who mistakenly accused her brother of being in league with the devil. Up until that point, she had been a famous midwife. Her brother, Heiner was a simple wood cutter. As the story goes, Heiner fell in love with the magistrate’s daughter. The two lovers, she of upper class, he of lower, stole away to a nearby village where a monk married them in secret. When the two came home, she was already thick in the belly with his child. The magistrate was furious. That same night, which they had naively hoped to be one of acceptance turned was their introduction to the beginning of hell.

The magistrate accused Heiner of using the devil to trick his beautiful, upper class daughter into falling in love with him. He called a midnight session of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Heiner was sentenced to be burned at the stake at sunrise. Word of the swift vengeance of the Magistrate blazed like a wildfire into the night. Alandrea was summoned before dawn. As she threw herself at the feet of the Magistrate, Alandrea begged for a pardon for her brother. The magistrate agreed to consider the matter on one condition; that she give a drug to his daughter that would rid his daughter of her demon spawn.

Alandrea went straight to work. She made a tincture in the wee hours of the approaching dawn. When she entered the room of the Magistrate's daughter, she found the girl had taken the matter into her own hands presumably once she too had learned the verdict of her groom. She had taken the poker from her bedside hearth and used it to tear out the child that had been kicking wildly only the day prior. Upon seeing the mangled body and limbs of her premature fetus, she had gone mad with grief. By the time Alandrea opened the door to her room, the Magistrate's daughter had torn her own eyes out.

The Magistrate, struck down by horror and rage sentenced the immediate burning of Heiner without any further consideration. He accused Alandrea of conspiring with her brother and in turn; cold and so hideous was his loathing of the brother and sister, he sentenced her to light the fire for her own brother's burning.

Theories run the gambit as to what happened to Alandrea after that dark morning. However she died, she arrived here in Otherworld searching for Heiner, her brother. The two were reunited a little more than a century ago. Steven has had his share of run ins with the two, though mostly with Heiner. He seems to be the one out of the two who can manifest among the living. Alandrea, in her own way is frighteningly worse. While she can only manifest to that of a mere shadow, she seems to have learned how to manipulate the richest source of Dark Matter; thoughts and dreams."

"The idea that what we think in our dream world we live in our reality" I stated as I wrapped the thin, blood stained blanket around me. "She made me think I was being possessed so I'd try to tear him out whatever way I could."

"Exactly" nodded De'Vok. "And a blind enemy is at a far greater disadvantage than a seeing one." De'Vok took out a parchment from near his own floor cushion and spread it over the small table between the two of us. "And as for your obvious disadvantages, we thus need to strategize. Your non-violent approach with Mrs. Miller was noble. Capturing Heiner within a paper version of her niece was exemplary. But there was a reason Michael originally set out to find himself a candidate for your post with bloodied hands from the past. Murder, which separates the demon from the victim is far swifter and therefore less dangerous for you. While your mission was successful, you stayed far too long on the surface.

"That's why I'm so tired" I remarked. "Manifestation must be harder than I realized."

De'Vok took a deep drag of his tea and didn't answer. "You must consider the possibility that you will have to kill your next demon and or its host to prevent the spread of evil. Michael's army grows tired and frayed at each turning of the wheel. It's your job to even the odds."

"I'm well aware of my job, thank you" I spat curtly as I dabbed at the scabs forming around my eyes.

"Mrs. Miller was actually a small test. Now that the other side is aware that you are a viable threat, your quest grows in difficulty" he paused to sigh and for a moment looked weary. His eyes turned to me filled with sympathy. "It grows in levels of difficulty that you have not and cannot imagine." He set down his tea and with a ghostly fingertip, traced the thin edge of the clay edges. "You must, in every way possible let go of your past. Michael has set high security around your family, but that is only as good as your own mind. Here, in Otherworld there are those who can read your mind, your heart as well as your desires; much like Heiner did. What worries me more is that for several long minutes you were seduced by such ploys. They were merely attacks on your judgment based on your strong marital vows. Next, it might be your children."

