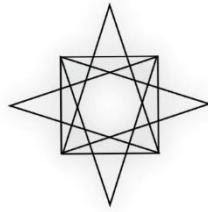


EMBER OF ETERNITY



AIDEN'S SONG

By
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Any likeness of characters is purely coincidental, unless otherwise noted by the Author. All events are strictly fictional and made up. If you have experienced any event in this story, it is purely coincidental, and you should seek medical attention immediately.

To my friends and family,
You held me at my darkest and stood near me by my brightest.

Thank you

AIDEN'S SONG

ACT 1

THE NIGHTMARE,

THE REVELATION

“...Such a handsome little Spirit... So full of love and compassion... But when I look into his eyes, I see a soul filled with suffering. What is your secret, my little Spirit? What burden do you carry that you refuse to tell me?”

FROM THE PERSONAL DIARY OF MAIDEN GWENAVINE

MISTER JINGLES

In the small Texas town of Florence, little Devon McNeil hid under the huge bush of tomatoes in his grandma's garden. His fingers were crossed over his mouth as he tried not to giggle. He looked at the furry legs of Mr. Jingles and kept an eye out for his brother, Donny.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Donny shouted; Devon let out a muffled giggle between his fingers.

"Shhh," Mr. Jingles rasped. "He's coming!"

Little Devon stuck his hands back on his mouth as he saw his older brother's feet run straight toward him. Donny sighed as he put his hands on his hips.

"I wonder where he could be, Mr. Jingles."

"I don't know! Not here! If that's what you're saying."

Mr. Jingles shifted his cat-like feet and scratched at a burn on his coal black elbow.

"I hope not, because that's the same spot he's picked every time we play," Donny said.

Little Devon let out a groan and laid his head on the dirt. "Not every time, Donny," Devon complained.

Donny sighed as he rolled his head up to the clear sky. "Get up, D, you're it this time."

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Devon got up and patted the dirt from his clothes, avoiding his brother's blue-eyed glare. He was rarely happy to play with Devon anymore—their mom said Donny was growing up and someday Devon wouldn't want to play hide and seek either. He couldn't imagine himself not wanting to play such a fun game.

"Come on, come find me," Donny said as he ran off, "Count down from 50," he added.

Devon looked at Mr. Jingles, who shrugged as he scratched at a pocket of skin on his hip.

"I don't want to play anymore," Devon grumbled.

"How about one more game?" The raspy Mr. Jingles smiled with wide lips and picked out chunks of skin from his thick black nails.

Devon let out an exhausted groan, and then looked over at the white gazebo stuck in the middle of his grandparents' large backyard. The adults sat and talked about nothing every time they came to visit. At least Devon got to spend time with Mr. Jingles- nothing was ever boring with him around.

His grandpa looked at them both while he whispered in Jasmine's ear, She was a year younger than him, but she always acted like an adult. She didn't play games and wasn't interested in playing with Mr. Jingles. Come to think of it, she hardly seemed to notice him.

His dad and Grandma were talking, they seemed unhappy with each other, something Devon wanted to avoid. They didn't scream at each other like they did last weekend, but the hushed tones and finger wagging was all the proof he needed. His mom and Grandpa both started whispering to each other as the other two began getting louder.

That was definitely an area to avoid now.

Devon smiled a broad smile when he thought of what he and Mr. Jingles could do while the adults were busy, and Donny was hiding.

"Let's make fire!" He spun and looked at his friend unable to control his excitement.

"Oh no, Little Poet, that was only once, remember? We will play like that more one day, but not now." Mr. Jingles nervously looked back to the adults with his ember red eyes.

"Please, Mr. Jingles?" Devon put on his best pout. Looking down at Mr. Jingles made it hard, but the look on his friend's face told Devon it was working.

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Mr. Jingles scratched at the tuft of hair between his horns. His eyes darted back to the adults again, then to the direction where Donny ran. "Follow me," Mr. Jingles said.

Devon jumped up and down in pure glee as a cheeky grin spread across his face. Mr. Jingles smiled his sharp toothed grin, then, began to run between the white shingled house and his grandpa's pride and joy, the classic Chevrolet Malibu, in the stone driveway, Devon close behind.

Devon couldn't contain his laughter as he met Mr. Jingles under the large old willow tree in the front yard and plopped himself in front of his friend. Mr. Jingles crossed his legs and sat down, a thin tendril of smoke leaving his lips as his bottom hit the soft grass, he took a deep breath in and spoke, "Remember, no one can know just yet. Your Grandma would kill me."

"Grandma won't kill you," Devon laughed at the ridiculousness of the statement, "she loves you!" Devon adjusted himself, left ankle under the right knee, right ankle under left knee just like Mr. Jingles had shown him.

Mr. Jingles showed his fangs in a smile, his leathery tail flicked as he sat in front of Devon. "Trust me, Little Poet, I've known her since she was as old as you. She will kill me."

Little Devon let out a groan, "ok-ok, our secret," he promised.

Mr. Jingles nodded and adjusted himself closer to Devon. "Close your eyes, Little Poet." Devon did so. "Imagine yourself reaching out into me." Devon saw Mr. Jingles behind his closed eyes and began to reach out to him with his imagination.

"Good, do you remember what comes next?"

Little Devon opened his palm between them. "I put a tiny piece of you through my chalk-rah," he said.

"Chakra," Mr. Jingles corrected, "And yes, in one hand and into your center--"

"My core..." Devon continued; he could feel the excitement in Mr. Jingles.

"You're such a fast learner," Mr. Jingles complimented. Little Devon smiled smugly. He was supposed to be in fifth grade, but they were about to put him in sixth, so little Devon knew how smart he was—he just made sure not to brag. His dad always told him to be modest, so he tried his best.

Focus, Little Poet.

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Devon began to feel a little tingle enter his hand and slowly slide up his arm and into his chest. It stung a little the last time he and Mr. Jingles made fire, but the outcome was worth it.

"Now you take over," Mr. Jingles encouraged. "Remember, slowly out the other hand and into your palm." Devon nodded and let the sting slide past his chest... into his hand... into his palm. "Now, open your eyes." Devon opened his blue-green eyes and smiled at the matchstick flame in his palm. "You're a very special boy, my Little Poet," Mr. Jingles said.

"One day you will become a very important man. You are a-"

"What's going on?" The voice of Donny made them both jump. Devon gasped and the tingle in his body began to multiply. His insides began to burn as he let out a scream. When he blinked, millions of faces appeared screaming in agony, distorted in pain and filled with suffering.

The flame in his palm grew tenfold. Little Devon pushed it out and a ball of fire roared to his brother. It hit Donny's arm and he began to scream, flailing his arm around.

"Donny!" Mr. Jingles shouted. "Shit!" Mr. Jingles jolted up and sucked the fire into him. He reached out to Donny, who screamed, tears in his eyes. He held on to a bright red burn on his arm. Half of his shirt had been burned away by the flame.

"Get away!" Donny screamed as he tumbled over into the deep green grass.

"It was an accident, Donny, I'm sorry!" Devon cried.

Mr. Jingles raised his small, clawed hands at him. "It's ok, you're ok." Mr. Jingles inched closer to him, but Donny recoiled.

"Monster!" Donny shouted as he raised himself up, bloodshot eyes darting between Mr. Jingles and his blistered arm. "Monster!" He cried as he took hastened steps backwards, he looked at Little Devon, chin quivering his back hit the wall. "Grandma!" He broke free from the corner of the house and disappeared to the other side.

"Shit, shit, stupid..." Mr. Jingles started muttering incoherent words. His ears tucked behind his horns, and he rubbed his face, eyes wide and face in a deep frown. "Devon." Mr. Jingles quickly moved to the near forgotten boy still sitting under the willow. Devon breathed heavily, his fingers tingling and his vision becoming blurry. Mr. Jingles hunched over Devon and did his best to soothe him, "It's ok, you'll be ok. Calm down-"

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“Jingles!” Devon’s grandmother shouted. Mr. Jingles grabbed his large ears and tucked himself in a little ball. The old woman marched her way to the two with her fists balled tight and scowl across her face.

“I’m sorry, my Moonbeam, Little Poet-”

His grandma grabbed Devon up into her arms. “Go away,” she growled, wiping her cheeks.

“My Moonbeam!” Mr. Jingles pleaded, hands tightly gripping his ears.

“Leave now, Jingles!” She marched herself and Devon past the house. Devon looked over his grandma’s shoulder at Mr. Jingles, who followed behind them.

“I was just...”

She spun around. “I will kill you if you ever come near me or my family again,” she spat.

“Gwen, please, let me speak!” Mr. Jingle’s tears singed the grass as he walked, slowly and carefully closer to her.

“I know!” She huffed, Mr. Jingles recoiled. “You have to leave Mr. Jingles,” She choked out those words like it was her last, “Leave or I will end you.”

Mr. Jingles let out a cry just before he vanished in a plume of smoke.

Little Devon began to sob. His body was numb, and he tried to talk but the words couldn’t leave his mouth.

“It’s ok,” his grandma cooed. “You’ll never have to worry about him again,” she said as she made her way into the house and sat him down on the dining room table.

The sink was beginning to overflow, his grandpa, leaning over it, flipped the faucet off and grunted. The old man’s fist slammed against the hard tile countertop, Donny and Devon both jumped as he slapped his fist down again. “Katherine.” Little Devon’s grandmother said as she rested his head in her palms, stroking his cheeks with her fingertips.

“What happened?” Little Devon’s mother appeared from the kitchen door with Jasmine in her arms, Donny went to stand, but something forced him back down into his chair, “Gwen?” Their mother hissed as the old woman still cooed little Devon in her palms.

Devon’s mothers mouth dropped, “Can someone please answer me?” she took a step closer and as quickly as Devon had ever seen his grandfather move, he stopped his mother with one hand and a stern expression. His mother’s dark eyes slowly began to reveal the whites and

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her jaw dropped sighing, huffing in silence, as the old man whispered something in her ear.

Devon began to feel his throat tighten, he tried to speak but his grandmother hushed him with a quiet whisper.

“My precious little knight, soon everything will be better, I promise.” She put her fingers on his forehead.

Her brown eyes turned silver, something little Devon found comfort in all his life, it showed how beautiful and amazing she and the world was. A tingle rolled out of her fingers and into his head coating his mind like itchy wool, she hummed to him as his eyes were forced closed- still awake but in a dizzying state that caused him to hum with her. A name came to mind, but that soon passed, another home where he felt the safest... gently faded away into the nothingness behind his eyes, names... places... a face of a friend he had known forever... gone, just as the quiet hum ended.

...

They both let out a heavy breath, Devon wiped his cheek and looked at the wetness in his hand. She let go, eyes swirling to what could have been a silver, Devon convinced himself he was just seeing things as he shook his head and rubbed his fingers through his hair.

His dad was talking to Donny as he put ice on a burn Devon didn't remember him getting. There were quiet murmurs as all eyes peered at him. Devon met those eyes as curious as they were as to what just happened and trying very hard to remember... something. He looked at the burn on Donny's arm, then at his grandma.

“What happened to Donny?”

His mother's free hand went to her lips as she let out a sigh, eyes beginning to swell as Jasmine dug her head in her shoulder, his grandpa dug his head in his arms as he leaned on the countertop, not saying a word- not even moving, his father lowered his head and grabbed the back of Donny's neck as little Devon saw his brothers face twist in a panicked shock.

His grandma held on to his face, hands quivering as tears fell from her worn face, she didn't speak, no one did. She rested her forehead on his and closed her eyes, taking him in and holding him tighter than he had ever been held before, “I hope someday you'll forgive me,” she whispered as she kissed his cheek.

CHAPTER 1:

NIGHTMARE IN THE STORM

The first spring rain was no normal storm. The wind threatened to tear the streets of Austin apart, lightning split the starless night, overcasting the deep glow of streetlamps under darkened skyscrapers. The taps of heavy rain on concrete were silenced by the rolling thunder that shook the air. This is a storm that has promised no end, a reminder of what chaos nature can bring.

Even with the unyielding downpour, this storm was welcome, a chance to wash away the last winter freeze and begin the brief spring that will turn into months of barley tolerable heat. The night brought this storm with a purpose, as the streets became flooded and the air began to thin, the veil of the strange weakened, and allowed all that is fables and myth to be felt, and possibly seen.

If you were intuitive enough, *if* the shroud that covered your eyes for so long began to lift.

Devon McNeal, now, barely twenty-one, felt the chill he always felt shiver down his spine when the veil of the realms thinned during intense storms, he didn't know this, of course. But this storm was different, causing a dull headache to form between his eyes and his skin itch and body ached.

He rested his back on a tough but comfortable lounge in his parents' office, reading a boring little novel that he found on a bookshelf covered in

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dust. Tired, blue-green eyes wandered off the pages every so often to look at the shadows dancing to the lightning. After a long hard day of work all he wanted was to head home and go straight to bed, but he was trapped halfway between his work and his home, waiting for the storm to subside and the roads become drivable again.

His mother insisted, with a stream of text messages, for him to stay the night when he got off. They lived closer, and where the chance of floods was less frequent. At first, he thought it was unnecessary, until he left his mundane job to find every main road blocked off. To his disdain, he was greeted with a dark house with his father's snoring matching the storm's ferocity as he walked in drenched and cold.

It was past 3 AM but he refused to sleep. He knew the second his eyes would shut- the storm would finally let up and the roads would be open. That would be just his luck, as it always had been. The second he blinked, he would miss something he needed. He refused for tonight to be one of those many missed opportunities. The storm will be beat and there was nothing that could stop that.

He gritted his teeth as he turned the page, in doing so, he tore a nick in the paper. *It's not that bad*, he thought after he hissed. This book was nothing like the Epic Fantasies he was used to, the Dragons and Warlords fighting to save the world was replaced by a man fighting to save his family from his own mistakes. He missed a lot of detail that he was used to as well, the author left just a little too much for his imagination to fill, and the headache was making that task slightly harder than normal.

As he trudged through the last chapter, he saw the unavoidable ending that left his mind to wonder. The lead put a gun to his head and his final words to his wife 'I love you Darla', were the last words on the page.

A cheap ending, death. It always made him feel unappreciated as a reader, He liked things tied up as neatly as they could. Without the final goodbyes, this type of ending was not his style. Not what he wanted, but it was an ending.

Everyone's ending.

In the past twenty-one years of his life he has seen the deaths of his grandfather, his grandmother and Max, his Golden Retriever he recently had to put down. He was lucky to see them all go from old age, and he knew and understood that. Devon wouldn't know how he would react if it was any other way.

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He watched as his grandfather pass, it was a slow and painful death with spasms of the body as it slowly shut down. Finally, he took his last breath on an early spring morning just as the sun rose. It was only a year ago, almost to the day. Devon didn't sleep for days after that and still had trouble sleeping, he knew the reasoning, as silly as it may be but still fought the fear that his eyes would never open.

Devon threw the book down and stood up, stretching, and popping his body, being careful to not let out a groan that would wake the house. With a dizzying sigh he sat back down and rubbed his face, mind still deep in thought as he rubbed his face.

Devon could still smell the hospital. Overly bleached linens and white polished rooms with a faint smell of death in his nostrils. The wretched smell left his stomach knotted up and a sour taste in his mouth. He could faintly hear the beeps of life as they faded away to silence. He could feel the dredge of the hospital as people waited to die.

His grandfather was a good man, a great man. A man that Devon spent many years on his lap listening to stories of knights and monsters, tickling him as the plot finally reached its conclusion. In those stories, the hero always won, ran away with a beautiful Maiden to live happily and peacefully. Of course, Devon was much younger but he remembered them and wanted those moments back as he heard the final sigh escape his grandfather's lips.

His grandmother was much the same way. A few months after her husband passed, so did she. On her last days, Devon stayed outside the room. Refusing to go in, he stubbornly crouched on the white linoleum floor, head buried between his knees. He knew when his brother touched his shoulder, her life was over. His eyes stained with red said it all. Devon didn't remember crying, only stuffing his face back into his knees.

Her final words to him, in her senile daze, echoed in his head above all other memories. "Remember to watch Mr. Jingles for me, Devon." It was a few days before her final breath, her gown outlining a thin husk of a body, eyes wide but so very distant, her soft aged voice and paper-thin smile made him shiver. He did his best to smile at her even though he knew she never had any pets named Mr. Jingles.

His father said Mr. Jingles was an imaginary friend she had since childhood and left it only at that. Even after Devon pushed for more answers, there was no more to give. The center of his brain stung when he

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thought of that name, such a strange name for a pet, if it even existed and not some old senile woman's hallucination.

There was no denying it, she was a weird one, but she was still his grandmother, a happy, loving woman who would make every problem disappear with her gentle smile and soft kiss on the cheek.

He rubbed his eyes, the forming lump in his throat and shaky hands made him remember to take his allergy medicine. *Too bad you're stuck here.* He reminded himself, sniffing to make sure it was just the allergies, nothing more than that.

He was very good at avoiding things that could send him into another panic attack that he used to have far too frequently in the past, until he learned to shut out the unnecessary stress. The deaths of his loved ones that happened almost all at once, led him to struggle with the peace he achieved so long ago. True, some may find him boring or mundane, and others would say he was just burying his emotions, his roommate Gael would consistently remind him of this. She had a knack of digging into business that wasn't any concern of hers.

When the day was done, he was happy with the unexciting life he dug in to and came to terms that it's not in him to achieve great things. He was convinced it was in his blood to be another average man. Stress, the very thing he avoided, was something he knew he couldn't handle. So, he never did anything to cause it. He wanted to see the world and perhaps maybe someday fall in love. The world was full of war and hatred, greed and overall evil. And love, love never came so he never searched.

The lightning struck, casting light in the open bay window before him. The family cat Missy meowed as she pranced away from the window, leaving her perch and strutting past him with a jingle of her bell and a nervous flicker of her tail. He rubbed his nose at her. She knew better than to get too close to him, it's not that he didn't like cats, just his allergies didn't. She was mostly his brothers anyway.

He looked out the window for a moment and feeling a cool chill down his spine; he rose back to his feet and turned away. Behind him in a chest-high glass cabinet held the ashes of Max. His eyes skimmed over the wooden box and he remembered the tug he felt as the needle left Max. He'd felt incomplete ever since. The void in his heart where Max belonged would never be filled again. He shoved down that twist in his belly and shunted his mind from the thought of death. He stopped his mind from

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slipping into his failures and procrastinations, one of the lower tiers of his downward spiral into his panic. Instead he focused more on his task at hand, staying awake. He rubbed his temples and centered his thoughts. *Stay awake, beat the storm! Come home and get some sleep in your own bed.*

He looked at the clock, half past 4. He groaned when another crack of thunder shook the house urging him to give up, *Bullshit*, he thought as he made his way to the living room, a large open room that flowed directly to the kitchen. The walls and floor was a perfect eggshell white, the floor being a cold marble. It made him feel uneasy, as if he was in some modern homes magazine.

The house was decorated in a minimalist fashion. Most of the furniture was bought at second hand thrift stores then refurbished by his father. Since his father's retirement that was all he did, collecting a garage full of soon-to-be refurbished antiques and secondhand fixes. His father would buy whatever he could, make it his own, and pawn it off to his children. Devon plopped down on the rock hard tan couch, grabbed the remote from the glass table, and began flipping through stations. To no surprise, all the massive screen showed was infomercials. He found one that wasn't too horrible and grabbed onto one of the flowery decorative pillows and clutched onto it, heavy eyelids taunting his stubbornness. *You got this, D!* He thought to himself, *Its gonna pass, and when it does you'll be asleep in no time.*

His eyes wandered to the window, and he felt a chill down his spine as the bright blue lightning illuminated the backyard. A shadow perched on top of the tool shed, the air left his lungs and he felt as if the thunder rolled into his bones.

It vanished at the next strike.

"You're just tired," he said to himself after the shadow faded from his eyes. The first words he said since he got to his parents' house echoed in his ears, reminding him that he was alone, his parents' sound asleep.

He put his mind to the infomercial, a kitchen knife that could saw wood, *What was that?* He thought as he kept his eyes fixed on the flat screen.

A boom of thunder rolled across the house, and a flash of light broke the darkness of the night, and Devon's eyes stayed focused on the knife.

His body shivered at the next strike, his breathe left his body and his eyes did not move, but he *Felt* something at his side, lurking into his body

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as the thunderclap lingered in the air a shivering breathe longer than it should have. *You're tired, D. Everyone gets a little paranoid when they're tired. Nothing is watching you...*

Another crack of lightning and a jingle of a bell and his eyes shifted ever so slightly to the Coffee table.

He wanted to scream, the weight in his chest kept him silent. He thought of running but he felt like a statue, stuck, gripping a decorative pillow mouth open and eyes unblinking. Cold sweat poured over him as he saw the shadow that stood above the toolshed moments ago in all its horror. Its razor-sharp grin, its long scythe horns, the dark pockets of scared and burnt black flesh, hell lit eyes that peered into him as Devon fought to try and think.

Its mouth widened as it rose on cat like legs, its mouth worked as if speaking, but Devon could only hear a ringing in his ears as he panted for air. It pointed a black talon finger at him. Devon made a sound and it tilted its head, pointed ears slightly drooped. Another sound bellowed from Devon and the smile vanished from its grotesque lips.

It was gone at the next flash of light. Devon rose to his feet, gasping at the tendrils of smoke left behind. "Just tired," he said louder than the rumble that shook the house. "Just tired..." He dared not look again. Instead he found himself in the hallway bathroom washing his face with the door securely closed. He looked into his blue eyes, examining his paled face, water matted up in his thick brown goatee. "Just tired," he said again, unclenching his tight jaw. "You are just-" he heard a rattle from a cat's bell. His shoulders tightened.

