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Episode Five: Kingdom of Light

THE GULFSTREAM G150 carved the atmosphere like a precision blade. At a fraction of the size of a commercial jetliner, the plane flew faster and higher allowing Abigail reach out with her mind and touch the darkening canopy of space above and briefly enjoy its foreboding presence. In silence, she took in its emptiness and vast loneliness. With the murder of Gloria still weighing heavily on her senses, she sobbed. Then, after a while, fell asleep.

Time passed.

It wasn't the squeal of the tires that awoke Abigail from her slumber; it was an overwhelming sense of otherness. Intense otherness that told her she was in another place far from home.

The heat radiating from the windows of the plane was another cue. They had arrived in Damascus—an ancient and wondrous city of poetry and proverbs. Slightly larger than North Dakota, Abigail knew Syria was situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. And with Lebanon and Israel on the west, Turkey topping the north, Iraq on the east, and Jordan securing the south, the country was a marvel of Middle Eastern culture and landscape. She had visited Lebanon once in her youth, along with so many other ports too numerous to remember. Her mother, constantly on quests to fill her library with ancient texts, took Abigail through the deserts of the Middle East in the fifties. Abigail remembered the secret tombs and hidden caves they had stumbled upon in their quest for forbidden literature. But now in the 2000's, a lot had changed. The deserts were no longer vistas of peaceful wonders—now everything was tinged with the unsettling air of military presence. Abigail tried to remain optimistic. She delved into the journeys of decades past and remembered the pleasant curiosity and graciousness of the Arabian people. Back then, Abigail became familiar with the sounds and smells of the land. It was this unwavering memory that transported Abigail back in time as she was deplaned by ground crew.

A subtle scent of jasmine tinged with the pungent combination of kerosene and human sweat hung in the air. A hot breeze blew from the East and massaged her skin. The heat from the sun was intense on her face and she craned her head back to soak

it up. It was much more humid than she remembered. Only one of a myriad of changes the Middle East in the twenty first century. "I remember a sun like this in Lebanon in 1953," she said to no one in particular. "I was given a charm by a small boy who wanted to trade it for a smile. It was to ward off evil. And all he wanted was a smile. Just a smile, that's all he wanted."

"This place is rich with culture and history," Sand said as he descended the steps of the plane onto the tarmac next to Abigail. "Damascus is considered the oldest city on Earth. Its demons are some of the most powerful in the world."

"There's something important you should know, Mr. Sand," Abigail said. "Your interest in demons is going to kill you."

He smiled at her. "Well, if I'm going to be killed, I'd much rather it be done by demonkind than mankind."

A stout, middle-aged Arabian man dressed in spotless white robes approached quickly from the terminal and rushed up to Sand, shaking his hand. The man spoke in broken English, heavily accented with Arabic inflections. "Mr. Sand, welcome, welcome," he said. "My name is Abbudin. Your cars are waiting. They will take you to where you need to go."

"Excellent," Sand said. "This is Abigail. My associate. She will need sunglasses to hide her eyes. She is blind."

"Of course, of course. I will see to it immediately."

Abigail sensed something with this man. It was an unsure sensation. Like being out of place. Abigail's emotions twitched and she grasped at Abbudin's arm pulling him toward her. Graciously, he bent down to accommodate. "You want to say something?" Abbudin asked her.

Abigail merely shook her head and ruffled his collar. "Your necklace," she said. "May I see it?"

"See it?" Abbudin replied in surprise. "But you are blind ma'am."

"Please, remove it," she insisted.

Abbudin laughed and looked at Sand who nodded casually. "Okay," Abbudin said, and reached into the many folds of linen and removed his necklace. He gave it to Abigail who examined it as if she could see it plainly. On the end of the rawhide string was a small, black onyx statue. "What is this?" Abigail asked.

"It is a good luck charm, ma'am," Abbudin said. "I take it with me wherever I go. It has brought me much good fortune."

Abigail's fingers pressed and swept over the idol. She finally looked at Abbudin. "It is Moniades," she said accusingly. "You carry the visage of Darkness around your neck."

"No!" Abbudin protested. "It is for luck. What do you know of Syrian mythology?"

“Moniades is Lebanese. And luck is a Western superstition,” she confirmed. “This is Moniades the Destroyer. You found this in Lebanon near Mt. Hermon. Near the Kingdom of Phoenicia.” Abigail paused and then said, “Or did it find you?”

Abbudin laughed. “Phoenicia is a city that exists no longer. I think you have been reading too many science fiction books! In Braille!”

“Akshelar Saturaal will return,” she said with a cold resonance. “And Darkness will return with him to this land. You are helping to make it real. In the process, your family will suffer. Turn back to the light while you still have time. For your family. And your child.”