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands. I knew he was right. Insomnia had played out my weakness and Alandrea had exploited it further in my own dreams. Slowly, I lifted my head, wishing I were alive enough to cry real tears. I stared back at De'Vok. "How?" I whispered.

"Think only of your job at hand and not where it may lead you. We will begin now." De'Vok flattened the parchment smooth and traced his long, bony fingers along a thick line. "We are here, or at least, this is where the door way once was and this is the hallway from which Steven brought you from your room." He moved his finger to a lower level on the map. "This is a floor that I've never explored located directly below us. I have read up on it in the room of archives and think it might hold an optimal prison to house our captured friend and any others you might convict along the way." De'Vok eyed the leather bound book at the end of the table where Heiner lay trapped within the ancient fibers.

"A tunnel runs from just below the room all the way to a chamber where it is said the library once drew its water supply. Some accounts describe a small pool while others refer to it as a deep lake. Whichever it may be is unimportant. What we are looking for lies within the shores of the water where a small cliff is said to sit just off to the water's edge. The cliff is made of limestone." De'Vok's eyes were twinkling with excitement at this last statement.

"And that's a good thing, right?"

"It's the best possible scenario actually. Limestone is said to be unaffected by high amounts of Dark matter. As a matter of fact, it often absorbs it, trapping it in its own molecular structure. Many a spirit has lingered too long in grief among the limestone hills or the buildings made of limestone; only to find itself doomed for eternity to repeat its weeping over and over again."

"A haunting" I said, fascinated.

“A residual haunting” De’Vok corrected. He continued to trace along the tunnel line beyond the library entrance, the lake and cliffs to the end of the tunnel line. A thick, henna colored stroke of the brush lead from the tunnel line to a vast chamber two floors above that of the Library.

“What’s that at the end?” I asked.

“If by any possible means Heiner were to somehow escape, the tunnel continues on up to the third level where Michael retreats in the calm of the battle. His palace is heavily armed and the last place any demon would dare penetrate to make an escape.”

I sat back on my cushion and stared at the map. I traced each corner, each level with my aching eyes. In the back of my mind, De’Vok’s words played again. I had to forget him. To protect all of them, I had to leave them behind. I had to let them go.

“More tea?” De’Vok offered, breaking my deep introspection.

“I’ll need to write something down for me” I said solemnly. “If something should happen for the worst, then you must promise me to deliver it.”

Wide eyed and intrigued, De’Vok nodded in agreement. He gathered up a glass pen, a bottle of ink and some parchment from a small box precariously placed near the fire. Gingerly, he returned to his floor cushion and set the parchment over the map. Dipping the glass pen in the ink, he silently awaited my dictation.

“In the event that I am not successful, I want to leave something of myself that only written words can hold together in the passing of time. When I was eleven, I once mistakenly got locked down into my aunt’s basement. There were few windows and even those few were too thin for light or a chance of escape. I screamed and yelled for help but the family, in our huge reunion numbers didn’t notice my absence and had long made their way to the beach.

Every noise made me flinch in fear. I must have cried for nearly an hour. Once exhausted and resigned to my fate, I found an open room where she and my cousins kept a huge collection of books in storage. I scanned to shallow, cellar shelves, reading each title out loud to give myself the illusion that I wasn’t alone. Eventually, I settled on a copy of ‘Through the Looking Glass’. While my fear spiked at every step in any direction, I eventually found an old flashlight and a moth eaten quilt. As the hours wiled away, Lewis Carol whisked me out of that old, damp basement and into a world where I wasn’t alone.

That day, I learned that words and books had power to change my perspective on even the darkest, scariest of situations. While I studied music into adulthood and turned it into my career, it was the advice of authors both living and dead that brought me calm in times of chaos. The only other thing that could bring me to an absolute calm and resolution was Gabe. Here is my favorite memory of him.”