"Missy?" Devon didn't take his eyes off himself for a minute. "I am not Missy," A rough amused sound came behind him. He looked in the mirror with wide eyes; he fought every inch in him to turn around. Sitting on the curtain rail he could make out a wagging leathery tail and cat paws as black as the shadow. Coldness enveloped him. "What the F-"

Devon shot up with a shake, the book on his chest falling to the ground. The morning sun was beaming in from the bay windows in the study. "Morning D," His mother's voice had the perkiness it always had. He groaned and rubbed his exhausted face. "Your father made breakfast if you're hungry, do you work tonight? How're the roommates? You know... Gael and what's his name? You know it! Her boyfriend..." Devon rubbed

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his eyes, that dream seemed too real, *was it even a dream?* “His name is Keagan, Mom.” His voice sounded groggy in his own ears.

His blurry eyes noticed Missy at the window, perched like the Imp, looking at him in a deep heavy purr as she cleaned her paws. “It was a dream,” He assured himself as he sat up from the lounger. A sharp pain came over his shoulder, and he worked on it rolling his shoulder until a sharp pop relieved the tension with a sting, as is his morning routine since shortly after he shattered it in a tree climbing accident many years ago.

“Tell me about it after you eat,” His mother said, He didn’t realize he’d spoken out loud. His mother, short and thin with grey hair and a young face for a woman in her later 50’s smiled at him as she sipped her coffee, “its bad luck.” She was always superstitious and loved hearing about dreams, being a therapist’s son left him telling her all about his dreams growing up, and she dissecting them like he was one of her patients. According to his mother his subconscious was always trying to tell him something, and it was always something he needed to work on. He did, for the most part, but sometimes grudgingly.

She walked out of the room and Devon was left standing there looking at Missy, locking eye to eye. He could’ve sworn he finished that book! He picked it up and hurried to the last page, there as he expected it ended just as he read earlier that morning.

“Take a shower!” His mother shouted down the hall. “You reek!” Devon rolled his eyes. He would of course silently comply. *More time wasted away from home.*

He went into the bathroom and hopped in the shower, cleansing himself of the stink from the night before and the final imprints of the nightmare, which was left seeded in the back of his mind along with a lingering smell that seemed to follow him, the smell of burnt flesh.

He looked in the mirror to check to see if everything was aligned, deep circles under his eyes hidden behind dark blond hair that always managed to be unkempt. *Good enough.* He got dressed in the sweat-smelling clothes he wore the night before and made his way to the delicious aroma that filled the house.

His father, a man who was aged beyond his years, was drowsily making breakfast as Devon went to sit down at the table. His face was wrinkled and his skin started to look thin but the man was handsome for his

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age, Devon would give him that. The dark rim of hair around his head held little grey that his short snow white beard made up for.

His father made a plate and put it in front of Devon with a broad smile. The McNeil standard breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage. Devon picked at the sausage and ate the toast, avoiding the eggs with his fork. "Donny is working on The Capitol building now, doing construction," his father mumbled between his food, "He is doing really well. The job seems perfect for him. Have you had any luck looking for a job in journalism?" His father said, swallowing his food with a gulp. Devon didn't tell them he stopped looking months ago. He shook his head in response, his father stabbed a link of sausage and shoved it in his mouth, "What about school? You going back?" He asked with his mouth full.

This was a whisper of a conversation they had months ago when he dropped out of college. His father was too stubborn to let him explain that he couldn't afford to finish college. He really couldn't, between rent and his astounding car payment, he was barely scraping by for food, often times scrounging his parents fridge for scraps. He shook his head again, leaving the breakfast table silent and his mother grabbing Devon's hand in assurance as they sat.

They ate silently.

Devon got up to leave and his mother shortly followed behind him, giving him a warm hug and kiss, "Don't let him bother you, sweetie, you know he only wants the best." Devon groaned as he opened the door. "Don't forget to tell me about the dream! Be safe, WE love you." The words trailed off as Devon closed the door and made his way to his silver Jeep Cherokee that, despite all the miles he put on it, it still managed to hold itself well.

As Devon drove home he couldn't stop the shiver down his spine. He felt eyes prodding into him, examining every inch of his being. Those eyes were accompanied by the stench of burned flesh and smoke. He did his best to ignore it but looking in his mirror to take the bridge home, he saw a tendril of smoke in his back seat.

CHAPTER 2:

SMOKE

Devon pulled into the wide driveway of his home, next to his roommates brand new Lithium powered SUV. His tired eyes were nearly stuck behind his eyelids as he let out a groan, *of course they would be home*. He never really had any issues with his roommates, but their eco-conscious, peace, love and happiness, lifestyle was annoying and exhausting in large doses.

His clenched jaw cracked as he yawned, barely tapping the pristine SUV with his car door. Glancing at the front door he thumbed the scuff he made, shifting his attention to the perfect circle of flowers around the large birch tree at the center of the front yard. The sweet smell of lavender hiding somewhere in the lot of flowers made the itchy nose worth it, to an extent, lavender always reminded him of his grandmother in the best way possible.

Stumbling with his keys, he peeked in the two thin blurred windows framing the thick oak door. The back door was left wide open, the roommates were awake. At least Keagan was, probably sucking down his morning cigarette. Gael was the type who wasn't afraid to sleep in that extra 20 minutes and rush a little faster to get ready for work.

Walking in, the almost overpowering scent of dried herbs and incense made him groggily sniff. The hallway was decorated with several half-moon ornaments, some made of metal, others carved from wood or marble. Above the archway to the living room a series of dried flowers and herbs hung. He gave them a spiteful glare as he continued past them, giving into his itch and letting out a heavy sneeze.

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The house itself was pretty and quite the opposite of the minimalistic house of his parents. The tanned walls of the living room were decorated with paintings showing animals in the hunt, mainly of lions and leopards. Tapestries hung ornately, depicting women dancing and men with swords, most, if not all, were framed with woven ivy etched in wood.

Of all the decorations in the house the one thing that stood out the most was a round, wicker woven shield, as broad as a man's chest. It made the centerpiece of the living room, hanging comfortably behind a cathedral's worth of candles on a built in bookshelf spanning the whole wall.

Devon tip toed his way past the sliding glass door, taking a quick glance outside, his nose huffed in the sweet cigarette smell confirming Keagan was awake. Feeling safe from the roommates, he began to walk a bit quicker. And just as his shoulders eased the door slid open, caught like a rat Devon stood still, unsure what to do next, "What's up, D?" Keagan said a bit too brisk. Devon gritted as he planted a smile on his face and turned to Keagan.

Keagan always made it a point to look his best. He wore long sleeve shirts with slacks, which didn't look cheap. His blonde hair always tied back in a loose tail, without a strand out of place. His short chin strap beard was newly trimmed on a strong jaw and heavy blue eyes.

Keagan would have been a perfect Gap cover model if he chose that career path. Instead he worked as a security guard for clients all over the Country and he and Gael traveled a lot because of it.

Devon said digging his hands in his pockets and sighed without thought, "Sup."

"Hold on, let me get Kitty." Keagan leaned against the outside frame of the door and looked out to the backyard. "I don't think that's neces-" He said looking at his bedroom door that was a mile away, "Here kitty, kitty." Keagan winked at Devon, and Devon did his best to keep the smile planted on his face.

Keagan smiled back; glancing beyond the wooden deck he stood on and put out his cigarette. He always seemed chipper when he was around Gael. When he was away from her, he became quiet and gloomy. She was much the same in that aspect, at times they could be worlds different, but never apart for too long. An odd couple that was nauseatingly happy.

"So how was your night?" Keagan made his way inside dropping his butt in a bucket by the door. "I didn't sleep well." Devon took a step back to his door and Keagan made a step toward him.

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“Storms can do that,” Keagan gritted his jaw, “But luckily Kitty is there to save me.” He winked. Without any warning Gael wrapped Keagan’s arm around her shoulders, A bright smile lit her face. “Hi!” She snuggled up to Keagan even more.

Gael seemed to be glowing in the sunlight, her dark hair flowing down her back contrasting the soft glow she always seemed to carry around her pale skin. Everything was small about Gael besides a few features Devon made a point to avoid eye contact with. Those features she seemed to flaunt daily. She only came to slightly below Keagan’s chest but that never stopped her from being in the spotlight of a room. She always seemed to wear simple clothes, nothing too formal compared to Keagan's wardrobe. She could always be seen wearing flowery skirts and low-cut tops.

“You didn't happen to have any strange dreams last night?” Her head tilted slightly as her dark eyes peered into him; this was very much like her, always curious and nosey. “Not really,” he lied, watching as her lips tightened and brow crooked slightly as he took a few more steps back to his bedroom door. The very last thing he wanted was a long analytical study of his dream. “Just wondered, felt something odd in the air...” She trailed off as he made his way to his door and slowly began closing it.

“Weird...nothing odd on my end.” He said as he took one more last look at those curious eyes. The door closed shut and quickly began stripping down, and finally, giving in to the enticing call of his bed.

He was given two rooms: one was a regular bedroom, the other he turned it into an office. For what reason, he did not know, it wasn't like he was going to get the job offers that would require him to use it. He never did in the year he spent applying from place to place, even a news stand would make him happier than being a stock boy for a company that was slowly monopolizing the economy. That was all a distant thought in the back of his head as he sank himself deep within his sheets.

He looked at his cell. 8:15AM, too many hours of lost sleep. He began adjusting his daily routine in his head, something he loathed doing but necessary some days. Today would be one of those days. *Wake up by 10:30 get dressed and ready, be at work by 11:30 and I'll still have plenty of time for lunch.* His eyes grew heavier at each passing thought.

He fell asleep sooner than he could imagine.

He dreamt of the Imp, standing at the edge of the garden, ember eyes peering into his bedroom window, a twisted smile of burned flesh, and a constant tendril of smoke leaving the edge of his lips as if his insides were

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cinder at the last of its life. Even in the bright morning, things seemed to darken like night around the Imp. Devon, with tired eyes, rolled over to check his phone. The memory of his nightmare quickly vanished when he saw the time.

11:15

With a start Devon jolted out of bed and quickly into a fresh set of clothes cursing as he threw on his shirt and stumbled over his shoes. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” He cursed at his stubbed toe. Luckily Gael and Keagan both left for their jobs shortly after he fell asleep so no small talk to delay him any further. Jumping into his jeep, he drove as quickly as he possibly could, but traffic was slow moving and tedious.

He could *feel* those fire filled eyes taunting him as he drove.

Although he couldn’t see the imp, he knew it sat in the passenger seat next to him. He fought everything in him to glance over, to no avail he looked over when a large truck cut him off, “You flying fuck-” his profanity was cut short when in a glance he could have sworn something was at the corner of his eyes. That didn’t stop the feeling though, it only grew stronger. He could almost feel the smile deepen, the tendrils of smoke tickling his nose, the faint distant smell of burned flesh rotting his throat. He blinked his eyes, a blink that seemed too slow. His body tingled and fingers began to go numb.

Not another anxiety attack, it was just a dream D, Those eyes, those damn eyes!

He blinked. He found himself in the parking lot of where he worked, parked in his usual spot under the sapling of a tree that doesn’t belong in this climate. Stunted and leaning, ready to give up. *How could I get here so quickly? Did I...No, I couldn't have....It was him... He did something... How?*

A cold, twisted laugh echoed in his car, “HeHeHAhaaha,” It planted itself into his brain, screwing with his thoughts.

His head slowly turned to the source.

The demon sat, looking at him with red and gold eyes, *the windows of hell*, a wide smile slowly sliding across his burned and twisted cat-like face.

“STOP!” He screamed as he pushed his way further from the creature. Its mouth began to move but no sound came. Devon blinked and it was gone. He breathed heavily, waving his arm around the seat to see if he could touch whatever *it* was. His hands caught nothing, but the smell of smoke that burned his nostrils made it seem too real.

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"It was just a fucking dream!" he grunted as he turned off his engine and slammed the door behind him. He shook his numb fingers and did his best to clear his mind as he marched the long parking lot.

Just a dream, just a dream.

As he stood at the entrance way he took a quick final glance at his cell and with a gasp he stopped dead in his tracks. The time read 11:15. He turned it off and back on, mind focused on the obviously damaged phone, slowly making his way to the stockroom. 11:16.

He looked at the clock above his head, 11:16; he could feel a cool laughter behind him. He turned to look, and nothing was there but a tendril of smoke. *Nope, just my imagination*, he thought as he turned back around and made his way to the small diner in the store. A plain ham sandwich and a pickle put a 6-dollar dent in his wallet, but it was still good food no matter how expensive. He walked into the smoking section of the break room; the sweet smell of cigarettes burned his nostrils. As he ate, he glanced over at an employee lazily grazing a newspaper with a cigarette in his hand, the sweet burn of menthol hit his tongue when he saw the brand, his brand. *I can just ask for one*, the calming nicotine screamed at him, wanting to pump through his veins.

He looked at the time. 11:45.

He blinked and he looked at the clock hanging over his head. 12:17. He heard the laughter echo in his skull.

He looked around then back to the young man. It read Mike on his badge. "What time do you have?" Devon put the sandwich back in the wrapping. Looking at his watch, Mike crooked his brow "12:25, running late? You've been staring off into space since I got here, you alright?" Devon combed his fingers through his hair "You're screwing with me right?" Mike shook his head, "Why would do that?"

Devon stood up giving Mike a glare and made his way to the time clock. His boss, Charlie, a bald man with a thick burly mustache stood at the time clock. "You've been sitting in there for an hour, you feelin' alright?" Devon nodded and slid his badge. The burly man patted his back. "If you're late again I'll write you up, buddy. Let's get movin', long day ahead of us."

He sighed as Charlie left him at the time clock. A cackling laughter that echoed all around him made him jump. It took everything in him to not scream, to not panic, at least, if he could spare himself the humiliation of running from a dream, a pesky dream that escaped his mind and messed with his daily life, he could.

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It was just a dream! He assured himself again, giving his hair one last tug before going to his station. Work seemed to drag, as it usually did. He avoided looking at his phone or any clock he passed, afraid of what he would see. Even when he got his first text message in days, he ignored it. As his shift narrowed down to the last few moments, he followed the trail of people to the time clock, clocked out and left quickly.

He sat in his jeep for a solid hour, looking at the sad excuse of a tree in front of him, puzzling out how he could mix up his timing so badly. Those eyes were there, seemingly never gone, always watching him, probing every inch of his being, mocking him with that grin. He wasn't too sure if it was his imagination anymore. He couldn't see him, but he knew the Imp was there. *It was just a nightmare...*

CHAPTER 3:

ODD HAPPENINGS

Devon woke up with the tension on his shoulders lightened and a smile on his face. No nightmare with the Imp, and today was the start of his weekend. Given his weekend was in the middle of the week, it was still two days off from work.

He got out of his twin sized bed and thought about something that made perfect sense. *Of course, it's stress!* He left the mediocre warmth of his cheap Great Value sheets, rubbing his eyes; he stumbled on his way to his tiny, simple bathroom and began his morning routine.

The bathroom was small, and a yellowish tan tile decorated the walls. Nothing was special about it and that was just the way he liked it. Simple always meant comfort in his eyes. Even reasoning simply, a feat within itself meant an easier life. *Stress could make someone hallucinate, couldn't it? It's done worse.*

He listed in his mind all the things that stress has caused him, from anxiety to sleeping problems, all viable methods that could cause a person to mildly hallucinate, but to lose track of time? Well,

that's more probable than hallucinations. As he worked the theories out in his head, he shaved his face where it needed to be shaved. The one underlying question he boiled down to was why he would even be stressed. He led a good healthy life, he ate right for the most part, his job was exercise enough, and he had a lot of down time where he could escape in a good book.

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His parents would give him a great deal of support if he needed money, although he never needed it, it was great to know. As he brushed his teeth, his mind wandered to the last time he had a break from the world, his twenty-first birthday sprang to mind, months ago. He and his brother spent a fortune in bars across 6th street.

Another seed that sat in the far reaches of his mind began to take root- it was just the two of them.

I have no friends. He drowsily thought as he got undressed and hopped in his tiny, tiled shower. Shortly after high school he spent a lot of time with a guy named Al. They met at his first job as an intern for the local thrift paper. They hung out for a little bit, but they slowly lost touch after he went to college; he poured so much time and effort into all his assignments that he never had the time to call or text. Slowly, after time progressed, he lost all contact with his friends.

He didn't get along with his college roommates very well either. They were a mess and spent most of their time drunk or talking about getting drunk. The type of drunk that led to random bits of strangers' clothing strewn out all over the house with nice surprises left of broken furniture.

His roommates heckled him into being a part of the obscene world that was college life, a life that he gladly avoided. It wasn't that he was antisocial; he just wasn't interested in house parties, or getting trashed every weekend.

He shook his head; *it's all in the past. It doesn't matter anymore.* He thought as he undressed himself and hopped in the shower. He wanted to escape the depressing droll that his mind was going through, but it stuck, firmly rooted in his head and unwilling to budge.

I have plenty of friends! Plenty enough anyways. As he thought on it, the roots twisted their way deeper into his mind, telling him, screaming at him that he really didn't. He didn't know if it was fair to count his brother and current roommates as friends. He knew not to include the few people he talked to at work, but that would leave no one to be there with him through his best and worst times, no one to confide in with dreams and goals. His shoulders eased as the hot water rolled down his back. He washed himself slowly, letting his mind wander further into thought.

He couldn't *think* of anything to confide in anyone. In high school Devon was very well known and liked not a single name stuck to his mind though, just slightly blurred faces that seemed nice to just be nice. "Do I really have no friends?" He found himself talking to the wet tile as he leaned his head on it. His eyes closed, the steam was really being to make

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his sinuses bad enough to begin sniffing, or could it be the lump in his throat raising.

Guess I'll cry... He did so quietly.

A few minutes later he jumped out of the shower. He avoided as many arguments with Keagan as he could, and the man could be an ass when it came to the hot water being used up.

That thought stopped as soon as he looked at the steamed mirror. His face locked in horror as he stood frozen, unmoving. He felt his fingers begin to tingle, his lips go numb. Scratchy and uneven letters slowly appeared from the steam in the mirror.

“U HAV ME”

He felt his eyes begin to tear up. *Don't say it, Devon... Whatever YOU do don't give in to it!* He told himself but his mouth beat him to it. “Who are you?” His voice quivered and shaken; his back pressed against the wall as firmly as he could. Slowly the letters came into view, letters that answered his question.

“UR FRIEND”

Devon screamed and began scrambling out of his bedroom and into the living room.

“Devon, what's the problem?” Keagan gnawed on an apple. “Nothing, it was just a damn dream, just a fucking dream.” Devon repeated over and over again keeping his towel wrapped around him and getting as far away from that bathroom as he possibly could.

Keagan walked to him with questioning eyes. He chewed slowly as his eyes widened, “A dream?” Gael marched through the living room with something in her hand, eyes fixed on Devon's bathroom, mumbling. She gave Devon a glare, holding her robe tight, her loose hair bounced as her bare feet marched.

“I knew it, I friggin' knew it D, you brought something in with you didn't you.” She grumbled.

“Kitty?” Keagan went after her, nearly shoving Devon out of the way “Gael!” Keagan was quickly behind her, tossing his apple on the dining room table. “Stray brining in strays,” She rumbled, “I smell its stink lingering around...”

A growl echoed in his room quickly followed by the crash of something hitting the ground. *Just hearing things.* He thought, pressed against the far corner of the living room, looking at the back of Keagan whose eyes darted back and forth between him and his bedroom.

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Gael stepped out of his room, holding on to her robe with one hand and huffed, Devon could swear he saw her eyes flicker silver, but it was gone in a blink *Could be the light*, the center of his head stung and he caught himself grabbing a knee and holding it close.

They mumbled something to each other, then Gael marched to him, robe nearly coming undone in the process. “What did you see?” she asked in her calm and pleasant way.

“You read it. I didn’t write that!” He slid his back against the wall, eyeing the two vultures, dissecting him, judging him, shrinking him to the size of a bug and waiting to chew him up and spit him out. She forced a smile as she kneeled to him and adjusted her robes. “Of course not, I know you’re more literate than that D, did you see any shadows or figures in the mirror?”

Devon tightened his fist around his towel. “WH-why would I?” He stammered. *What does she know?* She peered at him, no, into him with a deep stern look. “You lied to me yesterday. What did you dream about?”

Her lips curled for a moment, and she planted a smile once more, she knew everything, she was disgusted by him. “I didn’t-” she lifted her finger leaving his mouth closed shut, “What did you dream about, Devon?” She growled through pretty white teeth.

“An imp.” His hand combed through his wet hair, as he looked away from her arched eyebrows and outside where a wisp of smoke trailed past the glass door.

Gael gently touched his cheek and moved his head to focus back on her “An imp?” She smiled and Devon nodded, feeling cold and exposed. He tried his best to cover himself up even more. *Here I go, losing the only two people who talk to me*, he thought as he looked into her dark eyes and to Keagan who kneeled close behind her. “He was black and he wore a bell, he-he smelled burnt and he always smiled.” He forced a laugh and shrugged his shoulders. “A dream? Right?” His eyes darted between the two of them, her lips twisted as she looked at Keagan, who groaned, “I set up the barrier perfectly, Kitty.” Keagan said defensively, as if Devon never even spoke at all.

“What?” Devon, being ignored, squeaked.

“Even the greatest shields have their weak points, my knight. I think we have a special case here.” She arched her eyebrow, and Keagan smiled slightly, “We get to hunt in our own backyard?”

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She shook her head, "Patience, Knight." She smiled at Keagan and set her eyes back at Devon; she loomed over him. "Knight?" Devon laughed, once again the question went unanswered.

"Did he look like a Gremlin with horns or a Furby with wings?" she asked as she sat up and glanced outside. "Um... I guess a Gremlin with horns? But his eyes were red and he-" She raised her finger again and his mouth shut. She smiled, "Just a pest, Devon, nothing to worry about. He might get bored and leave; he might stay and be a cat's lunch if he interrupts my mediation again." With a nod she made her way back to the other half of the house.

