

## 1 – Alex – Ynys Môn, Wales

Midday light shone pale overhead, so unlike her brilliant Egyptian sun. Alex gazed at a rocky coast more barren than any she'd seen. A fitting land for exile.

Her boat's cedar hull scraped shore and jolted to a halt. She grasped the rail as a gust of salt spray stung her cheek like nettle leaves and when she spoke to her captain her voice sounded braver than she felt. "Great thanks, Chigaru. You have brought me safe to Wales." She counted three more boats preparing to land. "And my books, every scroll, tablet, and codex."

The dark-skinned Egyptian swung himself over the side. Boots ankle-deep in soggy sand, he reached out. "My lady, may I assist you? The crossing has been rough."

"No rougher than for those who came before bringing shipments of my library." Pulling her robes close, she jumped. Her feet touched. Her sea-weakened legs folded. Her feigned bravery crumpled.

Chigaru lifted her and carried her to an outcropping and set her cold feet on colder stone. "Why here, Royal One? To this brutish country?"

She began to massage life back into her legs. "Anglesey Isle is the site of great learning. Under these dark Welsh rocks lie libraries of unmatched literature and history. Tis a safe place for our treasure." Until Egypt once again was safe, here she would labor at what she knew best, caring for her books.

Already she missed Egypt. And her beloved sister. When oracles predicted her library would be burned, Alex began by stealth to pack and send books off across the sea. She'd kept her actions secret from her sister, Queen of the Nile, who collected titles like she collected necklaces. The last time she'd seen her twin, the great Cleopatra had sat, regal in a gold-edged tunic, grasping her crooked scepter. Cocky, controlling Cleo was tactless and temperamental—qualities which served her well as Pharaoh. Different as she was from her sister, Alex believed their love and loyalty once chosen would never waver. Yet, often Cleo chose unwisely.

Alex failed to convince Cleo that the true histories of all peoples must not fall into Roman hands. Those greedy ones would burn her Alexandrian Library and only tell their story of conquest and empire. Fearing Cleo's bedchamber talk with her current Roman, Alex secretly left Egypt while her sweet sister was off waging war.

If only she didn't miss her sister so. As the sea widened between them, her life force diminished as if shrunken by the salt air.

High above, a shriek and slap of wings caused her to crouch and cover her head with her hands. A blood-red body bore down, swooping from the sky so close she could see the lashes framing one gimlet eye. Before its segmented body lifted back into the sky she noted the leathery wings, clawed feet, and snake tail. She'd read about the magnificent red dragons of the Welsh in *Nennius's Historia Brittonum*, but never thought she'd see an ancient one herself. A good omen.

As she watched the creature soar away over ocean waves, a harsh cry pierced the air behind her. Alex spun around. Chigaru drew his sword. From behind a boulder a

human-bodied creature sprang, guttural noises spouting from an outraged mouth. Waist-length yellow-red hair blew back, revealing a fierce female face. The blue fabric of the attacker's cape matched her blazing cerulean eyes and the blue of her face. Not a good omen.

Imagining how she believed the great Cleo would behave upon arriving on foreign soil, Alex swallowed her fear and stepped around Chigaru and greeted the harpy as she would a slave who'd wandered into her library mistaking it for a fish merchant's stall. "Hail, gentle Druid. I am Alexandria of Egypt, sister to Queen Cleopatra."

The wild one did not respond.

Alex raised her chin higher. "I am Librarian of the great Library of Alexandria. I bring our books to your leader." Receiving no response, Alex assumed this blue-faced being lacked power of human speech. She spoke slowly, using hand gestures. "I come from across the water. I travel far to your island from..." Her hands formed the shape of a pyramid.

Chigaru whispered, "Waste not your words. This island wench cannot understand. I will climb the cliff and search for civilized citizens."

Fast as the wind, the wild woman bounded into his path and grabbed his sword arm. Twisting the arm behind his back, she bent him until his eyes looked up into cool skies and his sword stabbed the ground. He gulped as her dagger teased the skin below his helmet strap.

"My captain means no harm." Alex's voice, calm and low, disguised her terror. This land was far more dangerous than her correspondence foretold.

The blue-faced woman screamed, "Awaah!" and released Chigaru.

Alex raised her arm in greeting. "I come to see the Ovate, Gwynne of Anglesey. Your Librarian." She longed once again to be in the presence of gentle literate librarians.

The woman raised her blue-tinted chin, revealing a torc of twisted gold circling her neck like a noose. Her mouth curved into a patronizing smile. "I am Gwynne of Anglesey," the six-foot-tall banshee said in perfect Greek. "And these are my librarians." She indicated four ferocious blue-faced women who stepped from behind the rocks.

Alex choked back her fear. "You seem too warlike to be scholarly librarians."

The woman, too old to be a girl and too young to be called crone, leaned back and her laughter echoed against the rocks. The librarians jumped forward, cloaks billowing, weapons raised, to flank their leader.

Until this day Alex had worried that the Druid librarians of Wales might not be strong enough to protect their island and her treasure from advancing Romans. She now believed those fears unfounded. Alex waited, mocked by this barbarian librarian, with whom she'd corresponded as she'd prepared to transport her precious library to a safe location. Now she feared these Welsh were as twisted as the fiends she fled.

Alex watched Gwynne order Alex's men to offload the cargo, then turn back to Alex. "Come with me!"