De’Vok dipped his pen and inscribed the parchment with my painted memories of that day. “He was set to impress me. I was kind of seeing someone else and he recalled later that he had decided that

it had become his personal challenge to get me to go out with him. He had invited me to dinner but I had to work that afternoon. We agreed to drive separately and meet at the restaurant.

When I arrived, I sat down with him at a table in the corner of the restaurant. He asked the waiter for a glass of water, a plate, a lemon and a match.” De’Vok stopped and looked at me with curiosity. I smiled and he dipped his pen again.

“The waiter did as he was asked, meanwhile saying nothing to me. He just stared at me with this huge, goofy look on his face. When the waiter returned, he set all of the items on the table and turned to leave. Gabe stopped him. From his own wallet he placed a fifty dollar bill on the lovely white table cloth. Then, he told the waiter that if he could pour out the water and put it all back in the glass without moving the plate, he would give him the fifty.

For a minute, I thought I was on some hidden video show. The waiter looked around the room for management as if it were some test to his patience. Once he realized that Gabe was for real, the eager college student/waiter set his mind to the challenge.

First, the waiter poured the water onto the plate. Then, he set the lemon wedge in the middle of the plate. Quickly, he lit the match and stuck it in the lemon wedge. Lastly, he tipped the glass over the plate of water, lemon and flame. At first, I felt terrible for the waiter. Nothing seemed to become the set up save a nice luminary with a lemon scent. Then, the flame died out from the lack of oxygen. As the glass cooled, I watched utterly fixated on the plate as the water drew back into the glass thanks to a vacuum created as the flame died out.

The waiter walked away with fifty dollars. Gabe and I abruptly left the table, our money all spent on the one shot at impressing me. He took me to his place where he made scrambled eggs and toast. While I had eaten far better food in my life, it was the best date I’d ever been on and I knew I was hooked from that moment on.”

I stopped. De’Vok was grinning from ear to ear at the story. I gently took the pen from his hand and set it down. I blew lightly on the ink until it dried into permanence. Then, I rolled it up and tucked it back into the small box from which it had originally come. “Now, its out of me and left it you for safe keeping. If something should happen.....”

De’Vok stopped me from saying any more with a wave of his hand. His eyes were fixated on something behind me. I turned to see the familiar shimmer of light. Unsure who might be coming through the point of time, De’Vok pulled me behind him as if the frail old man was any protection. We both held our breath as the light grew wider. Both of us breathed a sigh of relief as Steven stepped out of the light.

It was strange to think but somehow, in the last few hours that passed, Stven has grown at least twenty years younger. With him was a young woman, not much older, it appeared than my own daughter. “Natasha!” declared De’Vok. The pale girl with deep, dark eyes smiled at the old librarian. He opened his arms as if to embrace her but Steven held her as if in a cage like hold and shook his head.

“She has not yet taken her final step. With Louella, I do not dare to tempt fate at this juncture. We have only a moment. The retribution is larger than we predicted. My household is under attack and while I apologize to you, Louella, my first priority is to my family. I do believe, you of all people will understand that.”

I was already to my feet. The girl in his arms seemed to watch my movements with close scrutiny. She lifted her chin and raised her nose to the air as if she were savoring the delicious aroma of something cooking. He was subtle, but Steven pulled Natasha in to his arms slightly as if to remind her of words spoken in hasty preceding moments.

“We’ve chased out Alandrea from the library and Michael has sent a small force here to guard the entrance. Anna is safe, old friend.” De’Vok seemed to breathe a small sigh of relief. “You two must get that book out of here, now. I’m sorry Louella but your questions will have to wait. Natasha is at risk and my wife cannot keep our family hidden forever. When my own house is in order, I will find you and join you. Until then, banish Heiner before his sister can find him and free him. If Evil learns that there is a permanent consequence we may turn the tide in our favor yet.”