Keagan looked at Devon for a moment, looking disappointed. "I'm stressed, a dream just got to me, it was a hallucination." He said trying to sound as assured as he could. Keagan smiled, and reached for his apple, "Keep telling yourself that and he'll never leave."

"I'm just going crazy, right? Please, tell me I'm right." Keagan patted his shoulder and walked off, "Sorry buddy, you got yourself a friend."

Devon laughed, "I AM going crazy," He told himself. *What were they talking about? How did she know what I saw?* He decided to call the last sane person he knew, his brother.

He marched to his room, giving the tendril of smoke one last glance before slamming the door, Gael shouted something but he ignored her, it most likely had something to do with how much she hates doors being slammed.

When he grabbed his phone; the text he got the night before came up. It was his sister sending more pictures of his nieces and nephew. "Miss you bro, come visit!" was all it read. The oldest boy was a year and a half, and two girls were just only a month old. She had them young, at eighteen to be exact, but she was always the Romantic, no one could keep track of what city she was currently in. She just stayed north with her husband who she had been with since they were children, and both refused to move back south. He did miss them all; Jasmine was a good person when she wasn't being, well, the Impossible Jaz, as his Mom called her.

He walked into his bedroom and sat down at the edge of his bed. Sighed and sent a thumbs up emoji with a heart next to it, then gave his brother a call, "Don?" He said when the phone picked up. The sound of metal against metal echoed in the background.

"Hey D, how's it going? You, ok?" The voice seemed too calm amongst the chaos he was in.

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“Yeah, I’m good... just stressing out. Wanna grab a beer or something?”

“Tomorrow after practice sound good?”

“Yea, tomorrow's good.” The Imps eyes dug at his side as he spoke. He looked to the window and on the patio table where he felt the eyes of the imp lock with his, his guts twisted.

“See you then, D.”

“Alright, bye.” He stood up and closed his blinds.

“You don't exist.” He murmured at the invisible eyes peering at him.

He sat behind his door for what seemed like an eternity before a knock startled him half out of his daze. “We need to talk.” Keagan said through the door.

Devon shook himself from the last bit of his daze, “Can I be left alone, please.” He looked outside his window. A figure stood invisible, all save for the distortion of light around it just past the fence line. Just taller than the Imp by a hair, it looked at him as he gazed at it. All more evidence of his going insane.

“No, let's talk, now.”

Devon marched over to the door and flung it open. “I'm crazy!” He laughed harsher than he intended.

“We all are a bit mad here. Get dressed and let's talk.” Keagan smiled. Devon, with Keagan in front of him, sat on the porch of the back yard, his pajamas were a little wet, leaving his skin itchy and putting him in a worse mood than before.

“I need to mow again.” Keagan stared at the ankle high grass. His foot was propped on the metal table and he leaned back an inch off the ground. Keagan looked at Devon making sure to lock eyes. “One of the downsides of love, I suppose.” He grinned as he lit a cigarette. *What does love have to do with the lawn needing to be mowed?* He thought as he fidgeted with his hands.

“Are you kicking me out?” Devon blurted out. It would be only natural for him to be kicked out. How much longer could they pat him on the back and say his problem was just a pest and it will go away shortly?

“No, it wouldn't solve your problem now, would it? You would still think you're crazy and you'd have nowhere to live, plus I can't do that to a friend, its not right.” Keagan rolled the cherry on the brim of the ash tray.

Devon shrugged and eyed the pack of cigarettes, not his brand but still a good brand to smoke. A whole two years were wasted when he reached for the pack and pulled one out. “I can move in with my parents.” He

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suggested as he lit his cigarette with a match and tossed the pack down on the table. The first drag burned his throat, but he held it in as long as he could. A scab reopened in his lungs as he coughed slightly. He kept his eyes down making a point to analyze the cigarette as it burned between his fingertips.

"But you won't. You have too much pride. And yes, you can have one. I don't blame you, to be honest. The main reason why I started was over something like this." Devon half realized that he stole a cigarette and smiled. "I'm sorry, I just- stress, ya know."

Keagan nodded. "Poor excuses are bad habits." Idly, he blew smoke on his cherry. Then after a long silence he began to speak again. "You know we trust you." Devon nodded and took a deep harsh drag of his cigarette, harsher than what he remembered. "You only told one lie the whole time you been here, what is it, five months now?" Devon nodded not quite sure where he was headed but Keagan continued. "I want to tell you something that no one else can know, not a secret but not something everyone shares to just anyone."

Keagan plopped his boot down and adjusted himself in his seat to where he was face to face with Devon, eyes intent with eagerness.

"I am a Knight, Devon. Gael is a Maiden. I am her shield from a world that hates her and her kind; I will die for her and any other Maiden who needs my help. There are millions of us, in hundreds of groups across the world. We call ourselves the Children of the Moon." Keagan half smiled. "So..." Devon rubbed his hands together and Keagan leaned back. "What does this have to do with the.... *thing* I saw?"

They looked at each other, Keagan's eyes shifting back to the house then at Devon he let out a long exasperated sigh. "Kitty is so much better at explaining this," Keagan spoke between the smoke, "She makes it seem so romantic and enticing." He looked away at the grass again. "Fine then, to the root." He sat up in his seat. "Motheir is a God, sort of, a celestial spirit that inhabits the universe. From her we were created and everything else that you see, but she also created other....things. Spirits and the realm they live in." Devon began rubbing his head, *Really Devon? What did you get yourself into now?* Seeing the frustration Keagan quickly continued to answer Devon's question.

"Maidens protect the people of this world from malevolent spirits. Now, Malevolent Spirits were once pure in the hands of Motheir." He nodded to Devon to make sure he was still paying attention.

"They turned against the human race from all their wrong doings."

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Devon crooked an eyebrow "So what exactly are these Knights? What does this have to do with anything?"

Keagan chuckled. "Well, um... Everything; Over two thousand years ago women who practiced witchcraft were condemned, murdered, and imprisoned for doing just that. They established a society of sorts, joining together to form what is now called the Children of the Moon. A woman selects a Knight or has a person she already wants to be a Knight," he pointed to himself when he said the latter, "and they go through rigorous training until they become a suitable Knight."

Devon raised his hand to stop him. "What the hell are you talking about and what does this have to do with what happened earlier?"

Keagan flicked his ash into the ashtray, looking away and tightening his jaw. "Everything, if you can see spirits or at least one you are aware of the Other Realm. What I'm trying to tell you is that you can become a Knight, like me and like so many others, and protect Maidens when they need you." He looked at Devon and grinned, Devon rolled his eyes carelessly. "You see a Maiden can't harm a human or bad things happen. And sometimes that needs to happen. I'll be there when it does and make sure they live to see another day."

Devon laughed. "You want me kill people?" Keagan's eyes widened, "No, no, no... It's become an honorary thing, really. Nothings happened in hundreds of years."

Devon scratched his head. "So you protect Gael from getting the axe, but what is she protecting?"

Keagan stood and rubbed his face in frustration; Devon was a little frustrated himself, "I'm sorry if I'm not more understanding but a few hours ago my mirror decided to talk back to me and your girlfriend gave me perfect details of something I saw in a damn dream. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention I can't sleep. I'm an absolute fucking nut job!"

Devon took another drag and found his cherry on the ground. He stomped it out and lit another one. Keagan looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "I'll pay you back," He grumbled through the smoke feeling the buzz take over his body.

They sat there in silence for a moment.

Devon found himself brooding over Keagan and his cult of moon children, only to have his thoughts broken by a sweet, elegant voice, "You're not crazy," Gael was leaning on the door. "If anything you are more sane than most, some would say, crazy not in the slightest." She sat down where Keagan was, directly in front of him. "I understand your

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stress, I really do.” She seemed to glow every time she was in the sun, a pretty face with hazel eyes that shone brighter than the brightest light, her long dark hair flowing down to her lap.

“Let me elaborate, I saw things when I was younger, much like what you saw last night. And what you have undoubtedly seen before. A man hidden in the shadows, a reflection in a window that doesn't belong, a dream that seems too real to be just a dream, this is what is real; A world much like our own and far from it, is right in front of you.”

“Forget what I am for a moment and forget your little friend. Look at yourself and tell me, as you begin to open your eyes to what is real, are you ready? Are you ready to accept *all* of reality?” She winked as Keagan's hand wrapped around hers. Devon shook his head and rubbed his eyes. *Ready to be whisked away to the magical land of make believe.*

“No,” He said finally, “and to be perfectly clear, what are you?” She tightened her lips and looked at Keagan, who shrugged. “I am a witch, Devon.”

Devon smiled, “Oh, Gael you know crystal healing and horoscopes are not real right? Like, an amethyst isn't going to cure cancer.” He laughed as he glanced at the invisible eyes of the imp on the metal table they shared. Gael let him have his laugh, “Yeah that's just people trying to hard, listen it does help channel some energy with rune work, but that's a little too complicated for you right now,” She smiled, “lets just focus on one thing at a time.”

Devon shook his head, “Guys, common, none of that stuff is real, I'm not mentally well, my moms a therapist, I know this is a stress reaction.”

Keagan pointed, “Her moms a therapist too.” But they both ignored him. Keagan took another drag of his cigarette as Gael rubbed his arm, “That's just silly! Go to your little friend over there and tell him that and see what he says.” Devon shrugged when she pointed right at the little demon that's been screwing with his life. Keagan shifted in his seat then took a heavy drag, keeping his mouth sewn shut. “We haven't really talked,” Devon admitted, “And I'm not going to start, I'm going to the doctor and seeing what they can do, maybe locking me up would be better.”

“There are more than a few of us in the medical field. They'll just give you a placebo and send you on your way. If you don't want to see him, you don't have too.” Gael said and Keagan smiled and winked at her. *They're mocking me!*

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Devon shook his head, *So I'm some sort of joke?* He thumbed his cigarette and stared at the space between the three of them, where he could feel those eyes on him. *So be it then, let me be the joke.* "You're both crazy, and cheesy, you think I'm supposed to buy all this. Nope." He raised himself from his seat and flicked the butt between his fingers in a bucket by the door, "Quit fucking with me and, and just..." He looked at the two then at the invisible eyes on the table. "All of you just leave me the fuck alone." His gut knotted and a surge of dredge wafted towards him as he gave the three a long hard stare before slamming the door and marching to his room.

"You hurt his feelings Devon, not nice!" Gael said as if to confirm what he felt. He quickly got dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, muttering to himself the whole time. He grabbed his keys and made his way to the front door slamming it behind him. He jumped in his jeep and drove off.

In the passenger seat he could feel those eyes again, hurt eyes.

"You're not real!" He shouted as he turned on his radio blasting it as high as it could go. "LEAVE ME ALONE!" And with that it vanished, gone as it should've been two nights ago in his nightmares. He set his sights to the lake; there, at least, he could get some peace.

CHAPTER 4:

BEAUTY AND A BEAST

The lake was glistening in the early afternoon sun, cool and inviting in the thick heat, but Devon stayed on the rocky shoreline. He was far away from where anyone could see him and bother his serenity. A nice quiet little spot he picked out when he was a child.

The first time he planted his feet here was on a field trip he took with his elementary class. One kid, when the teacher wasn't looking, pushed him down and punched him square in his right eye. He couldn't remember the reason behind it but he could remember running, running to this far off spot on the lake and getting himself close enough to almost plant his feet into the water. It took them an hour to find him, and after they found him, he was the one who got in trouble for running off. Not the bully who made him run in the first place.

He sat on a hard rock with his knees bent and nearly to his chest. He idly tossed stones in the water and watched the ripples reflect off the sun. He let his mind wander when he was here; it helped him figure out problems that needed silence and calm. His roommates fluttered in and out of his mind.

Let them be witches, but they don't need to reason out their hippie, pagan bullshit to me.

The Imp was a more prevalent issue, a sun that had all of these other issues orbiting around it. *There could be no way that thing is real...* He assured himself, but the anchor was still tight in his mind unmoving and

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rooting itself stronger by every minute. *Should I move back in with my parents, or should I stay and avoid any more conversations about moon children and Knights?* An option that should never have been but was still there, *I could move in with Don.* That would be beneficial to both of them, but Don was way more private than Devon lately, hanging out with Nori most of his free time. Nori was a good guy, but something seemed off about him. Ever since they were kids Devon could never fully trust Nori.

After thinking long and hard about it, he knew that Keagan was right about his pride. He was too old to move back in with his parents or even his brother. His parents were getting old. He had a feeling he would end up taking care of them more than what he wanted too.

It was only a few days ago when the storm came. Then, his biggest worry had been showing up for work and doing his job. Now, in the back of his mind and growing like a weed was the thought of him being sacrificed to some Pagan god. Even worse yet, being dragged into some witchy affair that would get him in trouble.

He threw another skipping stone, this time harder, as if it would shoot away all his problems. It didn't work, of course. *Maybe I should do a damn spell.* Devon chuckled to himself. He was never good at handling things like this; panic attacks happened on a regular basis at an early age up to when he was in college. It was only until recently they went away, but he felt one coming again, tightness in his chest, heavy breathing, his vision being blurred and his fingers tingling. He buried it, though, deep. *It will not get to me!*

He growled and looked up, high above; he saw two large birds flying in some odd and violent dance. He paid them no mind and looked at the leaves of a tree directly above him. Large bugs from thin to thick were perfectly camouflaged with the deep grey and brown bark, going about their business, scurrying about the long branches, carrying leaves and tiny pedals.

He closed his eyes as the wind blew heavy across the water's surface, rustling the leaves of the trees as it came his direction. It was a calm day now, the heat on his face seemed to soothe him slightly.

Now that he didn't have to worry about that Imp or any more hallucinations he could finally begin to relax. Making his mind avoid Keagan, Gael and their silly cult, he focused more on the here and now.

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The hot breeze and tiny ripples it made on the water's surface was mesmerizing to Devon, he rubbed his burning eyes and wandered back to the birds that were still in their dance directly above him. The fight seemed to grow more violent; but he ignored it and lowered his head into his knees, taking a deep breathe out when he did.

An ear numbing scream rang above him and when he shot his eyes open to see the conclusion to the battle above him, he was met with bright blue sky and nothing else, he groaned, *They just flew away*, he assured himself. *Are you ready?* Gael's words echoed in his head.

Children of the Moon, another cult to add to the American tapestry, He threw a stone without even looking. He was beginning to feel sorry for his roommates being a part of something that will get them in trouble one day. *I should do something to try and help them.*

Nah... They'll be fine... He thought, waiting to hear the stone thunk into depths of the lake. Seconds breezed by as his mind wandered to him being a Knight wearing a suit of armor with a woman at his side, covered in warts and wearing a witch's hat, he couldn't help but chuckle and shake his head.

He felt eyes on him again, hungry and waiting. Unable to shake it he fought the urge to look at it and give the eyes any satisfaction, but, as if they had a will of their own, his eyes slowly rolled up to the direction of what was staring at him.

Before him stood a woman at the water's edge, hair, a mossy green and eyes as blue as the sky, a face that was beautiful, to say the least, a face suited for a model. He raised himself up higher, she was absolutely beautiful! An hourglass figure with a full bust in a long dress that was being held on by wishful thinking alone. His face heated when his eyes wandered to that bust faintly making out her pink nipples. It's been years sense he saw what lay under her thin transparent dress. He stammered as she thumbed the tiny stone, her slight smile making the words he kept losing even harder to come by, and she loved it. She dropped his rock into the water. A seductive smile slid across her face, "Nice to meet you," She purred with a tone that set Devon on fire.

Before he could think, he was on his knees looking up at her. Entranced by her beauty with no words to say, he could only gawk. He wanted to touch her, he wanted to feel her. *I can't say anything....* He thought aimlessly in the back of his mind. *I can't even move...*

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“Do you want to play with me?” She giggled, her hand carelessly moved to the dress that clung to her body, moving in just a way that fueled his mind with thoughts he would never share with anyone.

She winked at him, and his body tingled head to toe in bliss.

His heart began to race; he felt as if he was going to explode, “Play?” The only words he could work out from his frozen mouth. She giggled and reached out her hand, “Come with me, the water is perfect.” Her lips twisting to a devious hungry smile. He looked into those wondrous eyes and his hand reached out as if on its own will. “Perfect.” He agreed with a nod.

He moved closer to her, to her eager wanting eyes; he could see a hunger, a hunger only he could satisfy. The heavy beat of a drum in his chest, his palms sweaty, his body tingling. He wanted her, he wanted to become a part of her, for all of eternity, he could only see her and her alone.

She was but a reach away, a breath closer to his heaven, he will be hers and only hers, forever.

He blinked. And the shadows around him began to shift. Emerging from them was a blur as dark as the shadow it came from. The form of darkness quickly moved past him and the stench of death soon followed.

A guttural growl and an inhuman shriek of pain echoed in the silence of the lake; the soft beautiful hand that yearned for his touch was on the rough stones, deep purple blood drops diluted from the water’s waves. He broke his eyes away from the hand that twitched on the shore of the lake, as the Beauty screamed a deafening screech. Her head rolled back as white feathered wings spread wide at her shoulders.

She clutched onto the gnarled nub that was once her hand. His trance was broken when he looked at her, her teeth became razor sharp as she growled, eyes locked behind him they slowly began to shift to a black as dark as death.

“Leave him alone,” A voice deep and wretched echoed in his ears. “He will not be harmed, Siren.” Devon turned his head and was face to muzzle of a beast as tall as his chest, paws as big as hands and fur that mixed in with the shadows around it, constantly flowing wisps seeking something to cling on to. “Step aside, young Knight.” He looked at Devon with golden eyes and nudged him aside, the hot moist breath, stagnant on his face. The Hound met the eyes of the Beauty and began to growl. The stench of death

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and decay came from the beast, but it was only darkness Devon saw, an aura blacker than any night and thicker than any fog, tiny tendrils slowly moved in wisps smaller than his eyes could barely make out.

The Beauty looked to her wound and snarled. “You Abomination!” She yelled. “Do you know how long it will take to grow that back?” She leaped at the Hound with a monstrous cry, rolling him to his side and biting down at his chest.

Both the Beauty and the Hound were a tangled mess of feathers and fur and wisps of black.

Devon screamed before he even knew he was doing it, blood splattered against the trees and his ears rang from their battle cries. He was unable to move as he watched the Hound bit down on one of her wings. She roared as white feathers now tainted red were torn from her. The Beast clawed at her face and she dug her now sharp fingers into its chest.

Move Devon, run! Do something!

He staggered to his feet, nearly tripping over himself, he began to run. His heartbeat faster than it ever did, his face stuck with horror and mind racing in a cluster in confusion. “This can’t be real!” He shouted to the trees. The only response was the battle cries he was running from. Tears streamed down his face mixing in with cold sweat. *This isn’t real!* He kept his eyes wide and locked on to the trail in front of him.

“He is mine!” The Beauty screamed behind him. “My Soul! Mine!” As the growls drew closer and closer, he ran faster and faster; he could *feel* her hunger for him, feel the thirst for his blood draw near. He turned his head to see the moss haired Beauty at his neck, her eyes distorted in purple and black, hungering for Devon’s soul. The Beast inches behind her, snarling as blood dripped from his fangs, gold eyes locked on his hunt.

A pain in his foot and Devon hit the hard dirt trail. He struggled to his feet, with a groan. The Beauty swooped down at him. Her sharp, jagged mouth opened wide and she screeched inches from his face. He raised his hand and gasped. *Are you ready?*

“NO!”

The shadows shifted from beneath his feet. Faster than he could blink the Hound leaped out from it and sunk his teeth straight into the Beauty’s throat. She groaned, as she wrapped her long-pointed fingers around the Hound’s skull. She flew up through the trees, clawing at the Beast’s chest as his deadlock on her throat grew tighter.

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Devon staggered up, his shoulder stung, and head pounded, his foot burned with every step as he limped his way among the trees, watching above him as the two entangled themselves in the air. His fingers tingled and his lips grew cold. A lump in his gut moved to his throat as he heaved for air. *I'm not ready! I don't want this, I don't need this in my life, why is it here? Why me?*

To his disbelief, a man with a beer in his hand and a worried look on his face appeared just off the shoreline. "You good, my guy?" He said casually and half drunk. Devon shook his head, not taking his eyes off what he was seeing. The man looked up as well. "Whacha lookin' at?" the man slurred. Devon pointed up, "...She tried to....eat me?" His words trailing off incoherently.

The two creatures crashed into the trees next to him; with a curse, Devon began a full sprint. The limp slowed him down, but he still moved- he had to keep moving. Birds flew in the panic and thick branches broke like twigs. "Run, man!" He urged but was only left by an odd look. *I am going crazy, right?* It grew quiet, no more howls and screams behind him. His legs moved as fast as they could up the trail. He wheezed trying to catch his breath but never slowing down even when he could see the break in the woods where the parking lot was. On the other side were his jeep and a faster means to get away from the chaos that followed him. He suddenly felt foolish and awkward when he saw the looks from strangers passing him. He gave them a stair back and quickly ran to his jeep giving the sky a long hard look. Behind him people began to mass around the broken trees.

He wanted to laugh at himself. He was having another episode; it may not be the Imp this time but it was still an episode. The people around him were just one more confirmation he needed for his insanity, and Gael, *damn her*, was feeding him bullshit. He needed to get this under control. Taking in deep controlled breaths he pushed that anxiety that began to boil up deeper down than he did before. *There are no such things as flying beautiful woman, no such thing as a giant talking dog and there sure as hell are no such thing as smoking Imps*, He reminded himself, as he'd done before. It seemed help, for now at least. He pulled out his keys and made a quick dash to his jeep in the loose gravel parking lot. The Hound wanting to disagree with the words he chanted in his head, sat patiently in front of his jeep. His mouth dripping with blood, held the hand it tore off from the Beauty. His black fur mangled in drying blood, the hound panted as he

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walked by. Devon ignored it or did his best to as he squeezed by where it sat to open his door.