Abbudin quickly lost his jovial way. He glared at Abigail, snatched back his necklace and placed it around his neck. He looked at Sand, who was smiling. “I think you had better talk to her,” Abbudin said. “She is confused.”

“Actually,” Sand said. “She is quite lucid. The cars, my friend?”

Abbudin looked at Abigail suspiciously. “Yes. They are waiting. I will take you to them now. If you will follow me.” Abbudin led Sand, Abigail and four of Sand’s thugs into the terminal.

The ground crew who were tending to Sand’s plane finally turned to look at the departing travelers. Perhaps if Abigail had still been in close proximity, she would’ve sensed something out of place with them as well.

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Grace held her breath, as did Deacon.

The tentacle eased its way further into the cabin then tensed. It’s liquid musculature rippling as if bracing itself.

Another bang from outside followed by the vile clicking noise. Only this time, not just one set; a cacophony. Dozens of creatures must’ve been just outside.

Deacon quickly looked around the cabin and spotted a half-bent metal rib jutting out from the wall. He grabbed it and started to yank. It finally tore off with a metallic groan. He held it up like a club. He moved Grace behind him. “Stay behind me,” he stammered. “And stay low.” She quickly scanned the interior of the plane and found another loose metal rib. She ripped it from its mooring and stood with Deacon side by side. “Forget it,” she said. “We fight together.”

A scant moment later, a thick tentacle shot inside the cabin and grasped deacon’s chosen weapon. He struggled to pull it back but the tendril was too strong. Deacon lost his grip and the metal girder was pulled outside.

Bang!

Bang!

The cabin pitched violently and both Grace and Deacon lost their balance.

“They’re too big, the damn things!” Deacon yelled. “They know they can’t fit through the door! They’re trying to roll us! Grab onto something.”

“Grab onto what?”

“Anything!”

Grace dropped her weapon and clutched one of the metal ribs still attached to the bulkhead, as did Deacon. The plane pitched again then turned over, commencing a roll down the mammoth embankment like an enormous pipe. It rolled over and over down the slope picking up speed as it went along. Veonissic demons screeched and howled outside, as they couldn't slow the metal behemoth to get at their prey. Inside, Grace and Deacon were pinned against metal and snow by centrifugal force. They both screamed as they experienced the weight of 4 Gs as the fuselage picked up speed.

The wreckage bounced across the canyon floor, shattering icy rock formations and obliterating snowy dunes in its path. It finally slammed into a rocky wall on the far side of the canyon collapsing boulders and icy debris onto the plane's hull with deafening finality. The wall had collapsed easily because it wasn't a natural part of the cavern at all. It had been made out of carved stone blocks but Grace and Deacon had no way of knowing this is what had happened. The plane's impact effectively knocked a hole into a second grotto and the pair was thrown from the wreckage when the hull ripped in half from the collision.

As Deacon had said, immortal bodies or not, it was still possible to feel pain and therefore, exhaustion. The pair of them lay still on the snow, thrown twenty-five feet from the wreckage.

Grace wasn't sure how much time had elapsed but finally she opened her eyes and found herself staring upward. It was quiet. Very quiet. The vastness was not lost on her. This cave was indeed much larger than the one previous. The roof was luminescent, sparkling as if she were looking into the heavens on a hot Louisiana night. She raised her head and checked herself for injuries. When she was certain she was relatively intact, she glanced around and spotted Deacon a dozen or so feet away. He was prone on his stomach with his face in the snow.

She staggered to her feet but quickly became dizzy. Collapsing down again she managed to steady herself and crawl over to him. She rocked his shoulder. “Deacon... Deacon, can you hear me?” With no movement or sound, Grace heaved him over onto his back. His face was caked with permafrost and his eyes were closed. His mouth was agape and packed with snow in a grotesque expression of death. Grace winced. “Deacon,” she repeated desperately. “Deacon. Talk to me. C'mon. You're already dead so you can't die on me.”

His eyes fluttered open and he spat out the snow from his mouth.

“Deacon!”

“Am I dead?” he said calmly. And then he laughed. Grace scowled at him and sat back in frustration. “What the hell is so funny?”

He looked at her. “No matter how hard I try, I just can’t seem to put myself out of my own misery.”

Even though she had decided not to trust him, she couldn’t help be pulled into his state of mind as he was expressive enough to carve a swath through her apprehension. She chuckled at the absurdity of it all. Chuckling evolved into giggling. A moment later, both of them were having a good old stress-relieving belly laugh.

When calmness finally settled and they managed to relax, Grace said, “So where the hell are we now?”