He didn’t wait for either of us to respond. Natasha was using all of her will to break out of Steven’s grip all the while her eyes zeroed in on me. When the light vanished and the room grew dim with firelight, I looked at De’Vok, confused. “Natasha is Steven’s adopted daughter. She was bitten once by a young vampire working for the other side. Steven found her and helped to nurse her back to health. He hoped that, like you, she might rejoin her human life after surviving the initial bite. The young vampire, angry at her rejection of him returned to the living world and bit her again. Very few survive their second bite and those who do kill to feed within twenty four hours, thus losing their souls to the side of Evil.

Somehow, Natasha managed to return to Steven and his wife without giving in to the insatiable hunger. Her soul has remained protected by her two new adoptive parents. As the Evil calls out to its followers, Natasha, being bitten by an agent of destruction, she too hears its call. Evil beckons her to make her first kill of an innocent and thus take her place in the army of darkness. Steven, I’m afraid will die before he lets that happen.”

De’Vok rolled up the map and set his orb to take us just beyond the emulsified door wall. In seconds, we stepped out into the familiar light of the library. “Anna! Anna, its urgent, my love, please hear me!” De’Vok called out.

A ghostly woman in blue hues and silvery, graceful lines materialized less than a few feet in front of us. “Anna dear, you are safe. Steven assures me that Alandrea has been chased out. Louella and I must go to the tunnels below for a little while.” She took his hands into her own icy hands and gave him a look with sorrow filled eyes. He reassured her. “We’ll be back before you know it.” Anna touched his face lovingly and sighed as if forgetting she was dead and then vanished into thin air. De’Vok turned to lead the way and the protest began.

Anna began to weep softly from somewhere in the library. De'Vok looked up into the air and called out to her, soothingly. "Anna, please" he begged. The weeping intensified to a pathetic sob that echoed off of the tile floors. I shivered as the temperature in the room dropped. De'Vok, being a ghost of sorts himself didn't seem to notice. A light breeze out of nowhere, blew between us; catching me by surprise. I gasped as the wind seemed to turn a silvery blue as it swirled near the top of the nearest bookcase.

One by one the volumes flew off the top shelf as if they each had been thrown directly at us. We scattered in opposite directions. As I rounded the corner, I called out to De'Vok. "Why is she so upset?" Before I had time to listen for an answer, a heavy, hard bound copy of the Iliad in its original Greek beamed me in the head. The floor seemed to sway and come up quickly as I landed with a dull thud to the floor.

"Anna, be reasonable. You heard Michael. She is the chosen one. I vowed to help her. Do you want me to break my promise?" De'Vok argued as if he were talking to the thin air. I watched as his small, elderly frame hobbled into the main walkway. He searched the ceiling for some sign. Out from under his feet, a large rug was yanked out from under him. He fell to the floor and landed on his back. A low rumble seemed to be coming from everywhere and no where all at once. The rumble grew louder and more distinct.

"Don't you DARE talk to me of promises!" thundered the voice, surrounding us. "YOU are the one who made ME a promise all those years ago. YOU promised never to leave me again!" The wailing intermixed with the low rumbling of the floor. It sent vibrations across the mosaics, breaking grout at the weak points in the masonry.

"But Anna, I will come back to you" De'Vok said, reduced to a gentle reminder.

The wind picked up turning from a light cold breeze to a stronger, intense wind. This time, there was a dry, uncomfortable heat behind it. As it passed over me, it made took my breath away and made me bury my face in the coolness of the floor. The wind carried a whisper that was difficult to make out.

I yelled again to De'Vok who again did not answer. The whisper directed him instead. "Do you remember the fire?"

De'Vok seemed reduced to a shell of a man by the mere suggestion. I struggled to crawl over to him as I slowly crawled across the floor. The closer I got to him, the hotter the wind. Soon, my hands felt as if they were seared with each new placement of my palms. The voiced continued to torment the old librarian. "Tell her. Tell her how you heard me screaming. Tell her how you found me, a blaze of walking, fiery flesh still searching for her love. Tell her how you left me to burn."