Starting his engine and leaving the parking lot, he gave a look in his rear view mirror, the dog prowling behind him darted his eyes and sniffed the air. In the distance he could faintly make out a winged silhouette. He began to drive home with a disgusting taste in his mouth and the knot in his throat getting larger. As he broke onto the highway the Hound matched his pace step by step. Agitated Devon rolled down his window. The dog looked at him without losing a step. "You don't exist!" He roared, expecting it, like his last episode, to disappear; instead it gave him a look that sent chills down Devon's spine. Devon slammed his hands down on the steering wheel; the Hound almost seemed to smile. He laughed "I'm crazy!" As he gripped onto the steering wheel as tight as he could. "I'm a nut job, I need help!"

He felt those eyes on him again, the familiar eyes of the Imp. He cringed as a cat's bell rang in his backseat. "Denying what you see is crazy." The voice of an old smoker spoke in the back seat. Devon felt his gut sink and his throat turn to dust.

"W-what do you want with me?" He asked carefully to watch his breathing, careful to focus on the road in front of him. "You're lonely Devon McNeil, and so am I. Let's be friends!"

Enthusiastically, the Imp rasped. Devon rolled his eyes. "I am not lonely, and I don't need some ugly figment of my imagination as a fucking friend." Those eyes peered back at him for a moment, the loom of sadness and rejection, dug into Devon's shoulders.

"I am," It said sadly, not a moment sooner the eyes faded away. The sad voice that echoed in his ears left him thinking, *I keep hurting the feelings of my imaginary friend*, Devon laughed.

He looked at the Hound running next to his Jeep and hysterical tears rolled down his eyes as he continued to laugh when he pulled up in his driveway. He mindlessly wandered into his bedroom, looking at the Hound as it followed him through the house. Devon sat on the foot of his bed and stared the beast, the Beauty's hand that still twitched in his mouth, sitting on his hind legs as purple goo dripped onto his carpet. The Beast merged perfectly with the darkness, and a statue of his insanity.

CHAPTER 5:

GWENAVINE

Madness, insanity, reality. Whatever it was, it was getting out of hand way too fast.

Three days since Devon saw the Imp, and in between, he found out his roommates were crazy pagans, probably plotting on sacrificing him or whatever moon children do. A crazed half-naked woman that could sprout wings gets her hand torn off by the giant dog, a dog that was sitting behind him and watching calmly as he searched endlessly for any answers on his computer.

Why all this, why me? He sat there, with a weight on his eyelids and his mind in a fog, halfway through the night before it dawned on him to do some research. He went into the other half of his side of the house in his study. Hours and hours of research gave him exactly what he needed; the Children of the Moon were real. They were hidden behind a series of gibberish, and rumors from conspiracy theorist sites and forums. An exhausting and frustrating number of sites were everywhere. Teenage girls claimed to be Maidens but really putting no backing behind their claims instead it just seemed like random acts of rebellion to Devon.

Layers and layers of nonsense until he found it: a Blog dedicated to them and their mysterious ways. The Blog was written by a woman who acted as the ambassador to The Children of the

Moon. She went by Gwenavine. Gwenavine the fifth to be exact, a beautiful name that reminded Devon of a dream he once had of his grandmother and a sandy blonde woman talking in a study.

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His mind stung and the thought quickly vanished with it. But as he read more of what Gwenavine and the Children of the Moon his mind tingled, causing him to take an Ibuprofen and put a hot towel around his neck and head.

From what she spoke of, they were a society that was always willing to help humanity and nature. They're always doing charities and fundraisers to help the earth become a greener place, adapting cities all over the world to wind and solar power. They gave billions to clean the ocean after the last war.

There was a darker side, many people claiming that the Maidens would come and take their children away from them, using magic to seduce the children and using them for sacrifice to their gods. Others claimed a Maiden would come and terrorize a small town until their demands were met, shaking the earth as they spoke, using the wind as a means to glide in the air and strike fear into hearts of people. That was all nonsense, of course. At least Devon could see past the guise of what was folklore and what was real.

Nobody could fly, as amazing as it would be. His mind went to the Beauty at the lake and he shivered, *Could they?*

With the bad came just as much good. A woman claiming to be possessed by an evil spirit, said she was cleansed by them. A small town that was struck by a sickness preached about how they came and breathed new life in the air, and shortly after they left, a population boom happened and the town became prosperous.

Gwenavine only spoke with select words on exactly who they are. They were a society who strives for a better humanity, a society of women who each have their own innate gifts. She never went into detail about any of the gifts or their means of a better humanity only that they follow and abide by the laws they must protect.

“Harm not the flesh
Protect the soul
Cherish the Knight
Love all”

More nonsense that seemed to make his mind at ease about being sacrificed for some ritualistic purpose. He continued reading, If Gael knew

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what he was going through and every site he saw was being cryptic, than there must be some sort of answer somewhere.

Gwenavine proved to be a valid source yet again providing multiple links for 'malevolent spirits'. He turned his chair around and looked the hound that was lying in a dark lump on the ground. He smiled as its golden eyes gave him a curious look.

“You're one of theirs, huh?”

The Hound put his head down and began licking away at the wound at its side. Golden eyes shifted to Devon, a normal dog hidden behind that veil of darkness, except for the size and the sickly sour smell of death that seemed to loom around it. He could pass as one at a glance at least.

Devon slapped his thigh in frustration and went back to his research; He found many descriptions and drawings of creatures he never seen save for a few fantasy books he's read, but none pointed to the creature behind him, nor to his stalker. “What's your name, what kind of... thing... are you?” He asked the hound as he scrolled through the websites. “You cannot know my name, not now, or ever.” The creature's rough voice made Devon jump in his seat, “So you finally talk and it makes no fucking sense... why not?” The hound did nothing but look at him, “Just...ugh... whatever, for-fuckin-getit...” He chuckled and continued mumbling to himself, giving up on the Hound and moving on to the Imp. He found many fantasy related things on Imps, mostly books he already read, but nothing too specific on any of them actually coming alive and screwing around with humans lives. Some things that he read about them seemed to be true. Pesky, annoying, and mischievous, but nothing about the burned skin and smoke. *Maybe an accident?* He thought, but that would leave out the smoke coming out of him. At least he knew how he saw the Imp. Storms apparently make the spirit realm more visible. He began rubbing his temples as the headache became too much for his. *So irritating... I bet they love to watch me squirm, gross stupid Demons...*

He finally looked up the woman from the lake; the only thing that came up was more gibberish about lake spirits and sirens from mythology. There were even a few movies that came up, but with the exception of the sirens most lake spirits were kind creatures. And sirens resided near oceans anyways and Austin was hours away from any ocean.

His mind jumped all over the place as he chewed on a pen, gnawing on it made his gut rumble, forcing him to get up and begin to search for food.

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He noticed, as he walked into the kitchen, a note on a magnet someone would overpay for at Hot Topic, of course it was a fairy sitting on a mushroom and of course the note was left by his roommates. The chicken scratch was Keagan:

D,

I know the past few days have been a mess. I wish I could help guide you, but I'm not very good at that. Explore the world with your brand new eyes and be careful, tread lightly, even the beautiful can be deadly. We are leaving for a few days to take care of some business up north. P.S. Kitty says to be nice to your new friend.

Devon tossed the note on the counter and scrounged for food. *My new friend? HA!* He grumbled to himself as he made his sandwich, turkey and cheese with chips piled on between the bread. *Business up north? What do a security guard and a librarian have up north to do business with? Probably running from their crazy roommate.*

He could see it now; his parents watching the six o'clock news and seeing Devon, his hair a deranged mess being drug from this house with a twisted smile on his face, *'His roommates concerned for their safety called the police after what the man said an Imp was following him...'* the news caster would say. His mother would lock him up in a nut house immediately and his father would shake his head in shame.

He laughed at his own thoughts and dove back into his research. As much as he wanted to be insane, he was beginning to see the world in a way he never did before, his fantasies coming to life and staring at him in his face, but it still didn't deter his frustrations and still wouldn't ever put him back to the way things were. A nice simple boring life, a life he had successfully kept boring. He glared at the Hound just before he spun back in his seat and began searching for more, for as much as he could find about his new perspective on reality.

It was only when the sun was beginning to show its face again that his body decided he should go to sleep.

CHAPTER 6:

SONS OF THE CHAMPION

The next day, Devon was walking around his house in nothing but a towel. He sent texts out to a few people he hadn't heard from in a while, to no surprise he got no response, his mother called but he avoided it. Nothing interesting to report besides he was going crazy and the crazy thing about it was, it was starting to make sense.

When the sun began to set, he slowly got dressed, dark jeans and a deep blue button-up shirt, both his since college. He combed his hair and started to drive up to the bar where he was meeting his brother. The Hound followed him, of course, and besides a few minutes of him feeling the Imp's curious eyes again, he was left alone. None spoke a word to him the entire day. Walking into the smoky bar, Devon could feel the unsettling feeling of the commotion around him. With drunks singing and laughing, the crack of pool balls being struck by their queue, and music too loud to hear. His skin crawled as he made his way past the thick crowd.

He picked the darkest, quietest part of the bar and ordered wings and a local Lager. He slowly consumed his food as he looked around at the patrons. The eerie creeping feeling on his skin emerged; he did his best to suppress it. It came and went when he was surrounded by people, an itch he never could fully scratch, one he had since he could remember.

To make matters worse, the Hound sat at the doorway that was left open, letting in the cool wet smell of spring, mixing with the stench of spilled beer and old wood. The Hound was intently watching him, quietly sucking in all the shadow.

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Finally, after a staring contest between him and the Hound, Don made his way in. He wore the same leather jacket he had since high school; it was worn but still looked good despite the age. He took a deep drag of his cigarette and put on a grin that, when he set his mind to it, seemed to make any woman swoon. Don carried himself a bit differently since the last time they saw each other, his back straight and prideful. He still carried that spark in his eyes that made him who he was. His ear-length hair had a few sprouts of grey in it, but he was still the same brother Devon had grown up with.

They hugged each other and Don took his seat directly across from Devon at a small table. "You look tired." Don said after he raised his hand up at a pretty girl with a smile plastered on her face. She was wearing jeans and a shirt that was revealing her bellybutton piercing, a red gemstone wrapped in silver. Her eyes darted about in a panic as she made her way to them. Don politely ordered his pitcher with a smile that made her fake one become a bit more genuine.

After Don ordered his drink Devon cozied himself in his chair. Being around his brother made the tension slightly more bearable. "You look older," Devon smiled pointing to the grey hair on Don's head. "At least it's not thinning," His brother smirked as he flipped a matchbook between his fingers, his eyes walked with the pretty girl.

Devon combed his hair with his fingers "I'm not going bald!" he growled. His brother laughed and looked at the pretty girl, who was now at the bar filling the pitcher. "Wouldn't be surprised if we both lost our hair soon. This is around the same time dad did." His eyes had a look in them. Like a wolf focused on a hunt. "Yea he also had a whole war he was fighting," Devon said and Don nodded, focused on the pretty girl that came back and filled up Don's cup, He smiled and said something in her ear that made her giggle. She scurried away eyeing him across the room as she took more orders. *How does he do that?* Devon thought with a smile. His brother chuckled, noticing Devon's amazement. They drank their beers in silence. Devon didn't know exactly what to say. How could he tell his older brother that he was going crazy? His brother ignored him, it seemed, looking at the people in the bar with a stuck smile on his face. "So, you said you were stressing out? About what?" He was halfway through his pitcher when he finally asked.

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Devon was already feeling the buzz from his beer. He shook his head. He felt a lot better now, but he knew all that stress was in the back of his mind. "I, I just don't know." His brother took a deep swig of his beer and poured another drink for himself. "Yeah you do, you just don't wanna say it." The words sent coldness to Devon. With a heavy sigh, Devon finished his beer in a gulp and raised the empty bottle. His brother laughed and raised his cup as their glassed clanked together. Devon fiddled with his empty bottle for a minute before finally bringing up the courage to speak. "I've been seeing things, I think," He picked at the label, making sure not to leave any glue on the bottle. "You think?" Don said, eyes fixed on the pretty waitress who was giving them another pitcher and Devon an ice-cold glass.

His brother gave her a flirty look that made her a little giggle. Devon poured his glass awkwardly and took a deep swig. "I'm just stressed, it's nothing, I just..." Devon shrugged, now focusing on the art of frost picking. "Need to get laid?" Don whispered, eyeing the waitress as she walked away with a skip, his brother laughed. Devon felt his face heat up and, seeing his face, Don leaned back in his seat and took on a serious expression.

Don looked at his glass and back at Devon "D, growing up, there was always something special about you, you could attract anything and anyone at any time you wanted, and you seemed to fit in perfectly. You had that," his hand fluttered for a moment, "I don't know, knack about you. Everyone loved you, even Dad, I was a shadow compared to you."

Devon raised his hands "Are you kidding me every time I visit them, dad seems to do nothing but praise you and barely talks to me." His brother flicked at his mug. "Because we all knew you were made to be so much more than a stock boy." He shook his head, eyes distant for a moment, "A lot more, Me, I got lucky with what I got. I'm doing a good thing."

"Working construction?" Devon asked dryly. "That's all *he* talks about," Devon lifted his beer and looking at the round wetness the glass left behind. He wiped it away and took a swig rubbing his wet hand on his jeans.

Don put his hands down to the table a bit harder than he attended. The slap of his hands made them both jump. Don focused on Devon, leaning in. "He wants better for you, we all do."

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Devon shrugged. "So what do I do now? Quit work and go back to school? No one can afford that, and I don't think the roommates would like that." He did his best to smile, and his brother returned it, the same. "Look, I don't know what you're seeing or really care, if you think you need help you know exactly who to call for that. I think you're fine though, nothing to be concerned about, just a bad couple of days is all." Devon rolled his eyes, taking another sip of his beer before he put it down. The last thing he wanted to do was tell his mother, she'll have him over medicated and locked up in no time.

"I don't know. Gael was saying--"

"Gael? The roommate? Is she hot?" Devon looked up at Don, his brother tapped on the table with his matchbook. "You dirty dog, you're tappin' that!" Devon laughed, almost spilling his beer. "No, no, no, I'm not. What made you think that?" His brother smiled as he sipped on his beer. "You gotta be getting it from somewhere, right?" Devon shook his head after taking a deep swig of his beer and gulping it down. "I don't know if Keagan would like that very much, besides, I can't tell you how long it's been," Devon admitted as he stared off into the mug.

"Well," His brother sighed, "Polyamory is one hell of a drug." Don grinned, "Wasn't sure if you like that kind of thing," Devon shook his head, wondering if Don was polyamorous, and by his expression Devon decided to leave that subject alone for now, "I don't think they are and I know I can't be, too much to handle at one time." Don shrugged in response, "Well, let's find you that one then" He looked around, obvious in his mission, "I can't help your crazy but I can help your--"

"Don't worry about it Don, it's not like any woman would be interested anyways." He thought of the woman at the lake and his further fall into insanity. "I don't think I would wanna mess with one anyways. They've been nothing but trouble lately." He glanced at the open door, the cool night air rolled in and the Hound sat there unmoving.

"Ah, come on! Like I said, you'll know what to do even before you do it. You're a Beast! We are sons of Neil! The bastard's Champions, you can pick up a lady!" Something his brother used to call them growing up the Sons of the Champion. It was odd hearing him say that again.

"Ok," Don slapped his cup down, foam beginning to slosh out and pool on the table. Don looked at Devon with a twinkle in his eyes, "There's a

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dark haired beauty at the bar that has been looking at you since I got here.” Devon began to look around.

His brother suddenly snapped his fingers. “I need you to look at me, okay? Focus.” His breath smelled of beer and Devon realized his buzz got heavier by the smile lingering on his face. “By the bar.”

Devon did his best to be as inconspicuous as possible, but his eyes lingered and his heart went to his throat the second he saw her. In the crowd of people at the bar he saw a woman, a soft face framed by long locks of tightly curled black hair. Her skin was a decadent caramel, her eyes dark, and her lips full and shimmering held a soft smile that made his face heat up when he realized she was looking at him.

“I-I Can’t!” She was far more beautiful than the fair skinned siren at the lake and far more beautiful than any woman he has ever seen. “I don’t even...” *Deserve her!* His words trailed off as he caught another glance at her, ignoring his brother’s devilish smile. “You can, and if you don’t at least get her name and number, I will.” That sly smile seeped on his face, a smile Don only got when he was drunk.

Devon grumbled as he sat up, he looked at his brother who gave him a look of assurance. Devon dug his hands into his pockets and began a long nerve wrecking walk over to his guaranteed embarrassment and failure. *What do I say? ‘Hi, I’m Devon a stock boy, college dropout with nothing to offer.’*

Sliding between people as he made his way to the bar, her eyes locked with his just for an instant, *by the way I have an Imp that won’t leave me alone and a Hound that won’t stop following me... want to meet him?*

He glared at the Hound who was still sitting at the door. Those eyes gave Devon a pinch in his gut. *What if that dog hates all females and attacks them.* He thought, *that would make no sense...would it?* He took his eyes off the dog and turned his head at his brother’s direction, unsurprisingly he was already flirty with the waitress, who seemed to enjoy his brother’s company. Courting seemed so easy for Don.

A hard bump from a large tattooed man and the stench of something sweet hit his nostrils and coldness soaked his shirt to the skin. Devon looked to see who he bumped into to find big brown eyes looking at him, an inch away from his face. “I am so, so sorry!” The beautiful woman said frantically dark strands of curls carefully placed across her cheek. “I was

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distracted and bam! There you were.” She smiled beautiful white teeth, her big dark eyes holding a certain glint to them.

He couldn't move, frozen with cold liquor soaking into his chest he stammered trying to find words to say until he quickly took a step back. He looked around frantically in hopes for some sort of salvation or some sort of hope. At the door the dog was rolling around on the concrete. He could've sworn he heard it laughing but being in a bar many people were. He looked to Don who was whispering something in the waiter's ear. *How do I do this!* She held her glass uncomfortably and looked at him. Those big brown eyes held something in them that made him stammer again.

Devon smiled again, noticing her discomfort his face tightened and stopped the laugh that tried to escape. “It's... Its fine...I was...I was, j-just...” His words trailed as he fought them. His mind was clustered and bouncing around as much as his heart was. *Be like Don... you can do this!* “I was just grabbing a drink, and someone bumped into me. Are you alright?” Devon sighed, mostly relieved, he got the words out. She glared at the tattooed man who was already across the room, drunk and laughing in his little circle of friends.

“I'm alright.” Her eyes focused on him and she smiled brightly “I'm just really sorry, I saw something interesting and well-” She put her hands in the air and shrugged with a laugh. Devon laughed with her but he didn't find his soaked shirt amusing. He looked at his brother who finally broke away from his flirting to urge him on with a pushy smile. She looked at him too crooking her eyebrows “Yes well, let me get you a towel,” She said between her teeth. When Devon nodded, trying his best not to show his irritation of how things were turning out, thankfully she didn't notice.

Instead, she smiled brightly, taking his hand and leading him to a corner of the bar where no one was sitting. When he pulled up a stool, she took it with a smile and he smiled back. It wasn't intentionally for her but he took it anyways, it made him look good so he didn't fight it.

“So, what's your name?” She straightened her skirt as she sat. He couldn't help but look at her long legs careful not to stare. “I'm Devon.” making sure he looked her in the eye. “Nice to meet you.” She out reached her hand and he hesitated on taking it, “I'm Valerie,” She cleared her throat as he took her hand.

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“So, what do you do?” She asked glancing at her glass. “I work stock,” he bit his tongue a moment too late. Not the proudest job to have, she glanced over at a small group at the other side of the bar.

He raised his hand for the bartender who nodded at him but took his time getting there. “But I went to school for journalism. It’s been impossible to find a job right now and blogs don’t really sell like they used to,” He admitted, hoping it could prove to be some sort of salvation. “Oh!” Her eyes widened. “That’s great! You know I always wanted to get into journalism. Go and see the world and write about it, I actually had a blog when I was younger but it went nowhere, as you said, hard to sell.” Her smile was brimming; he smiled as he felt his cheeks redden. She had something about her besides her beauty that he couldn’t quite put a finger on that made him feel...warm. He was relieved that it was dark enough to go unnoticed.

When the bartender appeared Devon ordered his local beer and asked her what she was drinking she told him and ordered it as well. “Oh, and can we get some towels, please?” He added as the bartender was mixing the drink, the man grumbled something and laid two towels on the bar.

“So, what do you do?” He handed her a towel; she began wiping the little spot on her skirt as Devon wiped his shirt. “A researcher, in a sense, it’s hard to explain but I love my job. If it has to be called that.” Devon nodded she seemed a bit uncomfortable talking about it, so he left it be.

He looked to where his brother was sitting and to his surprise the waitress was sitting on his lap as he whispered in his ear. “Is that your brother?” She asked and Devon nodded “I can tell, the similarities are uncanny.” She looked at his brother with a certain distaste. Or was it the waitress. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Devon asked as he wondered why he said that. “He is very handsome, but you got the better genes.” he could almost make out a blush as she sipped on her drink. Maybe it wasn’t dark enough.

Devon caught himself trying to peer out the door behind his brother “Do you own any pets?” she gave him a look like she was examining a specimen. “Um, no, I had a dog but he passed away.” Her dark eyes grew wide. “I am so sorry to hear that Devon,” his name rolled off her tongue that soothed him in a way he couldn’t explain. “What kind of dog was he?” She held her cup in her hand gently as she leaned in. “A Retriever.” he said as he looked at her. “I’m sorry you must feel uncomfortable talking about

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it. I know how hard it can be losing a pet.” He smiled but the few seconds of silence seemed to drag on.