Deacon turned and looked through the murk. Something glinted in the distance. He focused. What he saw filled him with fear... and excitement. “Maybe we’re about to find God.”

“What?” Grace turned. From this moment on, they were in unknown territory. They stared dumbfounded at a snow-covered wall in the distance. Into the rock was carved an enormous, ornate entrance to a pillared mausoleum or religious structure. Fifty feet tall with angels and demons depicted fighting one another around a clear, arch-shaped portal that led into a dark interior. The shimmering cavern ceiling suddenly shone blue and cast the whole cave into a cold cerulean glow. A chilled wind howled from inside the portal and swept past Grace and Deacon tousling their hair. It was a dank breeze of death... possibly experienced for the first time since her arrival. It was a moist breeze. Ill with the stench of decay... or perhaps more accurately... evil.

“Is that a church?” Grace asked.

“It looks like one doesn’t it.”

Clicking.

It was coming from the plane wreck. The demonic creatures that had followed them into the abyss had been cut off by a massive wall of debris but had now started to break through. The noise instantly drew both of their attention. “Are you hurt?” Deacon asked.

“No, I think I’m okay.”

“Then let’s go. It won’t take the Veonissics long to figure out what happened to us.” Deacon raised himself and stumbled. He checked the injury on his leg. The gash was packed with snow. “I still am getting used to injuries suffered here,” he said. “What I should be doing is cleaning out the wound but the snow will help protect it until I can tend to it.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Like a bitch but I can walk. There are advantages to having no blood.”

Deacon helped Grace to her feet. She brushed off the snow and indicated the structure. “We going in?”

“Yes we are,” he replied. “Maybe we can find a way out of here.”

Click, click, click...

Grace stumbled. Now Deacon steadied *her*. “You sure you’re okay?”

She replied, "I'm fine. Let's go."

The two of them hurried as best as they could across the icy rocks toward the massive structure. As they approached, the portal grew larger. Grace was taken aback by the sheer size of the doorway. Despite the unsettling sensation of evil, Grace thought that if God were here, something like this would be the place he resided. Strange, she thought, of all the unexpected things she had encountered so far... this place seemed to fulfill every expectation she had of the entranceway to the Kingdom of God. That, in and of itself, seemed to be the strangest thing of all.

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Three identical sand-colored Cadillac Escalades tore through the dusty streets of Damascus and headed out into the desert. Abigail sensed the stone buildings and Bedouin onlookers as they passed.

And once again, Abigail found herself transported against her will in the lap of luxury. Sand, sitting next to her had donned a red turban and robes topped off with dark sunglasses. He traded his three-piece Armani suit for traditional layered robes. Abigail, sporting blackened sunglasses and a desert camouflaged head wrap and robes reached out with her hand and prodded Sand's face and turban. Sand scowled in surprise and looked at her. "What are you doing?" he asked sharply.

"Trying to understand why you got the turban and I only got a handkerchief."

"It's not a handkerchief. And you should be thankful I gave you camouflage."

"Why?" she asked. "Are we going on a raid?"

"I don't think so," he said, annoyed. "But if we do, you can be sure they won't see you."

Abigail nodded and returned her hand to her lap. "They won't have any trouble finding you. Perfect color for keeping incognito in the desert: red."

Sand looked at her directly. "How did you know I was wearing red?"

"I could feel the color of the dye. In some factions out here, red is considered offensive. Pompous. Wearing red, you're twice as likely to be picked off by a sniper... but a good choice for you," she said with biting sarcasm.

Sand huffed. "Ridiculous." He turned away from her and leaned toward one of his thugs on the other side and whispered to him, "Is that true?" The thug just looked at him blankly and shrugged his shoulders.

The Escalades ripped through the desert on a lonely two-lane road on their way to a small village on the outskirts of Qatana.

It wasn't long before they reached a region of desert known to local rebel factions as 'The Devil's Needle.' It was a narrow canyon prone to whirlwinds of sand and scorpion storms (thrown about by the powerful canyon winds). It was also known for frequent rebel traps.

The Escalades entered the deep and rocky canyon and drove slowly and cautiously. Had Abigail been able to see, she would've observed half the contingent in the car was carrying automatic firearms, ready at a moment's notice to defend their passage. Regardless, Abigail sensed the soldier's fear and apprehension as they clearly were observing the surrounding canyon walls like eagles.

Sand leaned over to Abigail and in hushed tones he said, "This is a very dangerous part of the journey but the only way to where we need to go. This passage is notorious for ambushes and kidnappings. Can you sense anything?"

"Oh yes," Abigail said, cryptically. "We are being watched right now. Many soldiers are about us. I can hear their voices. We are driving into a trap. On the North ridge right in front of us. We won't survive."