I grabbed De'Vok by the scruff of his tunic as we both dashed behind a book shelf. I shook the old man in protest; trying to snap him from his memories. His far off gaze seemed to return to the present. He shouted to me over the firestorm. "I was the Librarian of the Alexandrian Library. The rival army rode in and set the city on fire. My oath was to my books. I was to stay to protect the royal

archives at all costs.” His eyes filled with tears and he choked on black smoke as he spoke. “But there was something I loved at that moment far more than any book, parchment or oath to my king. I loved my Anna. I ran into the city, abandoning my post in search for her. Little did I know, but she had recalled my promise to my king. I ran out of the Library to look for her at home. Moments later, she ran in to the library to find me.

The whole city was an inferno. In my shock, I came to believe I was no longer in Alexandria but rather the surface of hell. I made it to our small house to find it empty. I searched the homes of neighbors and family. Nothing. In my desperation, I convinced myself that she had fled to safety. The shame of abandoning what I had once sworn to protect took over. I returned to the library to save what I could or die trying.

As I rounded the first hall, there was Anna, inches from death lying in the floor. I went mad! I called for help. But the whole city had been crying out long before me. I screamed for a doctor. But the inferno’s throaty howl and choking black smoke stifled my call. She reached for me and all I could do was hold her smoking body to my own.

Driven by mad grief, in one afternoon I had lost my king, my country, my post and worst of all, my love. While war raged outside these walls, I went to my room and found a small box. I went back to the hall for Anna and carried her to my bed. I tucked one hand gently under her head, the other opened the small wooden box, took from it the knife used to carve meats on holy days and plunged it into my chest.”

A series of crashes from the other end of the room grew louder and louder. Anna, in her rage had begun to knock over each free standing bookcase, one into the other until a domino effect started a chain reaction. Volumes and shelves crashed to the floor faster and faster, headed in our direction. De’Vok and I leapt in the nick of time to find ourselves back in the main walkway; vulnerable with no place left to hide.

Anna had gone from silver flowing ghostly apparition to a stalking, fiery goddess; smoldering in a swirling array of black smoke and contrasting brilliant fire. Fire was far more powerful in Otherworld. Or it seemed that way; its light and heat in sharp, blinding contrast to the cold and grey backdrop. Ripples of heat, like I had seen in the desert travelled slowly, in cascades from her narrow hips, down her thighs to the library floor. She was carrying something in her hands as her whisper carried to the corners of the room. “And that’s when you promised.”

De’Vok held his head in his hands. “Yes, that is when I promised. When we both arrived here, spared in some sense of the word; we took the shared mantle of guardian for this sacred library. I promised never to leave my one true love ever again.”

“And you have already broken your promise” Anna spat as the flames surged to further amplify her rage.

“That is true. I left at the command of the leading general, Michael” De’Vok defended himself calmly.

“You came back with another woman” Anna towered over us. Some of the long window’s small panes shattered under the intense heat. The explosion forced De’Vok and I to cover our heads and plug our ears in an automatic human reaction.

The blazing Anna reveled in her powerful tantrum. Her firestorm surrounded us in flames ten feet high. The books and papyrus fed the fire that she commanded at her finger tips. A pearl handled knife with the blade; red hot dropped from her dainty hands and into his. “The choice is yours, my love” she hissed; seething and seductive. Release your soul to heaven. You know the cut that is required. Release your soul and sever our eternal bond. Or stay with me here like your love promised.”

I remembered Michael and the Civil War soldier. As De’Vok reached for the knife, I caught his arm. “Steven is right. He has to take care of his family first and so do you.” I reached into my pocket and retrieved my orb. “My family and I are together and we’ll need both of you to help me prepare to leave.”

I looked up to Anna pleadingly. “Can you take me as far as the door?”