It was her that finally broke it, “I’m not very good at this,” she adjusted a lock of hair behind her ear. He smiled as his gut knotted. “Um, do you come here often?” She laughed lightly putting her drink down. “No, this must be my first time out in months.” He said fiddling with a coaster. His cheeks hurt from a grin he couldn’t get rid of. She nodded, her fingers tapping on the glass, her light smile becoming more prevalent. “Yea, I don’t get out often too, but a few of my friends and I decided it would be best to have a night out and play, for once.” Devon tried his best not to cringe at the word “play”; maybe she would sprout wings and devour his soul. He smiled at the thought that he wouldn’t mind it.

She seemed to grimace at something over his shoulder, she took a sip of her drink and gently put down her glass, looking away in some sort of defiance. “We have to go, Valerie.” A hard voice behind him shot his back straight. He looked behind him to see a man twice his size in muscle and dark short hair, the man eyed him with deep green eyes, eyes that screamed rage.

“I was having a conversation, it can wait, Trevor.” Trevor’s lip twitched. “Hurry up, we will be waiting outside.” Never taking his anger filled eyes from Devon.

“I am deeply sorry.” She said as he walked away with a few others trailing behind him. “It’s ok- he just wants to look out for you.” Devon grinned as he readjusted himself in his stool. She smiled and took a small sip of her drink. “He is just a friend he will be nothing more.” She added with a slight wink. “I do think our conversation is pleasant though and I would wish to have more, possibly.” Devon’s hands were shaking as he wrote down his number on a napkin and a chill ran down his back as her fingertips brushed his as she reached for it. “I will text you and let you know I am home safe.” she said as her eyebrow arched. Valerie glided away to the door and Devon was stuck in place, smiling.

After a moment he made his way to his brother “You got her number?” He said as he scooted the waitress away, she quietly complied and floated away into the crowd. “She got mine.” Devon smiled.

“Good.” Don brimmed with pride. “Something about her friend though, I don’t trust him.” Don added. Devon nodded. “He does remind me a bit of my Roommate, which isn’t bad.” He lied, to be honest he didn’t trust the

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man either, it was the eyes, he decided as they drank their beers in peace. The waitress returned with another pitcher and after it was done and the next one was being poured, Devon cleared his throat and asked a question that was itching at him.

“Have you ever heard of something called the Children of the Moon?” Don crooked an eyebrow “Why do you ask?” Devon shook his head remembering what Keagan said “Nothing, it’s just what my roommate-” He felt horrible that he already said too much but it was his brother he could confide anything with him. “Are your roommates running around with broomsticks naked?” Don had a smile that seemed all too forced. But Devon didn’t seem to care, the buzz made him speak instantly, “Well I haven’t seen any broomsticks and I hope I never see any nudity from them.”

His brother chuckled as he did glass mug frozen in the air with an almost sad expression on his face, “I’m sorry,” Devon slurred. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything, it’s a secret, sort of, I think.” He laughed, “Please don’t say anything to- I don’t know.” his words slurred in with his laughter, but his brother still had that same expression. “Your secrets safe with me D.” Don took a swig of his beer that seemed to last the entire mug. “Forget the roommates!” Slamming down his drink. “I need to get drunk!” He groaned. Devon raised his mug and drank what was left. With a sigh of air, he slammed his mug on the table.

From then on everything became blurred.

CHAPTER 7:

DOCTOR RICHARDS

Devon's eyes opened, and immediately he regretted the last two beers he drank, *or was it 6?* The world blurred as he rose out of bed, bringing on a painful headache which forced him back down to the warm pillows.

He groaned and tried again, rubbing his eyes then opening them only to find the large ember eyes of the Imp staring back at him, giving him that same curious expression, he gave before. Head tilted just slightly and a grin at the corner of his face showing a few of his fangs shooting out of black gums.

Devon immediately closed his eyes again, "I bet this is a quarter life crisis," he mumbled as he rubbed his forehead. His eyes opened slightly to a blurred world and in it the imp still stared, Devon let out an exasperated groan that shook the house, burring his face in his comforter to get a little more darkness.

Sometime between that rainy night and now, he felt more comfortable with the thought of what he was seeing. That the things he was experiencing was as real as the pain shooting through his temples. His stubbornness wouldn't let him think that way; after all, the question still burned inside him, *why now, why me, why it?*

He peeked out of his tiny linen cave and to his relief the Imp was gone. He began to rise and immediately found the Hound at the foot of the bed. Head tilted just slightly.

"Fuck!"

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The hounds head tilt even further, Devon gave the curse a haughtier rendition and the hound woofed in response. Unsure if that was a laugh or not Devon decided to leave it be.

He looked to his TV at the corner of his room, the imp idly scratched its burned hip and stared at the black flatscreen, his fiery eyes reflecting in the glass, "How do you do this again?" it mumbled and Devon purposefully didn't respond.

The Imp picked up the remote that sat next to him and pushed a few buttons, mumbling incoherently, until it flickered on.

"Fuck." It jumped and laughed, glancing at the two of them and smiling even brighter, "Scared me... hehe." He pushed buttons flipping through until SpongeBob SquarePants blasted in the room.

Devon roared as he hid inside his cave again burring a pillow in his ears.

"Oopsie Sorry, D." A muffled voice said as the volume was lowered to a more manageable level, Devon squeezed his dreary eyes shut and cringed, his headache inched back, just beyond the dull hangover and seeded in the center of his brain, the shivering stab leaked through his body and reminded him every but of this was just-
Too real...

He decided it would be wise to make a phone call he was not willing to make. He reached for his phone on his nightstand still hidden in his cave. "Fuckin' Imp, stupid dog, coming into my life, not letting me sleep, I will...I don't know, ugh, you fucks can eat shit." They both chuckled at his mumbling curse.

He called the only number that could get him an appointment as soon as possible.

His mother answered with eagerness to her voice that only a mother could have.

"Hey mom, listen I have a headache but can I get the number to a therapist?"

"Absolutely D, sweetie, where does your head hurt? Is Ibuprofen helping?"

"Its like right in the middle but that's not why I need one."

"Oh, I know, I was just curious, I won't ask if you don't want me to know, I love you and respect you, you know."

"Thank you Mom, I just need to work through some stuff is all."

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“What kind of stuff?”

“...Really mom?”

“Sorry curiosity killed the Kat.” She laughed at the pun with her name.

“If it helps I’ve been talking to Don and the roommates seem to want to help.” He gave a long hard glance at the hound.

“A good structure is important, I’m glad you have that.”

“Uh-huh...”

“So Doctor Richards is my best bet for you, she’s an absolute doll and lets see, I think she’s working on her second PhD and actually has a few TedTalks if your curious, I know she did one on Human Rights and right after the War she helped me with some of my research on PTSD, and oh she has done wonders with memory recovery...”

Devon felt the tinge of the headache come back as his mother spoke, “Mom, that sounds great, can I just get the number please?”

She gave him the number with a sigh, telling him that he can get an appointment today if she just mentioned he was her son. She took pride in the fact that she knew everyone in her field in the city and a few more statewide and most would do anything for her. It didn’t require much thought to figure out everyone in his family had something going for them.

His father, the great Edward McNeil fought a war.

His brother, the illustrious and suave, Donavhin McNeil, is working his way up in the world at record pace.

The impossible Jasmine, with a caring husband and her litter of children, the happy family that the Tanner’s had nothing on.

They accomplished their goals a lot sooner than he, and he was stuck as a stock boy with no real aspirations ahead of him besides trying to stay out of a straight jacket.

When they hung up he laid there for a minute, waiting patiently for his headache to fade away, feeling those eyes on him. He dialed the number he jotted down on a piece of paper. A pleasant-sounding woman answered, a little too pleasant for his taste. He asked for an appointment and mentioned his mother. The woman was all too eager to get him in within the hour.

Luckily it was close by where he lived, so he took his time getting ready, crawling out of his bed and making his way to the bathroom. Ignoring his hallucinations even when the Imp thought it would be wise to turn the volume up as loud as it can go with a snicker, giving him an ear-to-

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ear smile that was all too unnatural when Devon poked his head out of the bathroom while brushing his teeth.

The little pest only talked about being friends, but it had to know that it was being more frustrating than friendly, "You know..." He began to say as he tied his shoelaces. Looking at the pest who lazily looked away from the TV. *Don't feed it Devon, it'll only make it worse.*

He kept his mouth shut and finished getting ready. Same clothes he wore last night but he won't be seeing Don anytime soon, so he wore them anyways.

He ignored the Hound as it ran alongside his jeep on the freeway, he also ignored the cat like paws dangling in his windshield as he looks ahead to the stop and go traffic that belonged to the Imp. *It's way too real...* he thought as he looked at a kid next to him in traffic smiling at the Imp and back to Devon.

When he finally arrived at his destination, a tall building as old as the city, with deep grey stone walls that had designs etched into it, large glass doors with silver rims and a fountain off at the center made of marble.

A man stood against the outside wall as if a door guard. The man looked worn with a cold hard face and deep green eyes that made Devon shiver. He wore a long black coat that came down to the center of his thighs, it was too warm to wear in the spring weather. His collar and shirt were as red as blood. He nodded to Devon as he walked up. He ignored the man and dug his hands in his pockets, as they passed, he could hear him huff and then say something that stopped him in his tracks.

"Fine dog you have there."

Devon shot him a look that sent a sneer across the man's face. They both looked to the giant dog who sat calmly at the large fountain looking at them both while the Imp was too preoccupied staring at the water as if afraid to touch it.

The man didn't look crazy, but then neither did Devon, at least he hopped. In fact, the man seemed to blend in with the crowd and was too finely dressed to be a homeless madman. "Not mine," Devon said between his teeth.

The man tucked his hands in his coat pockets and looked at Devon intently. "You must be someone special then. Very special." The slanted smile came again, and Devon was sure the man was crazy. "You have a good friend." Devon tried his best to smile politely at the man, but he

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wasn't very good at dealing with people in general and had no idea how to talk to a man who shared the same hallucinations.

"I have to go." Devon said as he began to open the doors. The man nodded as if expecting that much, never locking eyes with Devon, as the glass door closed behind him, he shivered as he looked back at the man who looked at him at the side of his head same smile planted firmly on his face. He did his best to rid his mind of the man as he looked at the wide-open lobby, a receptionist sat behind a carved wood desk that she had to strain over to look at him.

It was absolutely beautiful, still carrying many of the flaws from the tree it was made out of but crafted in a way to make it a workable desk and stained to bring out the natural colors. His father would have a fit if he saw it. The receptionist smiled as Devon approached and without saying a word, she handed him a clipboard with a sheet of paper on it. She was a small woman and very pretty. Her round face covered in freckles hid behind thick locks of red hair.

He smiled back as he took the clipboard, "If you can please sit, Dr. Richards will be with you shortly." Her voice as pleasant as it was when she spoke over the phone, Devon gritted his teeth in a forced smile.

She pointed to an area rounded off by comfortable-looking furniture with a round table at its middle. He nodded and went to sit down. Before he did, he needed to tell her, "I think there's a homeless man outside-" Her giggling cut him off, "Don't worry that's my dad, he came to pick us up for an event. You're our only visit for the day, it was so last minute, but we take care of our own." Devon nodded not really paying attention, he was more focused on the paperwork and before he could even finish a shadow loomed over him.

"Ah, Devon my how you've grown." Devon looked up to see a grey-haired woman with the slightest bit of age touching her face; her grey eyes pried at him making him shift back in his seat, she cleared her throat and her lip twitched slightly.

"We never met personally but your mother, Dr. McNeil, always had pictures of you as you grew, you and your siblings of course. How is she?" She sat next to him, a comfortable distance away, she wore high priced clothing that was all black and her jewelry silver. She clasped her hands and rested them on her knees looking at him with anticipation.

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“She’s good. Enjoying retirement with my dad.” He forced a smile, as he tapped the clipboard with his pen, she smiled back and leaned in as he finished speaking. “That’s wonderful,” She said calmly eying him up and down. “And your brother and sister?”

“Don is good, and Jasmine is alright, she’s got a litter of kids and a husband who adores her.” Her smile stayed placid as her eyes drifted to the clipboard “She’s so young, what is she nineteen?” Devon nodded, “The first two are twins and the other just popped out of her last month,” Dr. Richards roared in laughter, Devon smiled politely, fighting the urge to rub his headache away as he waited for her to sigh out that final laugh and straighten herself up, “May I?” She took it, leaving Devon to fiddle with the pen “You have a nice laugh,” He said unthinking, “it feels familiar.”

Her eyes shifted to him and he suddenly felt like a zebra being hunted, “Thank you,” Her lips pursed, “And how are you, Devon?” She skimmed over the contents of the clipboard. Devon shot a glance from the large open windows to the water fountain outside.

The man, the receptionist’s father, was sitting on the edge of the fountain with the large Hound laying down, curled up and resting on one side and the Imp at the other, laying on top of the fountain wall, looking up at the sky. They seemed to be taking to one another, the Hound and the man.

He never looked at the Imp. Devon for a moment tried to reason that out. Nothing came.

“Not good.” He sighed. “Oh? What’s the problem?” Devon leaned back in the chair that seemed to swallow him in comfort. *Last chance... might as well dish it out.* He thought as she looked at him with prodding eyes.

“Well,” Devon started with a sigh, “I was at my mom and dad’s the other night and this little imp thing with glowing red eyes popped up out of nowhere, then the past few days it’s been just hanging out with me, kinda.” Her expression didn’t change but Devon continued, “I’ve been experiencing loss of time too, I think, or like, the time around me has stopped or slowed down, when I was at work he was messing with the time, it was weird.”

Her lip twitched and she wrote something down, “I see Devon, have you been experiencing headaches as well?” Devon nodded, “Pretty bad one in the middle of my brain it feels like, my anxiety is through the roof too.”

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She looked at him, wondering if the zebra was worth the chase, her eyes were just as prodding as the imp, digging into his brain burying herself inside his soul, he shivered out the headache and she smiled, "Continue," she said plainly.

"When I went to the lake I saw a dog covered in shadows attack a half-naked lady with wings..." He looked at her and she smiled lightly, Devon wasn't sure what to think of it so he continued, "I think-I think" He sighed, "she was trying to eat my soul..."

She nodded, "Do you have any friends or family members that have been experiencing the same situation?" Devon shrugged, "Gael and Keagan, my roommates, have been telling me this is normal, even explained the Imp to me, they told me about what they believe in but to be honest, I think my roommates might be part of a cult."

Doctor Richards smiled brightly, "Is that so, Mr. McNeil?" Devon nodded, but she continued making another note as she spoke, "I don't want us to get off track, but I have to ask you a question." Devon nodded again and she asked, "Did you experience any trauma as a child? A loved one injured or a loss of a pet or...something similar?"

The headache came back, a slight tingle that rolled down his neck and ended in his chest, "N-no, I don't think so, I don't remember much as a kid, I guess." The headache subsided when he shook his head and let the chill take hold.

"That's fine, Mr. McNeil, there's not much I can do about your headaches I'm afraid," She said noticing him, or your loss of memory, sometimes the wires will reattach themselves if something familiar happens."

Devon nodded, "I don't think anything important happened anyways, I think I can live my life just fine not remembering," her mouth tightened, and her eyes looked sad for a moment, "I hope you don't mean that Devon, I feel your childhood may be the most important part of your life, and sadly you're missing it."

His mouth was sewn shut, when he blinked his grandmothers tomatoes sprung to his head and a slight ting of pain sprang after it, "Maybe," He sighed, shooing away the image of Dons scar on his arm, *What a strange thing to think about...*

The sound of the pen scraping the paper was very loud between them, Devon glanced outside for a moment and looked at the Imp dipping its

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finger into the fountain, causing steam to come up and it smiling brightly at it. Devon caught himself smiling too. The shadow hound was unbothered and the man was gone leaving behind a space between the two creatures that caused him to be here in the first place.

Dr. Richards looked outside as well, "Can you tell me what you're looking at?" She asked and Devon responded automatically, "The Imp and the Shadow Hound," She said nothing, "there was that guy out there too, but I guess he's gone now."

"Yes, he does tend to linger," She smiled lightly, "let us focus on you and what we can do to help."

Devon sighed and his shoulders eased, "I know through your mother that you have experienced some loss in the past year or so. Your grandfather, your grandmother, and your dog,"

Devon nodded, "Max."

"Max is a good name," She smiled when he looked at her, "I think there has been a cocktail of things that have helped you reach this point in your life, and its up to you how you should pursue it." She tapped her pin to the clipboard, "I believe this is the moment in your life where you begin to take the reins and decide your fate."

Devon smiled, it was nice to hear that, reassuring that someone is trusting him with something as small and insignificant as his own life, "I want to have control back." Her face was still as she hummed, "Can you be clearer on what route you want to take?"

Devon's smile deepened, "I want to never see that imp again!" He said, "I just want my life back, No more witches and sprits, or hallucinations, no more Gwenavine, or Knights. None of that nonsense, I just want to forget this ever happened and move on."

Dr. Richards closed her eyes, hummed and after a moment smiled, "You have been under lots of stress, so I will tell you what I'll do, I will give you a prescription of anti-anxiety meds, and something to help with what you're seeing, and I would like to see you take the rest of the week off of work."

Devon sighed, "Do you think that's all there is to it?" She shrugged, "Let's take this slow, I would like to see you next Monday after your time off and a couple of days of the anti-anxiety in your system and we can talk further."

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She stood up and Devon followed suit, "I would like to talk to you further as well, I want to hear about your childhood and find the root to your headaches," she looked at her clipboard and her mouth twitched, "I have a feeling they're connected."

She guided him out to the receptionist not saying much at all, "I look forward to hearing about your week Devon, tell your mother all is well when you see her next." She put the clipboard down in front of the redheaded receptionist and strolled away as elegantly as queen walking to her throne only giving a slight glance back, "Oh and Devon," She said eyes wondering between the two of them, "Don't be afraid of not being alone, you have more support behind you than you think." Her glance was something familiar, and comforting, Devon felt his face heat up and he smiled back, "Thank you."

Devon and the receptionist looked at each other, she looked nothing like the man that was outside he was a brick and she was a flower, she smelled like one as well, Lavender perhaps? One of his favorite smells. She looked almost angelic compared to the man. As rough as the stone he leaned on when he first saw him.

She looked sad for a moment, gritting her pearl white teeth behind thin pink lips as she read the clipboard, Devon tried to glance but she lifted it up immediately, "no peeking," she said in a mumble Devon huffed and she put the clipboard on the table behind her, "If you have any issues with your work remind them of the new workers rights laws that passed last year, and read what it says in this pamphlet," She handed him a green pamphlet with a smiling chef on the front titled "Your rights!" her eyes were low and she fidgeted, *What's her problem*, Devon thought, very curious on what was on the clipboard.

"I will set you up with another appointment on Monday at 9am. Does that sound ok to you." Their eyes met for moment, but she looked down again at the calendar before her. Devon agreed to the time, and she jotted it down, "All set, I really wish to see you soon, D...Mr. McNeil." she cleared her throat.

"Do you wish to have your parking validated?" She said pleasantly. "No, thanks." He said as he walked away ignoring her and finally feeling the tension roll of his back. Finally, someone listened to him and gave him a reasonable solution. Though he never would have guessed she would

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want to dig into his childhood, he guessed that was how all therapists made their money.

As he drove, letting his mind wander, he felt a heaviness reach over him and grab him tightly. He wasn't there when his grandfather passed, and he couldn't bear to watch his dog be put down. *They needed me...*

"One still does." The rough voice of the Imp broke the silence.

The lump in his throat became a bowling ball. He knew, somehow, what the Imp was talking about.

He found himself walking into his parents' house and emerging from the study with a small wooden box that held the ashes of the best friend he could have ever dreamed of.

His father rubbed his shoulder as Devon fought the tears, "such a big soul doesn't deserve that box anyway." His father said and Devon walked out the door.

He drove through the traffic, cradling the box, to a hidden plot of land, covered in trees and tall grass, a place he has been several times in 15 years, Max's very own playground.

He walked this time, with the Imp at his side, and the large Hound a few steps behind him. They walked in silence as the knee-high grass rustled to the wind and sun began to set.

They walked until Devon stopped. Fingering the letters in the box for a moment, he felt odd, silly almost. About releasing the ashes of something dead. *What does he care? He can't....* His mind went blank as he felt this surge inside the box a pulse of desire, a hum of love and affection, an urge to run free again. Nothing more and nothing less than that feeling he felt not too long ago.

It was him, it was Max.

He opened the box, and he sighed as he looked in, tears flowed down his face as he said the word he always used to tell him when they reached this spot.

"Run."

If there was a gust of wind, he didn't feel it. What he did see is the ash begin to pour out of the box and empty as if a gust of wind took it, what he did feel was freedom, peace, and so much love. And what he heard was the howls of any animal that could howl all around him, the Shadow Hound taking the lead.

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As suddenly as it happened, he felt the last thread of Max break inside him. A hole where endless love once lived in his heart now open and gushing tears. Silence, yet again, only his weeping could be heard in the opening.

“Even in death they are forever loyal. But he is free now, and so are you,” The Hound spoke reverberating sorrow in his words, “Be bound only by the wind, my brother, he is in good care.”

CHAPTER 8:

HIS NIGHTMARE, HIS FRIEND

Devon woke up from a nearly forgotten dream. The late morning sun left his head pounding as he stumbled into the bathroom and did his morning routine.

After having a healthy breakfast of leftover cake, he found in the back of the fridge. It tasted stale but he was more focused on the Imp wandering around and finally resting in front of him on the dining room table.

He grabbed the orange transparent bottle he left on the counter the night before and fished out a pill, eyeing the thin white pill and thinking of what Gael told him, “Nah,” He whispered.