Alex followed, up crude steps cut into rough rock, forcing her sea legs to keep pace with the Druid's long stride.

Once over the hill, Gwynne ushered Alex into a rustic banquet hall. Tantalizing smells drew her toward oak-planked tables heavy with iron plates piled with roasted

goat. Servants carried in steaming bowls of oat porridge and flagons of wine from honey. Though Alex prided herself on a plain lifestyle compared to her flamboyant twin, this was peasant fare. Still, after their voyage it was a sumptuous banquet.

During the journey around the Iberian lands and north along the coast of Britain and Wales her captain avoided ports, fearful the Egyptian royal ships would be recognized. Food had little importance on board and Alex spent the first half of the journey sick in her cramped quarters and the second half scanning the sky for sight of land.

When Alex and her crew had eaten, Gwynne reappeared wearing a navy velvet gown embroidered with mystic symbols. A brooch held fast a blue cape. Red hair, now neatly braided and crowned with a golden coronet, she looked more queen and less barbarian.

Gwynne escorted her royal guest to a round thatched hut. It was no palace, but the bed was thick with sweet grass. And did not rock.

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Later, before the sun slipped into the sea, Alex walked the beach, imagining the sand beneath her feet that of her own vast desert, not this cramped strip between craggy shore and foamy salt water. From a rocky outcropping above the harbor she watched the last of her boats, now light in the water, sail away. She closed her eyes, imagining the azure blue of her inland sea.

Hearing voices, her eyes flashed open and she looked toward the dock. A couple sat together. The man's head of iron-red curls leaned close to the woman. The woman wore no tunic or shawl over her bare shoulders. The breeze swirled her silver tresses over the man's brawny arm. The woman sang a melodious song, in a foreign tongue, sweet, sorrowful, and full of longing. Their legs dangled toward the water, his strong and muscled, hers—no legs—but a graceful piscine tail.

Embarrassed to have observed their intimate moment, Alex retreated up the cooling rocks toward the evening entertainments.

Slipping into an attentive crowd, Alex watched a theatrical performance and though she understood few Welsh words, enjoyed the play. As the mood became more lively, a skilled dancer twirled and sang with broad wild gestures. Another wore the mask and headdress of an animal, not unlike the masks Egyptian priests wore to mimic their gods.

The performances seemed a primitive diversion. Yet even educated Greeks loved drama and reveled in humorous oration. Too tired to stay, Alex wandered away as others, including the red-haired man who had been with the mer-woman, gathered around a fairy ring to watch little people ride on tiny greyhounds.

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The next morning, after a breakfast of dry biscuit and goat milk, Gwynne insisted Alex follow her up a grassy slope. Alex pulled her shawl close, for this weak northern sun did not warm her.

Gwynne pointed to a village of thatched round houses, long buildings, and three amphitheatres. "Much is for show. Our real work is below ground on the other side of the wooded mountain. Yet this scholarly façade provides pretext for foreign visitors and frequent sea traffic."

Alex saw a circle where men in Greek-style robes sat on benches listening to the rugged red-haired man she'd watched the night before. "Who is that?" she asked in a tone she hoped sounded only mildly curious.

"My little brother." Gwynne's voice softened. "Dylan's lecturing on sea channels to the New World. He has mapped the northern coast. Fancies himself quite the explorer."

The man stood, waved, and approached. Alex saw he was even taller than his sister and his muscular physique outstripped that of the largest of Cleo's guards. The Druid's blue eyes flashed and Alex quickly pulled her gaze from his full mouth and strong chin.

Dylan pushed back his unruly hair and bowed. "So, the famous Librarian of Alexandria."

The Druid queen's brother's bow seemed to mock her more than show respect. Alex nodded, affecting her best pharaoh's daughter demeanor. "Alexandria of Alexandria."

The tall man nodded. "Welcome, Alexandria of Alexandria." Then flicked off what appeared to be a fish scale stuck to his woolen tunic and added, "What will you do now that you've delivered your books to our little island?"

Alex nodded to Gwynne. "Whatever furthers our mutual goals." Who was this impudent sailor to even ask such a question?

Gwynne smiled. "Alex will be a great asset in cataloging the Greek and Egyptian tomes in my backlog."

"I'm sure." Dylan bowed again. "Excuse me now, my students await." With a wink to Alex added, "Find me when you become bored."

Alex watched him stride away in the manner of a voyager off to set sail for new great adventure. She'd had her adventure. It was time to settle down to work.

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### **An excerpt from "[The Pharaoh and the Librarian](#)" by Amber Polo.**

What if Cleopatra faked her death and escaped on a pirate ship? While her sister sailed for Wales with the most valuable ancient books from her Library of Alexandria? And they both landed in an imagined new world filled with crypto-creatures and historical humans?

Trekking the desert of 1<sup>st</sup> century New Mexico, Cleo from the Yucatan and Alex from Nova Scotia, they'd need bravery and help from friends and lovers to evade inner demons and determined villains across an uncharted wilderness filled with crypto-creatures and historical humans.

Amber Polo, constantly asking "What if...?" has a hard time writing in one genre at a time. Best known for *The Shapeshifters' Library* series which asked what if librarian dog-shifters faced book-burning werewolves, she shares her love of libraries and fascination with creatures and places, real and not-so-real in [The Pharaoh and the Librarian](#). [www.amberpolo.com](http://www.amberpolo.com)