"My cars are bulletproof." Sand said. He turned to one of the armed men and spoke in quick Arabic. He told the soldier to watch the North ridge for movement. The soldier cocked his weapon and grunted an acknowledgement. "Bulletproofing might not be enough," Abigail commented, her gaze locked on the rocks outside.

The convoy of Escalades continued to drive on when the lead vehicle suddenly exploded in a scorching blossom of fire. The explosion was so violent, the Escalade lifted from the ground and flipped onto its roof. The other two Escalades slammed on their brakes, shifted into reverse and careened backwards to get out of the canyon. Inside the middle vehicle, Sand screamed, "*Rocket launcher! Rocket launcher! Back up, Back up, Back up!*" The driver was shouting back at him trying to steer the reversing car straight without swerving into the rocky walls or bouncing into the last vehicle.

Through the chaos, shouting and being pitched about, Abigail was concentrating on the rebels in the rocks. They were scrambling to reload their launcher and run back to catch the fleeing vehicles. "They're reloading their rocket launcher!" Abigail yelled.

Sand was perched on the edge of his seat shouting instructions at the driver. "Stop the car," Abigail said.

When no one acknowledged her, she said again, "Stop the car."

Again, she was being ignored.

Once again, "*Stop the car! Now!*"

Sand looked at her. She grabbed his arm and said, "Stop the car. Now. *Now! Now!*" Sand grasped the shoulder of the driver and yelled for him to stop the car. He did. The Escalade skidded to a halt. A rocket buzzed overhead and exploded a dozen feet behind them on the sandy ground just in front of the last car. Rocks and debris rained on the roof along with fiery shrapnel. Had their car continued its path a moment longer, it would've intercepted the rocket and suffered the same fate as the lead vehicle. The rear vehicle kept going; it wasn't going to stop for anything.

Instantly, a wind kicked up and stirred the sand of the canyon floor. A whirlwind. Its sudden ferociousness took the car's inhabitants by surprise and blinded the driver. The car behind them also had stopped. Abigail sat quietly and calmly.

"Keep moving!" Sand yelled.

“No,” Abigail said and patted his arm.

A soldier reached for the car door and was about to bolt under the cover of the storm but Abigail restrained his arm. “No,” she said simply. The soldier looked at her with fear and did as he was told. Thick sand squalls restricted all vision and the Escalades stood parked.

“Good!” Sand shouted. “At least they won’t be able to see us.”

One of the soldiers said, “But they can still take potshots at us!”

Abigail closed her eyes and shook her head. “Do not worry. We are safe here.” Something hit the window from outside. Something small and hard. But not enough to crack the glass.

Then another impact.

And another.

Like stones.

Next to Sand’s window was another impact. This time the object stuck to the glass briefly. It was a scorpion. The storm was lifting the creatures from the desert rocks and spinning them through the air. The rear Escalade’s inhabitants had unwisely scrambled outside under cover of the storm and now were suffering a horrible death by means of multiple scorpion bites. As were the rebels in the hills. All of them. Abigail and the other passengers heard the agonizing screams of men over the howl of the wind.

This carried on for some minutes. Everyone in the Escalades fell silent as the shrill screams of men echoed all about them. One man, clearly one of the rebel militants, slammed against the glass window next to Sand and started banging on the glass. He wanted to be let inside. Scorpions, three of them, clung to the rebel’s face and continually thrust their stingers into his cheeks and temples. Blood spewed from the wounds until the third scorpion rammed its stinger into his eye. The man fell away from the glass screaming.

Then...

As quickly as it had begun, the storm lifted.

The wind had extinguished the flames of the lead vehicle and revealed dozens of bodies strewn everywhere. All dead. Thousands of scorpions crawled off bloodied corpses and returned to their hiding places.

All was quiet.

Not a living soul left... save the middle vehicle. And inside, everyone was silent and frightened. All but Abigail who was smiling.

“What happened?” Sand asked timidly.

The driver turned to face them. He stammered, “The Devil’s Needle. It is the Devil’s Needle.”

Abigail casually unwrapped a small black onyx statue from her robe and handed it to Sand. He took it and regarded it carefully.

“Moniades,” Sand whispered. “Did you take it from Abbudin?”

“No. It found me,” she said. “Just like it found him. Now you’ll find that he is dead as well. The same fate that waited for those in the storm.”

“I don’t understand,” Sand said.

“You don’t see the eyes of the demon,” she said, “until you let him in to your home. Now. It’s time to find your village. Help me into my wheelchair. From here we follow the canyon on foot.”

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Coming Soon:
EPISODE SIX:
DEACON’S SECRET