The Imp now sat with his legs folded and hands on his knees. A smile slid across the heinous creature, “What do you have there?”

“Something that will make you go away,” The creature’s ear twitched, “It says the effects should happen immediately.” Devon raised the pill at the Imp who sat there just as still and just as quiet.

“Any last words?” Devon mocked. Only silence was returned, unmoving except for the tendril of smoke curling out from the edge of its lips, and a twitch of its leathery tail.

Devon popped the pill in his mouth and waited.

And waited.

An hour later he was sucking down a cigarette on the porch staring at his newly found roommate, The Hound, lying in the sun with a soft glow of darkness around him. The Imp still sat on the table, his razorblade smile growing brighter at each passing

moment. Devon ignored him though, his mind was set on more pressing matters.

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“At the lake,” he said pointing with a shaky finger, “You protected me and now you just follow me around like a guard dog.” The Hound tilted his head, “Yes, that is what I was commanded to do.” it mumbled, Devon flicked his cigarette, and he began tapping his foot on the ground.

“Who commanded you?”

“Who do you think?” The Hound replied calmly.

“If I knew I wouldn’t ask!” Devon took a heavy drag that made him choke a little.

The hound huffed and rested his head on his paws, still speaking in a mumble, “Simple fool, look around you, do you think I would be let in to these Boundaries without the crafters permission?”

Devon crooked his brow, “What boundaries?”

The Hound looked ready to laugh. “If you can *see* me then you can *see* the boundaries, what curse holds you to the words you speak where you mind already made its choice.”

Devon looked around as the Hound gestured him to do, he saw nothing but the quiet backyards of his neighbors. “This is dumb.” He mumbled.

“Dumb?” The Hound snarled, “You pup, are afraid!” He hackled with his fangs showing.

Devon growled, “Is it Keagan? Oh, I bet its him! you and Keagan can go get fucked!” Devon said between the smoke, instant guilt hit his throat, he didn’t mean it of course.

The Hound seemed to smile if he could do such things, “Like the stray you are, you bark and have so little to say,” He showed his teeth, something between a smile and a snarl, Devon matched his grit, “Well you can just shut the fuck right up!” He flicked his butt at the Hound and missed horribly, the Hound didn’t even notice, his focus was pointed towards the north.

“Who the hell thinks I need protection?” Devon grumbled and the Hound glanced at him “Blind,” He barked. Devon rolled his eyes and left the porch, slamming the door in the process.

A smoke ring appeared from the chair in the living room. He moved cautiously to find the Imp taking two fingers to his lips then blowing out smoke with a satisfied smile.

“Fine,” He growled between his teeth.

He marched to the kitchen and grabbed the broom slamming the door immediately, “I’m not crazy,” His face broke into a half maddening smile

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as he rushed back into the living room, the Imp was gone, only a ring of smoke marked where he sat.

“Ohh, it’s a game now, huh?” Devon chuckled as he began to scan the area, beginning his hunt for the Imp.

Devon peeked his head into the entrance hallway, the Imp sat with a smile. Devon smiled back and readied his weapon.

“Afraid?” He questioned the Imp. *Terrified*, he swung his weapon and the Imp jumped missing him by the hair on his toes.

The Imp laughed as he jumped over his shoulders and back into the living room. Devon spun and was met, face to face, with the Hound, yet again. His white canines were exposed in a half mocking growl as the Imp stood behind him shaking his bottom and tail.

Taunting ME!

“If you’re supposed to protect me then get him!” The Hound rose and got in a stance blocking them from each other. “He does no harm to you.” It growled.

“I’ll take him on, bring it! Flesh Bound!” the Imp smiled even brighter to acknowledge some sort of insult, “Very well then,” the Hound chuckled as it casually moved to the side.

So, they think this is some sort of joke? Devon met their smiles and ran after the Imp who met his heavy blows with dodges and ducks, picture frame and a lamp was the only thing his weapon harmed.

Devon tried a war cry, sounding weak in his own ears, he swung at a wisp of smoke.

The Imp ran into Devon’s bedroom, arms flailing above his massive ears “Ooooh noooo!” He mocked.

But Devon slammed the door behind him, the roaring laughter of the Hound echoed behind the door.

“It ends here.” Devon growl, the mockery ended as the Imp looked at the glare he was giving. The Imp took a few jumps back and with a swing the television that he had never watched cracked as the broom sent it to the wall.

Another furious swing and the vinal collection neatly organized from genre and favorites were sent cracked and splintered. He noticed with heavy breath that the Imp was beginning to slow and wear out. Devon was determined; the Imp poked his head out of his sheets attempting a doughy

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eyed look with the fires of hell burning inside, “But you're my bestie, remember?”

In his blind rage Devon threw the mattress and his perfectly laid out wrinkle free sleep went with it.

“Why me!” He shouted as he picked back up his broom and searched under the remains of his bed. He found nothing; he spun to the door to find the Imp, trying to open the door.

“Caught you!” He said as he ran to him in his great war cry, the Imp vanished in a plume of smoke with just a fraction of time left.

Devon flung the door open to find the back door wide open the Hound and the Imp were gone. Devon lurched out, hand on the broomstick with a death grip. He peaked outside the sliding glass door, to see them both side by side, a mountain and an ant hill of pure mockery. The Imp began to whisper as Devon drew near.

“Blind as a bat
And stubborn as a goose
As dull as his blade
And the grace of a moose”

Devon tightened his grip as he inched closer and closer, as the Imp chanted. “I can see perfectly fine.” He said as the chant got louder.

“Blind as a bat
And stubborn as a goose
As dull as his blade
And the grace of a moose”

Off to the side of the yard a freshly dug hole was made, a hole that had the twitching fingertips of a hand torn from the limb of the Beauty at the lake.

“Blind as a bat
And stubborn as a goose
As dull as his blade
And grace of a moose”

He stepped onto the grass that was well past ankle high. *Has it been only two days?* He remembered seeing fresh cut grass when he got home the other night in his drunken daze. After Keagan mentioned it.

The chant echoed in his ears.

“Blind as a bat
And stubborn as a goose

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As dull as his blade
And grace of a moose”

He raised his mighty broom to the sky and saw a glint in the fence line...*You can see the boundaries...* the rough voice of the mutt staring at him echoed with the chant. *This doesn't make sense!*

“Blind as a bat
And stubborn as a goose
As dull as his blade
And grace of a moose”

A grandeur swing and the Imp vanished and reappeared like he was never even touched. The Imp looked sad, and Devon felt even sadder.

“You were just a dream. Not real!” He cried “A *nightmare* damnit! Who are you?” Devon threw the broom across the yard and sat down. “I am real, my friend.” the Imp said cautiously, Devon looked at him fearful of the reality settling in “And if I am a nightmare, I’m sorry I was ever yours.”

Devon would be lying if he said he felt afraid of the scratchy, smoky voice of the demon in front of him, would’ve sent him running if he was. Devon began to laugh, he wanted to stop but everywhere he looked he found that madness to be his reality, The wards and their tiny little glint on flat stones on the tall fence posts, that he didn’t see before. He was blind before and how he wished he still was.

The Imp looking at him curiously tendrils of smoke rising from his partially opened wide lips. The thought of the woman at the lakes edge sprouting wings and fighting the black Hound only he can see, a dog as big as a bear, sent him laughing harder than he ever had before.

In the reality that sank in and took root, he plopped down in the grass, looking at the Imp of his nightmares.

The nightmare that never left, one that stayed with him and called him a friend.

Those large eyes looked at him as his large ears tucked behind his horns. Eyes that yearned for companionship and begged for understanding. The Imp smiled as they locked eyes, Devon smiled back.

His nightmare, his friend, sat in front of him and said words that never were true than that moment of time.

“About fuckin’ time.”

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CHAPTER 9:

AIDEN, THE LITTLE FIRE

The falling sun was at its most beautiful, the slight shades of gold, purple and red, made the backyard feel like a dream. One stuffed to the brim with a familiarity that was dripping from the pores, a home filled with dust inside Devon's mind that hasn't had its door opened in ten long years.

The headache though, still anchored at the center of Devon's skull forced that door shut still, and Devon was beginning to feel it erode, and keep him in his dream until there was nothing more to dream about. And the itchy grass was a constant reminder that this was a real, terrifying, and nightmarish reality.

He looked at the creature as if it was the first time seeing him, a face more wide than anything normal, with a mouth that spread from ear to ear, a sharp nose that crooked a little at its tip, the center of those fire red eyes held a black slit like a snakes, his dark coal skin seemed stretched over his bones with burn scars at his ribs and neck, and he was split in half at the hips with cat like hind legs below and a leathery tail that seemed to have its own mind. The Demon was far from cute, almost, but not quite, like a Gremlin with two scythes sprouting from the top of his forehead to his lower back. But he wasn't ugly either, something deep inside those fire filled eyes and charred skin was a compassion and love that Devon could *feel* but not understand.

"What's your name?" He asked and the Imp looked at him with a slight smile across his wide lips and scratched at his collar where the bell tied to it jingled just slightly. "I have been called by many, but right now it is Aiden."

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Devon put on a smile and stuck out his hand. "I'm Devon, but you can call me D, if you want." Aiden raised his hands and took a step back. "I can't." He looked sad, "I can hurt you- I have before, I won't hurt anyone again." Devon put his hand down and thought for a moment, *Hurt me? Just by touch?*

"Would gloves help?" He remembered an old pair he had in his closet that might fit him. The imp, Aiden shrugged, and Devon stood up and ran to his disaster of a bedroom to dig in his closet, he found a pair of black leather gloves that he wanted to gift his nephews, he knew he could easily get another pair next time he sees them, so he thought nothing of it.

He ran back and tossed Aiden the gloves, he put them on curiously.

Devon sat back down in the grass and smiled at the thought of a pair of gloves floating around with no body, He asked in curiosity, "How does that work? Are the gloves gone now?"

Aiden shrugged, "I am sure the Gwenavine knows the science behind it, but whatever I possess as mine will move to the realm I'm in."

Devon sighed watching Aiden wiggle his fingers inside the gloves, "I have a million questions now," Devon said, feeling the knot in his brain tighten, "Let's not focus too much on that nonsense now, Lit-" His glowing eyes closed quickly, "Devon."

Aiden reached out his hand and smiled, the smallest bit of smoke leaving his lip, "let's see if this works."

Aiden looked at his hand nervously then at Devon's.

"I won't be mad if you hurt me, it's worth a shot, right?" Devon said.

"You can't help it, plus I think you have more control than you think." Aiden nodded the smoke from his lips fading slightly and the glow in his eyes receding, "shall we get this over with?"

Their palms touched Devon could feel warmth under the gloves like a fire in a furnace, slowly like a muffled echo he could feel a sadness reverberate through his hand and to his heart, he felt a lump rise in his throat and when he blinked a flash of a young woman filled the darkness. He didn't dare let go, as his palm began to sweat, he blinked again.

She smiled and laughed in an open field, *was that her?* A thought not his filled his mind. Her fire red hair glimmered in the sun, deeply rooted in his mind it was an image he couldn't get out of his head.

Aiden smiled brightly, like he had an itch a decade old, finally scratched, flame lit eyes widened as Devon could feel the tears begin to

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pour from him. He blinked again his ears filled with screams of the woman.

A fire that burned, *oh it burns!*

He took his hand away, a metal to a magnet. A tingle from his palm to the pain in Devon's head resonated through his arm.

They looked at each other for a while as Devon wiped the tears from his face and chuckled. "That was- that was pretty heavy," He laughed. The demon nodded and looked at Devon's hand, then darted to his as he wiggled his fingers. "Who was that?" Aiden looked at him and crooked his hairless eyebrow, "Did you see something?"

"A woman with red hair." Aiden's eyes shot open and he shook his head. "Don't worry about her. Just a witch." His ears twitched as he looked away mumbling to himself, "Yeah they tend to just hang around huh?"

Best to leave that alone, Devon thought, afraid to pry any further.

"Was that given to you as well?" Pointing at the bell around his neck, doing his best to change the subject, Aiden looked at him wide eyed, as if he was snapped out of a train of thought that he didn't want lost, he nodded sadly as he touched the bell with his gloved hands.

"She was a friend," he said, eyes lost in thought. "When she was a kid she gave it to me, and we were inseparable for many years." His hellfire eyes looked at Devon despairingly as he thumbed the bell, "Something bad happened, and..." His eyes shot down, "She was a good friend, I wish I was as good to her as she was to me." His eyes wide, he let out a sniff as he glanced up at Devon jingling the bell between his fingers. Devon understood that feeling, being so close to the verge of tears it hurt.

His mind jumped to his grandmother, seeing her lying in her bed, eyes shut stiff.

"I'm sorry," Devon looked at Aiden whose long ears were tucked down, "I've been told though, growing up, that there is place where Souls go when they die. I'm not sure that's entirely true, but you convinced me that anything can be possible."

Aiden gave a wide mouth grin, "Heaven?" He said and Devon nodded. "I know of it, it isn't like what people think at all. It's only where the pure go, the impure souls are put back into the Eternal Well and are put back in the flesh to begin anew." He smiled like a school kid who learned something new in school.

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"I never thought of it like that." Devon admitted. "It makes sense, kinda," Devon rubbed the back of his neck where the headache leaked out from, "I guess." The face of the woman still burned in his eyes and his arm tingled, an aftershock of shaking hands with a demon.

Aiden nodded as if he understood, eyes lowering to the grass. "It's a good thing that she's there." Devon started. "That means she's happy and at peace." He smiled at his little friend who seemed to perk up a bit.

Devon couldn't find it in himself to forgive his newfound friend for the way he was acting, "Why did you mess with me?"

Aiden laid down in the grass and looked up to the sky, tendrils of smoke left his mouth. "I was only trying to be helpful." Aiden said after kicking up one of his pawed feet on the other.

"Helpful?" Devon decided to lay next to him using his hands as a head rest. "Sorry, but you were not helpful." He reached into his pocket and grabbed his pack of cigarettes and fumbled with a lighter that wouldn't light.

Aiden took off one of the gloves and with a snap of his fingers his inch long claw held a flame at its pointed tip, Devon leaned over and puffed on the flame and chuckled to himself as he laid back. "What a strange and wonderful world." He quoted one of the books he read a long time ago. The main character found himself trapped on a planet enriched with oddities.

Devon decided it would be best to look at this new perspective of life the same way the hero did.

Wide eyed and ready to learn, instead of stubborn and miserable. "I'm sorry I hurt you." Aiden admitted after a moment, he then put his two fingers to his lips and blew out a ring of smoke after, mimicking Devon. "Don't worry about it, the past is past, just friends don't do things like that to each other. Not humans anyways."

The Imp shrugged "You were late, so I helped... and then you got lazy and stood there, so I thought it was a good idea to move you along quicker." Devon laughed "Oh and what about scaring me half to death the first night I saw you?"

"I don't get noticed that often, even the Maidens and Knights can't see me sometimes, and when they do they only see me as a pest, or worse a monster for the more inexperienced ones, psht, to think, I'm some sort of *Pookah*, I'm here because of them-" He bit his tongue and sighed, Devon

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had no idea what he was talking about and he figured it was another thing he didn't want to talk about. "When I saw you look at me, I was very happy, I didn't mean to scare you, besides, humans are just too jumpy." Aiden smiled as he made another smoke ring.

"The bathroom?" Aiden's smile grew brighter. "You didn't listen to me when I talked to you, you fainted that night and I had to drag you all the way back to the nest you made and give you back your thing. I tried talking to you several times, I told you who I am and everything and you just looked at me, I was being polite too!" He added the last part like he was being rude. "I'm sorry; I just couldn't hear you, I only felt you there." The Imp nodded. "Exactly what I thought, so, I left you a note when you seemed sad."

It all made sense in a way, in an odd, twisted way. A lonely Creature that only wanted friendship and the only person that could see him ignored him and thought he wasn't real. "I don't have a reason to be sad anymore, do I?" Devon said looking at the smoke rise from wide lips, Aiden looked at him curiously. "I have a friend now." He smiled and Aiden cracked a grin that spit his face in half. "Do you mean it?" Devon nodded and Aiden laughed.

After a moment of long silence, Devon found himself staring up at the tree and its thick branches, when Aiden broke his train of thought. "D," Aiden began. Devon looked over to see him blowing smoke rings again.

"I don't want you to die." The demon said blandly.

"I don't plan on it," Devon threw himself up, "What the hell?" *Who the hell would say something like that?*

Well, he would be the type... he chuckled to himself.

"You will though. I kind of feel like it's my fault, I-I Just wanted to be your friend." Devon looked back at the sky, slightly annoyed, he pushed a feeling down, the same feeling he got when he lost Max. "We are friends, and I won't die!" He won't die, he refused it at least for a very long time, he hoped. "If I can find a way to keep you alive, can I do it?" Devon scratched his chin. "Yea, sure." The imp smiled. "I'll think of something, friend, I'll do anything!" Devon decided to leave it at that, the rest of the sunset he spent time trying to think of what to talk about to Aiden, "Why do you have burns on you?" he realized by his expression a question like that was still rude. "I- I, well, you see I-"

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"It's ok, really, you don't have to say anything else if you don't want to." Devon explained, feeling guilty for ever bringing it up. Aiden nodded his head and looked tugged at the bell around his neck. They sat in silence again, until the Hound rose suddenly, sending a few butterflies and other insects that rested on him, fluttering away in a hurry. "Keagan is in danger, he summons me." He looked at Aiden and lowered his head. "I leave you to his guard, Little Fire." The Hound leapt into the shadows. Tendrils of blackness wrapping around its body before it sucked the beast in.

That's actually kind of cool. Devon thought as he looked at the spot that the hound vanished. *Keagan!*

He laughed, *of course it's Keagan.*

"Humans and their troubles." Aiden rasped, laying back down one of the many butterflies landed on his gloved finger and he smiled like it was something new.

"What do you mean? You spirits seem to have troubles of your own." It was only a day ago the hound appeared and saved him from a beautiful woman. Aiden crooked his head. "Some half naked woman got her arm snatched off by that dog-thing." Devon said as he waved his hand to the direction of where the dog ran too.

Aiden shot up eyes wide and tail flickered, "Ah yes, I knew something was strange, when you got back, did she molt?" Devon shrugged. "A most foul and ugly thing, they feed of men's souls and use it to purify their waters, most of the time they lay hidden under the water and tangle flesh-er- humans feet in weeds. If you touch them it stings like a jellyfish and can kill you just as fast. You are lucky." Devon cringed as Aiden spoke. "She was so beautiful." he said idly *even the beautiful are deadly*, the note read, *are they all deadly*. He thought as he saw a butterfly land on the branch directly above him.

He looked closer to see a tiny creature about the size of his thumb that blended in perfectly with the bark, rise on two of its twigs like legs.

It prowled and stalked the butterfly as it rested, with a hard pounce it grabbed on to the butterfly and tore its wings off leaving the mangled carcass to fall between Devon and Aiden. "Ah the Fae are finally awakening!" Aiden said. The Fae, as Aiden called it, put the wings on its back and the wings fluttered, a beautiful metallic blue took to the air. "Those are the real pests. Hard to rid of and even harder to kill." Devon blinked and the Fae was gone, he had too much to learn, he felt as if

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everything he was taught was wrong, even his eyes deceived him for many years.

So this is my strange world now...

CHAPTER 10:

The Lost Maiden

Keagan stood firmly behind Gael as she discussed the importance of seeing her friend, who neither of them never met before. Like Gael, Keagan never liked lying to get what they needed but these situations called for a little dishonesty.

The nurse, in her deep blue scrubs was a mask of indifference, her overly painted face and folded arms stood emotionless as Gael pleaded her heart out to the woman.

A perfect statue of the bleach coated building they stood in.

“Please Ma'am, I know she isn't family, but it is very important that we speak to her. My mother is a therapist and she said at times like this friend are just as important as family.” Gael shifted slightly and made herself look smaller. She was a tiny woman, but always a presence to be noticed, and she knew how to look exactly how she needed to look and act exactly how she needed to act in situations like this.

He shifted closer to Gael, to give more of a perspective, where she looked weak, he was to look strong. When she needed to look strong, he would step back. Their little dance of manipulation was unsettling and a little fun rolled into one.

His eyes shifted naturally to the scraping of slippers on dull linoleum floors- She was ancient, her snow-white hair cut nearly to the scalp and bloodshot blue eyes distant and soulless as she shuffled by, hand swatting at the air, mumbling about dancing moon beams.

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It was too late for her, too many years with her mind lobotomized with drugs to see her as anything more than the madness she lived in. Even from behind he could see Gael's face twist as the woman walked by. *It could've been her*, he thought with a twist in his gut that made him grateful that it wasn't. She looked to think the same.

"It doesn't matter what your mother thinks, my doctor has clearly stated that she needs only her family this early in the sessions. Come back another time and we will see." Gael kept silent for only a moment before she chose her already pre-rehearsed words. "If someone in her family was to agree to have her see us, would your doctor contest that?"

The woman's face finally moved- her lips pursed for an instant that made Keagan smile. Gael knew her people and Keagan, couldn't fathom how she manages that skill.

"I don't see a problem with that," The woman sighed, conceding her defeat as her posture gave into the weight of 30 minutes of back and forth. Gael turned with the perk that made him fall in love with her to begin with, "Can you please get Kevhin dear, no rush." The nurse clicked her tongue.

Keagan made his way to the front lobby, involving Kevhin wasn't the first plan, Gael needed to keep family away at first so she can examine them in a temperate setting, but it was now unavoidable.

The psychiatric ward itself had his hair standing on end, its overly bright lighting with white floors and walls made him squint. The moans and cries of the mentally ill and abandoned echoed through them, the energy of a thousand tortured minds leeching into the walls and giving the bleached air a weight that shifted uncontrolled and slugged.

"Do you see this, Roderick?" A man with a scar from the top of his shaved scalp to the bottom of his chin breathed hollow words as Keagan walked by, "He's not from here too," the man smiled with grey teeth, Roderick was a well-used plush bear, and the man's thin grey lips pressed deeply into its head, wet from drool, "The *Seer* told us he is here for her." The man juttet in his seat and gargled a laugh, and Keagan shuttered as he hurried, "She was right, he does look a little out of place."

He washed away the thoughts of the man when he entered the lobby, seeking out his *Calm* and bringing it to his conscious he took a heavy breath out and balanced his breathe in two steps. A trick he learned a few years back when he was a Squire, it helped, more often than not, and something he relied on, thanks to a studder he kept at bay for years.

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Kevhin was the older brother of Kara, and it was him that called The Children of the Moon when his parents sent her to this mad house of horrors tucked away in the middle of Missouri. She was in and out for years from what he said, and all because they never believed a word she said about her abilities.

Their intentions may have been well in the beginning, but now they used a power of attorney to throw her away. Poor girl didn't live with them for two years, and they won their case and became bullies in an instant.

Keagan never questioned his place as a Hunter, and Knight Sergeant. They took him in when he needed it the most and he owed them every bit of the life he lives now. Even if it requires having to travel, or stretch the truth, or kill.

Keagan walked the short hallway and saw Kevhin outside, taking a heavy and long drag of a cigarette. He could smell the sweet smell already and reached into his pocket and gripped his lighter on instinct.

As Keagan opened the glass door, Kevhin looked at him with bright eyes filled with worry. His hair was long and dark, and his skin pale. His jaw was a near perfect square with a patchy beard. Thin lips squished into a forced smile, showing wrinkles that shouldn't be there for a twenty-four-year-old.

Kevhin took in a deep drag of his cigarette, his bright eyes lost in the wooded view surrounding them. Keagan lit his own cigarette, Gael said take his time, so he will, besides it's not every day he could freely talk to another man about, well, everything and being able to have that freedom was nice.

Keagan wrapped himself tighter in his coat as he took a drag. The cold wet air was the exact opposite of Austin and Keagan despised it. He looked around the woods, searching in his mind for a way to start a conversation.

"It's beautiful here," He began, "Chilly but beautiful." Kevhin gave him a quick mumble and kept his head down. Keagan attempted again, "Do you hunt out here?" He never went hunting, at least for things in this Realm, from what he could remember anyways, "A few of the squires said this place was a perfect hunting ground."

"No." Kevhin responded taking another drag of his cigarette. Keagan leaned on the wall next to Kevhin. "Well, what do you do? In your free time?"

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The man looked at him and shrugged, "What does that have to do with what's going on now?" He said smoke leaving his lips.

Keagan reached for his Calm again, stifling an exhaustive sigh his gut wanted to push out, "Well..." Keagan began but lost the want to talk after. After a long and uncomfortable silence Keagan put out his butt and began to walk inside.

Gael was always better with people anyways, his job wasn't to socialize or 'mingle', his job was to guard his Maiden. That was something he strived his best to do, his absolute priority in life. Although, most of the time, it turned out to be him following behind her looking the part of a brute, which he found amusing.

He suddenly missed his sword that was safely tucked away at their hotel. Situations like this seemed to be more effective when he wore it. Even currently, people still respected a sword.

Gael thought it would be better to leave his sword behind, even his Runes, only allowing him his pocketknife he had tucked away in his boot and one Rune he never went without. *I can still do some damage if need be.*

"Your turn is up. Remember stick to the script and this could end up working out." He flung open the glass door and walked in, Kevhin close behind. They made their way down the hall, avoiding the man sitting down stroking a drool-soaked Roderick, still mumbling and still half dead to the world.

Such a beautiful part of the world and everyone is assholes, He thought as he turned the corner to the nurses' station. To no surprise Gael was already fast friends with the expressionless nurse, who was now positively giddy as Gael read her palms.

Keagan cleared his throat and waited for them to finish. Gael, of course, only read the good things in the Nurses' palm being sure to avoid the negative, with the woman's attitude this past hour there had to be plenty to sift through. "Kevhin, dear." The Nurse smiled looking up to Gael who more than likely promised her a great change is about to happen. "You didn't tell me your sister had such great friends, they came all the way from, where is it Gael, Austin, that's right!"

Kevhin planted a smile on his face and started to speak his scripted words, "yes Ma'am, the Richards have been--"

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“Oh! Let’s go see Kara right away!” she said, hurrying him along down the hall. Kevhin was aghast as they began to walk, glancing back at them with a slight smile on his face.

“What did you say to her?” Keagan whispered, half smiling. Gael wrapped her fingers around his with a smile planted on her face. “What she wanted to hear.” Keagan did his best not to look gruff but the woman’s banter to Kevhin telling him all about his sister the past few weeks made it difficult. “So, you lied.” Gael shrugged at the comment, “Not really, is omission lying?” she said, avoiding Keagan’s glare with a mischievous smile.

They abruptly stopped in front of a door marked ‘Airden, K’, with a rustle of the keys the door was unlocked, and Gael jumped past everyone as soon as the door was cracked and jumped in.

“Kara!” She started in excitement as she busted in. For Gael that excitement was never faked just for her being who she was, but that never set aside her goals she wanted to be the first in and the first to examine everything in the little room.

Keagan, however, needed to fake his smile, white seemed to leach onto anything with color, even the once bright blue bedspread faded from years of bleaching. The bed frame covered in thick layered paint and screws drilled into the floor made Keagan’s teeth crack. The only thing that stood out in the room was the colorful drawings stacked an inch high on a metal desk which too, was screwed to the floor, and drearily white.

A small framed black-haired girl stood facing the wall looking at a picture taped to the wall. Her pale skin did not seem immune to the leech of white inside the building; her fingers idly rubbed the surface of a picture as she murmured incoherently.

The picture was of two dark haired children under a tree both smiling brightly, it was them, Kevhin and Kara Airden no older than five.

Maybe it is too late for her after all.

“Kara. It’s me, Kevhin, I brought your friends here to see you.” Her body tensed when she heard his voice and she turned, green eyes, distant from the world, looked at her brother glazed and lost, “Kevhin?” she asked with a quivering whisper.

“What did you give her?” Gael growled words sharper than a blade. There was a laundry list of drugs that could block a Maiden from the Art. Gael knew most of them from her past alone. But to a place like this, those

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drugs were meant to calm their minds. Instead, it made matters worse for the Maidens.

“Nothing more than what we would prescribe any other patient with her condition.” The nurse said blandly. “She is in...” Gael cut her off before she could finish. “Condition? And *what* condition is that?” Keagan quickly, instinctively, grabbed her hand to soothe her. It seemed to only calm her slightly.

“She is in the best of care Gael... our doctor is the best in the state.” The nurse looked at Gael with wide eyes and pouted lips, afraid. *Good*, Keagan thought, Gaels feral side is more frightening than the worst of her humane side.

Gael was too focused on Kara to care about the nurse, a tool already disposed of. She was back on her mission, analyze Kara Airden and see if there’s anything that can be done to save her. After that her mother and the Council will not rest until she is free and safe.

The air around them thickened, Gael glanced at Keagan with silver eyes. As soon as he saw the smallest reflection of himself in those power filled eyes that groan that was brewing inside him was released in one long sigh. She made up her mind, and nothing on this planet will change it.

Her hand reached out to Kara, who flinched but Gael smiled, “Its ok,” she whispered quietly, and Kara inched her head into Gaels palm and Gael began her *Cleansing*.

The nurse droned on, about Karas progress and how she has influenced the whole ward but not a single one of them was paying attention. Kara pushed herself into Gaels palm even further, letting out a slight moan as Gael did the same. A breathe shared between them as well as a single tear.

Gael pulled back her hand and Kara blinked. It was done.

Her green eyes scanned the room and fell on Kevhin, her arms raised up like an infant wanting comfort, and she spoke her first sober words, “Kevhin.” The siblings met each other, the Nurse finally shutting her mouth and a deep smile reached her painted lips. “Kevhin...” Kara sobbed out as they held each other.

“Kara?” Gaels words were a little drunk as the sliver in her eyes faded back to hazel. Kara rolled her head on her brother’s shoulder to look at Gael confused and exhausted. “Hi! It’s me Gael.” She tried to sound eager but the woe in her voice was more prevalent.

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Gael stood and wobbled, the *Cleansing* got to her as well, not only has her energy drained but sometimes the effects of drugs tend to stick to the Healer.

Gael smiled as she slowly caressed Kara's hair, eyes drooping and head heavy. Kara's glare hurt her but Gael, as strong as she was still, persisted, "You remember me silly, we grew up together, remember?" Kara shook her head and dug herself into Kevhin chest. As long as the nurse stood watch Gael had to keep lying, luckily, they were dealing with a girl who knew about the Children of the Moon and the World Unveiled.

"It's me, Gael, Gael Richards. Our moms knew each other really well, Doctor Richards is my mom." another sort of lie but Doctor Richards was a well-known practiced therapist, who kept no secret about her ties with the Children of the Moon to the public, in private she was their High Priestess and the woman who took in Gael at a very young age.

Kevhin nodded in encouragement as Kara shied away. The girl looked terrified. Eyes darting between the two and fearful glances at the nurse, it made Keagan shiver, *what did they do to you?* He couldn't help but glare at the nurse who crooked her brows challenging him.

"We used to play in the gardens and pretend we were chasing faeries." Kara's eyes seemed to brighten as she cautiously began to move away from Kevhin slowly moving to her desk, hands shaky. "We used to tell each other stories about Maidens and Knights..." Her words trailed off as Kara picked up one of the papers and pointed with a dreary smile. On it, to an untrained eye, the drawing looked like a butterfly in green and brown crayons, but to someone Unveiled it was a Fae fluttering in a field of grass.

"Yes!" Gael smiled, taking the picture, and examining it, beginning to look as miserable as Kara.

"Pretty drawings, can I see what else do you have?" Keagan thumbed the stone in his pocket as the two girls whispered to each other as they rummaged through the pictures. He glanced over at the nurse who eased her shoulders and let out a quiet smile, Kevhin standing not far from her looked ready to collapse from the stress of the past few weeks, but just as relieved as the nurse. It must be heartbreaking seeing his younger sister act like this, a grown woman's mind deluded by so many drugs it makes her act like a child.

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Gael suddenly hissed and Kara squeaked. Bringing herself back into the arms of her brother. "What is it?" He said looking down at his sister then scowling at Keagan. *What's your problem?* He scowled back.

"Just a bad Dream." Gael said ruefully. "It's not a dream... It's not a dream!" Kara said slowly and warily, her drunken eyes locked with Gaels and then the nurse. "It's real. It's all real!" She cried as she clutched a sheet of paper in her hand.

The nurse stepped in and grabbed Gael by her arm. "That's enough! We don't want her stressed out any more than what she already is." Gale calmly patiently looked at the woman, "Just a few more minutes please, Nurse Jackie." The woman let go of her arm and Gael walked to the end of the bed leaving the paper behind and she leaned on the frame, eyes for just a second showing her dreariness.

"Remember when we were younger," She began "very young, and you used to have really bad nightmares, about a man with only sharp teeth and no eyes." The girl nodded tears streaming down her cheeks, she was beginning to realize their little game. Keagan's fingers tightened around the stone in his pocket.

"And remember what I showed you, how to stop him, we said a little prayer and pretended we were witches to make him go away." Kara's eyes widened, *there, you got it now!* Keagan thought as his shoulders eased and Kara was suddenly in Gaels arms, "Yes! Finally, yes!" She pushed Gael with force, and Gael laughed in her shoulder.

Weeping into her shoulder Gael embraced her, soothing her with a smile that eased Keagan. He then looked at the nurse challengingly, if those words were said around ears that knew too much, then they would send more than just a Malevolent spirit after them.

The nurse smiled calmly as she watched the two. A chill down Keagan's spine and the white-haired woman groaned down the hall. "Excuse me." Nurse Jackie raised her finger and turned to leave the room with a smile that was all too forced. Keagan didn't like the chill, but he dismissed it as his own discomfort for a moment and made his way to the drawing. A face with no eyes and a wide mouth filled with sharp shark-like teeth.

A Crawler and the worst type, a fully evolved Crawler, known as the Masters.

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Most Crawlers would never grow past adolescence, this one could be well aged and able to possess. It could turn this into something bad, especially when he was left with only one Rune and his Maiden halfway doped up from Cleansing. He loved her for her compassion the most but now he was unable to protect her. Being caught between a Maiden and a Master Crawler with nothing but a pocketknife to fight back with. the worst situation imaginable.

A Poisonous ravenous spirit was stalking Kara and they needed to get this problem squashed, one of the few spirits that goes after the flesh and not the soul.

He needed his Companion and needed it fast. Devon will have to make friends fast with his little pest and they will have to deal with whatever Malevolent comes their way alone for the time being.

“What is that?” Kevhin said eyes darting between Keagan and the paper “Is that what’s been hurting Kara?”

Keagan nodded, “Apparently,” nobody told them that she had a Malevolent stalking her, and apparently hurting Kara. Judging by Gaels expression neither was she.

“So, what do we do?” Kevhin moaned looking at Keagan expectantly. *NOW you expect me to save the day!*

“We wait.” He gripped onto the stone in his pocket and fished it out. An ivory white, with the two circles overlapping and three triangles inside a hexagon connected at the tips in the middle.

He whispered the name only a few knew, and few will ever know. “Now, why didn’t you tell us about the Crawler?” Kevhin looked stunned and Gael silenced more words by a sharp click of her tongue.

Keagan grunted. “Hurry, you old Hound.” He mumbled as he looked at his kitty, she whispered faint words to Kara. “I will do anything to get you out of here, and I promise you I will do anything to get rid of *it*.” Those words seemed to soothe Kevhin more than his sister.

The tears were broken by ear wrenching screams, Nurse Jackie. All eyes shot to the open door to the hallway, Kevhin took a step to the door, but Keagan stopped him. It was too late for the nurse, sadly there was nothing he could do but stand his ground.

Keagan knelt and reached for his knife, he had a few strategies he could use with it still, nothing deadly but could give them a fighting chance, if his Shadow Hound doesn’t hurry.

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The ward erupted in screams and banters, the man with the scar across his scalp ran by screaming at what was behind him. A guttural roar echoed in the hallways and the Nurse let out one final blood gurgling scream.

Keagan closed his eyes for a moment, letting his gut wrench, *may she find her peace*. Blood splattered across the white walls of the hallway and the floors, then silence. Gael set a barrier around the four of them, Kara clutching on to her in a panic.

“He’s here.” Words reverberated through him louder than any scream.

“Hurry up!” He shouted to the Shadows. By the way Gaels barrier looked the Hound was the only chance of them making it out alive.

A horrid rancid scream bellowed over the chanting and yelling from the patients, he could see a shadow rise and after a moment the shadow began to move to the room, the scraping sound of heels slipping in blood, drawing closer and closer. Nurse Jackie was dead, her soul consumed, and body possessed.

Everything became quiet under the slight ringing in the air. Except for the echo of heeled footsteps and the slick wet sound of entrails sliding on linoleum.

“Keagan!” Gael called out but he was too focused on the footsteps, too focused on his next move.

“Keagan!” The words harder and harsher as the shadowed footsteps drew closer and closer. Each step was a second closer to their defeat, to their death.

Pat...

Pat...

Pat...

Pat...

Pat...

A Master crawler, in the flesh, searching for this room on stumbled legs.

“He’s coming!” Kara cried on Gael’s shoulder.

He growled, never taking his eyes off the shadow, his trance was broken, what he would give to hold his sword.

“Do something sugarplum!” He hissed, not knowing what he could do himself, there was nothing left to do but wait. She looked at him distastefully.

“I can’t if she’s still alive. Not if...”

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Her words trailed off as the pungent smell of guts and death wafted into the room, lacquered nails wrapped themselves around the door frame.

Wheezing huffing whine of the Nurse slowed as her head poked in, her dead eyes floated around in their sockets searching for them, and heaving in air, smelling their fear with satisfaction.

Her tongue broken from its home, slithered like a snake out of her split open cheek, from red lip stuck mouth, curling past her eye and opening her skin to show her pearl white skull matted in a nest of blood and hair.

Her chest split with her skin hanging, showing bone and meat. Where her stomach once was now a hollow cavity where half eaten intestines and her liver only remained.

Keagan could hear Kevhin heaving. He tightened his grip around the knife, he thought of slicing his wrist and distracting it as they ran. He thought of the nurse, he thought of his damned Runes at the bedside of their hotel room.

Hurry up!

“He has another one.” Kara whispered.

The beast that was once the Nurse wheezed deeply to Kara’s voice.

“But all he wants is me.”

The shadows deepened and the air thickened, Keagan smiled at the disaster in front of him, “Finally,” He whispered as the monstrosity dragged its way to them, “She dead, Kitty.”

“No shit,” Gael grunted as the shield fell.

The liquored nails reached out, pulling themselves so close Keagan could feel the heat from the body, but as quick as it moved Gael was even quicker.

A blast of wind moved past him, one so strong it pushed the creature back into the wall and smashing against it, blood popping out of it like a squeezed leach.

And as if by the mere thought, Keagan’s Companion leapt from his shadow and tore into the creature before it hit the ground.

Tendrils of shadow latching on to the Crawler inside the body and white fangs tearing into flesh and cracking bone.

The Shadow Hound snarled as the Beast tore from the dead body and cried out unable to even touch the Hound that mauled it.

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With a snap it was free from the corpse of the nurse and Keagan raised his hand to his Companion, who stopped instantly and waited, ready to pounce on Keagan's command.

It rose on long thin legs. Its body was a skeleton with stretched skin, twitched as it looked at the Hound, huffing and wheezing. The eyeless head moved beyond Keagan, to Kara who shivered like a leaf. Its head twitched back to the Hound and thin long arms raised, a finger at the Hound, it growled.

And the hound growled back.

"Let us fight, Tainted One!" The Hound darted for the Malevolent.

"Move!" Gael shouted to the hound and with a wisp of blackness it was gone. A blink later light encompassed the Crawler. It hissed and moaned at the agony spinning around to the four in the room.

It cried out as its body shredded into nothingness.

Gael with her hand still raised gasped for air. Her silver eye darted around the room. "Kitty?" Keagan went to reach for her hand. She growled but he took it anyways. "It's ok. It's over." He assured her.

She closed her eyes and lowered her hand. "That was closer than what I would like it to be." She mumbled tightly gripping Keagan's fingertips. "I know, baby." He said as he took her in.

"I know."

CHAPTER 11:

By the Horns

The morning light woke Devon earlier than usual. Not working left, him back on a regular sleeping pattern, it seemed. For some, that was a good thing, for him he had no idea how to bide his time.

One day in and he was already wandering the house with Aiden close behind. Slowly cleaning the mess, he made as best as he could, super gluing together a statue of a woman meditating, and gently redecorating the living room to where it was before. With a roar from his gut stopping him, he decided it would be best to begin by making breakfast.

In that new morning routine, Aiden began by talking his ears off, telling him all about his thoughts on his roommates and the Children of the Moon, on one hand he seemed sort of put off by them and with the other he seemed like he cared for them. As indecisive as a cat, and shameless, Aiden was good company to have around.

Devon could understand the confliction, all he wanted was to be left alone and even though he generally was, a new set of eyes

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appeared at the back of his head, and it wasn't Aiden this time, it was Gael's.

Wherever she was right now, he knew she was keeping a close eye on him. On the other hand, reluctantly, he wanted to learn everything he could about the creature sitting in front of him, and the spirit at the lake whose hand was still half buried where the Hound left it in the back yard. And the secret circle of witches that hid themselves among society. As he ate his toast and bacon with ketchup sandwich, he looked at Aiden waiting for his time to speak but that time was a hard coming, he was all too eager to speak when no one before would listen.

"What are you?" He interrupted Aiden, who lounged on the table where Devon sat. Aiden scratching his blistered back and shrugged.

"So, you mean to tell me you've existed not knowing what you are?" His red eyes glared at Devon while he was focused on that itch on his back.

"I know what I was- hey wait! Aren't you asking yourself the same damn thing?" He said snidely, Aiden was developing a foul mouth rather quickly.

"What are you talking about? I'm a human!" The food in Devon's mouth made it hard to talk. Aiden got up on all fours and stretched himself in a position where he used his horn to scratch. "Oh yea, that's it!" His eyes rolled back as he reached the right spot. Devon gave him a look that made Aiden shake himself then sit back up right.

"I'm a spirit then." he said finally as he looked at Devon defiantly. He could only roll his eyes in response *If he didn't want to talk about it then fine*. After a few moments of silence Aiden went back to talking about the Children. "What reason do you think it is, that they can see every other friggin spirit except for me? After all I did for them, and that Maiden didn't even see me. What is she blind! It's not hard to pick me out of a crowd, I mean, look at me!" He flexed his bony arms Devon couldn't help but laugh compared to the only other two spirits he had seen Aiden was grotesque, vulgar and, cocky.

It was hard to see him surrounded by women spirits or not. "Oh, like you bring women to your Den on a nightly basis. Tell me D, how many notches do you have on your belt? Me, I lost count at 1200, yeah, live a few thousand years, breathe fire out of your mouth then compare that number." Aiden sneered.

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Devon wiped his mouth with his hand and looked at him for a moment before standing up and going back to the kitchen to wash his plate. *1200? bullshit...* He began counting his short list of ‘notches’ it was a short list, a very, very short list. “It’s not quantity, its quality.” he said as he vigorously scrubbed his plate.

Aiden laughed. “Of course, it’s about quantity, it’s your purpose to breed! So, get busy!” Devon did his best to focus on the glass plate but to no avail.

“I’ve met someone, you know.” The demon stood up and gave an overly enthusiastic expression putting his hands to his chin in a sense of wonderment, “Oh please, do go on,” he said mockingly.

“She’s pretty, and sweet, her name is Valerie and I met her at the bar the other day.” Aiden jumped up excitedly. “OOOoo goodie and have you mated yet?” His words sounded a bit more sincere but still held on to a bit of sarcasm.

“No, humans don’t work like that, were all about finding the one and falling in love.” Devon realized he was defending himself more than he should. “You’ve had a few thousand years to figure that out, you should tell me what love is, Romeo.”

Aiden laughed, “Your kind live for what, maybe a hundred years, two hundred, if you’re lucky and you speak about this love and finding one. Spread your seed kid! That is one of your key purposes, mate, damn you!”

Aiden’s lips could nearly touch his ears and Devon’s cheeks were beginning to become sore, “It’s not that easy you little imp, there is this thing called wooing.”

Aiden laughed hysterically patting his knee in the process “Wooing? You read too much, little poet, this Valerie girl, all you have to do is grab her by the horns and-” His gestures were perfectly clear on what he was going to say next, Devon cut him off by throwing a rag at him which passed right through him.

They both laughed and to Devon it felt good. *So, what if I am crazy? At least he’s a better conversation than most people.*

Tears rolling down his eyes he leaned into the countertop feeling an ease roll off his shoulders-

THUD

Aiden hissed as the wicker Shield fell from the wall and toppled down, plates clanked in the cabinets with the house’s shutters.

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THUD

Devon went to the door and opened it. Above he could see the dome of the barrier ripple and heave under a great force. Squinting Devon saw her, the true nightmare from the lake, the once beautiful and now wicked, Malevolent Beauty.

THUD...THUD....THUD....

The Beauty cried out, shaking the Barrier with her wallowing cry, Devon put his hands to his ears as the note that could shatter glass shook his blood and curdled his mind.

Devon's heart began to pound out his chest, remembering her putrid smile and vile eyes, his breath left his body and tears rolled down his cheeks.

Aiden bolted between his legs in a plume of smoke.

THUD

"There she is!" Aiden roared as he began his climb up the tree, "You bitch!" He waved his fist as plumes of smoke left his mouth, gripping on to the trees highest branches as it rattled and swayed from the force of the Beauty's fist.

"You mess with D, you mess with me! Common!"

THUD!

"Aiden, shut up!" Devon said as he pulled out his phone, there was only one person he knew to call, Gael.

No answer. He tried again, *THUD, THUD, THUD*, no answer, his hands were shaking as he tried to call Keagan, again no answer.

A soul-shattering screech and he fell to his knees, his mind blank and only filled with terror. Devon looked up with tear-soaked eyes to see Aiden mocking the intruder high on the treetop. His phone fell from his hands, his eyes stuck on her as she made her assault on the shield above him.

THUD, THUDTHUD, the dome began to crack from the force.

Within the cracks he could faintly make her twisted demonic grin, razor sharp teeth dripping with purple and blood.

"Aiden!"

The barrier shattered, within the falling transparent shards he saw a distorted flame as large as a child leap from the branches, roaring with her screams.

Aiden caught hold of one of her wings and bit down.

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She screamed, as her wing began to boil and burn, her razor-sharp teeth exposed as the flames consumed her.

Aiden, the little fire, leapt to her back and dug his claws into her a second before she hit the ground, her body heaving as it was half buried under the dirt. The flame disappeared from the demon, the Beauty nothing more than charred remains and broken wings.

Aiden crawled from the spirit. "Easy!" He grinned wiping his gloved hands free of the flames.

Devon was rooted to the ground, clenching his jaw tight his teeth hurt. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move, his heart was racing and his whole body tingled as he breathed in short, and shallow breaths.

What the fuck...

As Aiden strolled casually to him, faint shadows poured in from all directions, shadows that didn't belong and silhouettes of figures unnatural. Some short and thin, some tiny as a mouse, others as large as a tree, moved along the yard and blurred figures soon joined and surrounded themselves around the smoldering corpse of the Beauty.

They hissed and moaned as they twitched over their bodies, some screaming out in pain. *How can he not hear this?*

"Aiden..." Devon whispered as he covered his ears to a roar that shook his soul. "I honestly don't see how the Hound was having such a rough time." Aiden said arrogantly, devoid of what was happening behind him.

"Dude..." Devon muttered, he tried everything in his power to speak, to warn him of what was happening behind him.

"Lucky you, I was around, eh?" Aiden said as the shadows and blurred figures began bubbling and collapsing around the corpse, forming a purple-black umbra around it.

The Beauty began to twitch, slow spasms that led to stronger more fierce seizures, her wing snapped into place and a thick plume of feathers spurted out of it as the burned flesh crumbled off.

"Aiden, behind you!"

Aiden turned his head in time to see, the Beauty rising from the ground, her face twisted in a rage leaving her pointed teeth growling and purple poisoned eyes glinting. The Imp only laughed and roared back, he was more like a lion cub than a lion.

Her hand with knarred and pointed fingers grabbed the other from the mound it was buried in. "I only came to take back what is mine," Her voice

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echoed in Devon's ears, a voice that leaked power and death. "I have no patience in waiting." She jabbed the hand back to the nub and adjusted it just right, wiggling her fingers as black sludge rooted the nub in place.

"Leave now," Flames lit in his mouth as Aiden growled. "Or die!" He adjusted his gloves as he spoke ready to fight.

The Beauty hackled, "Little one, you see you are out matched, but you still stand and fight. You are weak."

Aiden sneered, "You have no idea how wrong you are."

The Beauty's looming gaze landed on Devon like it was the first time, her enraged eyes grew to hunger.

"Ah yes, the boy from the lake, you have many friends I see." Her wings flapped and she began to rise from the ground, her black crow-like feet met at Devon's chest. He looked at her, horrified, from what stood before him.

He put everything he had into rising to his feet. *I have to run, I have to move.* Before she could get any closer to him, Aiden pounced on her, sinking fiery teeth into her heel. She growled as she grabbed him by his horn and tossed him aside, sneering at him as he landed on the tip of the roof.

He pounced before she could move another inch, this time catching a hold of her wing, black blood dripping from the open wound, she hissed and spun back, reaching her long fingers to Aiden, as he clawed his way up to her back leaving burns where he scratched.

She spun as she hit the ground, trying to catch the fire that spread all over her leaving cuts lit in flames deep in her porcelain skin.

She caught Aiden's heel. With a roar, she threw him down, air cracking from the force, again and again screaming in blood curdling rage; she beat the Imp into the dirt. His body limp, Aiden was tossed aside like a scrap of meat for a dog.

Leaving Devon alone as the jagged grin of the beauty drew closer to him, "Aiden." Devon moaned, afraid to wipe his wet face. She grinned at Devon with black soaked fangs. "What do you want with me?" he shouted, body quivering in cold sweat.

"I want your soul," She said simply. "Such a ripe and well-aged soul stuck inside a young, cowardly boy, let me take you away from your burdens, your fear, your pathetic life." Her strangely long finger began stroking his chin.

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The tiny sting of a scratch and Devon jolted back, he felt a sickness come over him instantly, it spread throughout his body and his eyes began to close.

He fought it.

Every beat of his heart fought the poison searing at his skin. *I'm not ready; I can't die. I won't die!*

His mind drifted to the red headed woman in the field, she spun carelessly in a world of fire, she had something inside her, he could feel it, the same feeling he felt when he was around Gael. Something he had as well, a spark? No, a *will*. He felt his body shift and apart of him slip from his grasp.

His soul.

NO!

His eyes opened and suddenly warmth washed over him, his mind washed away and his heart beat faded, he felt the air and the sun around him seep its way into him, and *Through him*. He grabbed the air and without a thought he put up his hand, a thin film enveloped in front of him stinging The Beauty. She drew back and steam rose from her wrist where the film struck her.

"Oh, fuck" Devon said in a gasp, eyes glued to what he created- as thin as a sheet of paper, it enveloped around him. A Shield of air he was struggling with, no not it, the air itself.

"Ah, it all makes sense now." She said as she pushed her fingertips to the film bending it just slightly as she singed her long fingers. "You have been *Touched? No something more...*" Devon scooted back as the film bent further around her hand, her palm bubbling and burning as she smiled a jagged smile. "...Divine." Her eyes hungry, her smile twisted, she laughed.

"Leave me alone!" Devon grunted as he felt her push on the film protecting him from her. His hands began to quiver his muscles began to twitch as he struggled with the Air and the poison in his body, "Go away!" He shouted.

She twisted her hand and the film tore.

This can't be it!

She crawled into the tear, dark eyes looking into his. Her poison seeping its way into every bone in his body and the fight with the air that he finally lost too, he finally gave up. He leaned back straight with the wall

THE NIGHTMARE, THE REVELATION

and Devon closed his eyes just as her hand reached for his face, “This can’t be it!”

A great flash of light illuminated the darkness in his eyes, a howling screech followed, “Devon!” He heard Gael shout.

Oh, thank fuck...

“D!” Keagan huffed as he felt something tug at him.

Another howling screech and another flash of light this time his eyes twitched open long enough to see inside the whiteness, a winged figure take flight, *she’s gone?*

The last thing he remembered was his body feeling cold. He felt sick as his body fell to the warm wooden patio.

His body was raised, something taking a hold of his limp body. *Is this it... is this the end...* He wondered as chills spread throughout his body.

His eyes drearily opened, Gael smiled with tired eyes as she pat him on the shoulder, Keagan not a step behind her. Behind them stood a young girl and a man, who could be her brother with faces of confusion.

And Aiden, gentle Aiden, lying at his chest curled up in a ball with a bright smile on his face, “What happened?” He said finally. His mind was filled with fog and blurred eyes made it hard to focus. “You Awoke,” Gael said fixing her hair in a bun.

“A late bloomer, some would say. But you finally *Awoke*.” Devon closed his eyes, he wished would never have opened them, deep down he was glad that he did. He groaned and put the soft throw pillow over his face. “Oh c'mon! It's not that bad!” Gael chuckled. “Rest and get some food in you. You have a lot to learn.”

Devon groaned and they laughed, even Aiden. He felt the warmth of Aiden as he nuzzled back onto his chest. “I am glad you're ok, friend, we showed that bitch.”

“Not really, we got our asses kicked.” Devon laughed and with it a headache came. “Damnit,” He shouted into the pillow. “I don't want this!” His eyes peaked out to Gael whose eyes glinted a brilliant silver, a silver that felt familiar, comfortable even. “Can I go back to healing you now?” She said as she reached out, “Damnit!” he winced and she pulled back, “If I don't heal you, you'll die, D,” she was firm as she put her hand on his forehead.

“Mother fucking damnit, yeah...” She laughed and a cool chill rolled through his forehead and to his chin, then across his body.

THE NIGHTMARE, THE REVELATION

“Stop your whining,” Aiden’s fire eyes looked up at Gael who seemed to barely be aware of him, “At least you’ll have every Maiden in the world wanting your seed. To think there is only three of you left in this world, that’s some mighty fine odds there!”

Three?

“What are you talking about?” But he got no response from Aiden, instead the dark-haired girl spoke, her voice very soft and mink, “Is he talking about Borse?”

The room ticked on in silence and he let it. He didn’t want to talk he had no reason to, but that name dug a hole straight to his soul.

Borse....

AIDEN'S SONG

ACT 2

THE PARADE OF STRANGE

In a breath they were gone, all that I have worked for, all that I dreamed for. Gone. The first nobles are no more, a House so meticulously crafted by the generations, now doomed to fade into oblivion.

And yet I find solace in the future that now rests in the truly unknown. Damned the ancestors and their curse, I look to you now, as we always should have- my future, my Poet....

- FROM THE PERSONAL DIARY OF MAIDEN GWENAVINE IV

CHAPTER 12:

THE FALCONS NEST

Donavhin swung his bokken.

Thwack!

His shoulder gave way to the counter, and he raised his bamboo sword back to stance. He huffed and refocused, preparing for the next strike from Laine 'Nori' Takashi.

Thwack, their two bokken pressed against each other, Nori was hard to read, face hard as ice and eyes laser focused, and already ten steps ahead of Don.

Nori twisted his wrist and pushed, forcing Don twist his in such a way that left his chest open. His trainer eyed him and tisked, taking the initiative and swung for Dons ribs.

Don jumped back and deflected. He buried down the sting echoing from his wrist to elbow and swung.

Thwack, clap, Thwack

Nori moved back and forward again, *Empty fade*.

Don pivoted at the thrust and deflected- he nearly lost his grip but rebounded almost immediately.

Nori's eyes were wide, and his face drenched in sweat, his grin was maddening. Knowing Nori, Don was beginning to challenge him and, to Don, spoke volumes of his progress.

Since childhood Nori always pushed himself to the absolute limit with everything he set his mind to, and this time, for the past

year and a half they both found themselves challenging each other with swords Don swung for Nori's neck.

Blocked.

He swung for the core and yet again he was blocked. Every swing Don made was blocked by Nori.

The two men heaved for air, bare chests soaked in sweat, neither one of them let down. As Don struggled, Nori didn't show any signs of wear. The man was a force of brute strength and perseverance.

Nori egged on Don, "Come on Donny, you're better than this!" he taunted, "You're making yourself look bad."

Don huffed, his arms were heavy, and his wrists were on fire, he was done, but he needed to push himself a little further. Don swung weakly and grunted as Nori blocked it, laughing through his heaves. Don's body screamed at him to rest, but Don pushed.

Nori switched his stance when Don stepped back. An offensive stance. Don let the twist in his gut take hold for a moment, "Oh fuck," he grumbled.

A black belt at the age of 15, a national mixed martial artist champion at 20, and now a master swordsman at 25, Nori was the best Don knew at everything he stuck his mind too.

He charged. Don's cold gut let out a grunt as the two swords met. The hard smack of wood echoed in Don's ears as he struggled to keep up with swing after swing. Nori smiled behind a strand of long raven hair that lost its grip.

Don saw an opening for Nori's arm and took it.

He swung with all his effort and Nori twirled the faux blade with his and Don's wrist gave out with the flic.

His sword left his hand and hit the hard concrete floor. The smack of hard wood and flesh rang in his ears, his shoulder burned, and his head stung.

"Oh shit! You, ok? Donny?" When the room stopped spinning Don realized he was on his knees. Nori's hand rubbing at Don's neck. "Yeah, I'm fine." Don lied, he pushed away Nori's hand and stood up.

Nori stood a head shorter than most men, but he was stronger than most, His body was ripped from years of training. His face still stuck on to youth, but his dark almond eyes screamed experience.

They made their way to the closest bench outside the ten-foot square marked off by red paint on black concrete. They were in Nori's

Gym, 'The Falcon's Nest' an empty building in the early morning, save for the two of them.

Don looked at his watch, it was 4 am and he had another sleepless night under his belt. He took a deep swig of his water and held on to it like a baby with a bottle.

"You're a tough one." Nori said as he took his seat next to him. Don couldn't help but grunt. "I mean it, Don. You always have been. For the greater good, you fought off bullies with Devon; you helped me get through elementary school. I even saw you chase down a guy who took a woman's purse downtown." Nori laughed.

"Eh," Don grunted and before he could get a word in Nori continued.

"Who does that now and days, chivalry is dead, but you've held on to it your entire life. You don't know how much that means to me. To this world! That there is still a guy like you out there willing to take a blow or two for a woman's purse. For your brother. For that nerdy Asian kid, you met in Mrs. Chambers's class."

"Yeah," Don nodded painfully, remembering, "You wanted to be called Nori and people made fun of you because of it. Kids are weird."

Nori looked at him intently, Don never asked why he wanted to be called Nori, but he did so without question, that's who he wanted to be so he was. That simple.

"You're the weird one." Nori laughed.

"Most people now will just shake their head at all the bad things about this world and carry on with their mundane lives. You," Nori shrugged and took a sip from his bottle. "You make the world a better place. A light in an otherwise dark world."

Don rolled his eyes. "I did what I had to do. People would have done it too." Nori shrugged. "If you think that, but really no, no one would." Nori balanced the wooden sword on the ground. "But you would. The Innocent would, which is why I want you to take a step further than you already have."

"What step is that?" Don grumbled as he rubbed his neck. He was a part of this fraternity for four months now and all he saw from it was a group of men getting drunk and working out the next day.

Filled with book thick rules and guidelines that none of them seemed to follow apart from Nori and a small group. "We've been

watching you and how you are and how you interact with people. You're not like the others and to be honest you never were that type. We took a vote and I think it's time for you to see what the Innocent are all about." Nori said with a smile on his face.

"And what are the Innocent all about, Nori?" Don asked genuinely curious. Nori stood up with a bounce in his step. "It's kind of funny, and I know you, you'll think I'm crazy."

"Get to the point, Nori." Don laughed nearly swallowing his water wrong. "Alright, Fine, witch hunters." He gave Don a moment to laugh, and when Don was finished groaning at the pain on his neck Nori continued, "A highly organized, highly effective army of witch hunters."

Don stood up to leave, "You have fun with that." Nori whacked him in his arm with the bokken. It stung a little but nothing like the pain he felt on his neck. "They exist, Don, I thought they were nuts too, but Nick showed me a few videos and I actually met one in person, you have to believe it."

"We have over two hundred thousand members and they've all seen these Wicked as they work. You can ask every one of them and they can tell you their own stories, show you, teach you. You can see it for yourself if you want. We begin our first assault in the morning."

"First assault?" Don asked.

"Oh yeah," Nori tossed the sword at him, and Don caught it. "You're going to kill innocent people."

Nori shook his head. "Both are far from good." He stuck two fingers up in Don's face, "Only two anyway, a Wicked and her apprentice. The only two we know of who Break the Bind and can kill a human, they have and they will again."

Don crooked his eyebrow, "Break the Bind?"

"Witches can't kill people, but they can manipulate and distort memories to get people to do and say what they want them to do."

Don groaned.

"Look at us as police," Nori continued, noticing, "We've been keeping them in check for hundreds of years now but now we can make a checkmate. Their leader, Borse broke the Treaty and in doing so gave us allowance to exterminate a plague on humankind since its existence."

"A Treaty, huh? And what does this Treaty say?" Don egged on. Nori shrugged as he tapped the wooden sword on his shoulder. "Some

political nonsense if you ask me. I never got that stuff. All I know is its time for the Innocent to move.”

“Forget it, I won’t do it. Damn Nori, you’re really starting to sound just like Devon and his books. I don’t care what you think, there is no way witches can be real. They’re just stories.” His head began to pound, a face crossed his mind, a beautiful young woman speaking to his grandmother in her study, he felt a warmth in his chest and the memory was gone, “Don’t get yourself in trouble, man.” He said, distant in what he just saw, *who was that?*

Nori looked at him and smiled, “Yeah man, they’re real.” Don groaned, “And don’t worry about me getting in trouble, its legal on a technicality from what Nick says,” Nori let out a long sigh, “Do me a favor? Call out of work tomorrow and meet me at the Capitol.” Don raised his hands.

“Oh, nonono. The Capital? That’s some terrorist shit right there. I can’t have anything to do with that.” Nori laughed, “That’s where the base is. deep underground the Capital. You know all that concrete you’ve been mixing the past few months, well you just help build our base.” Don said nothing, it was a strange job all around, simply because no one besides a few were allowed to work inside, Don wasn’t one of those few, but he thought it was more on security than a secret hideout for witch hunters.

Nori patted his shoulder and grinned deeply, “It’ll be cool, you’ll be walking in with a group of big wigs. General Goode will be there, and Grand Master Ashkoon, as well.” Don shook his head letting the air of a weak laugh leave his lungs. His eyes caught his reflection in the mirror across from them, his deep blue eyes lingering for just a moment into themselves.

The Innocent, a group of witch hunters hiding as a fraternity. It was strange that each and every one of the men he met is willing to kill innocent people. They were all good people, at least the ones he met. Despite the late-night parties, they had good heads on their shoulders.

And Don, seeing himself in the mirror for what seemed like the first time in months, saw his own transformation. “You won’t be alone there. Al, Jason and Reggie will be there too,” Nori said looking at Don’s sword. “But you’re better than them. You, I would fight side by side with. Hell give me orders and I’ll follow. They will all follow you.”

Don shrugged, he didn’t like feeling pinned, which was exactly what Nori was doing. “If I catch even the slightest whiff of something bad-

” Nori smiled and raised his hands up. “I wouldn’t blame you. If I’m crazy lock me up and throw away the key.”

“Alright,” He looked down at the wooden sword in his hand.

“I’ll go.”

CHAPTER 13:

COFFEE WITH A GOD

They were love.

A couple strolled the downtown streets of Austin, beautiful silhouettes in the morning sun glinting off the wet concrete. The smell of earth and tire rubber lingered in the spring air, mixed in with the ever-present scent of lavender that became a blissful regularity in their life.

Ronal could be at home sleeping or better yet reading, but he was gladly stuck arm in arm with a beautiful woman, who was born to smell like lavender and earth, and command a will that matched her own undaunted soul.

Her short, cropped hair with long feathered bangs bounced as they walked. She walked with a purpose, causing him to fall one step behind her, aching his tired body even further. She was beaming with a gentle glow and a radiant smile, she now had her knight, and after years of training and traveling, they were back home.

And they were home.

He too, found himself smiling in his drowsy mood. The night before marked the end of their journey to his Knighthood and to find himself kneeling before her. Borse behind him point of his Claymore pressed against his back as he spoke his Vows of Knighthood.

Angel made sure to take extra care dressing him this morning, all without saying two words to him the entire time.

Twisting her lips in disapproval when he left the room in jeans and a T-shirt.

He changed three times before she nodded at a pair of dark corduroys and a white button up with ivy stitched into the cuffs. It was then she turned her attention to his beard. Handing him a pair of scissors and smiling in a demanding way that he found endearing.

His purposeful look of disapproval when she walked out with a skirt too short, his smile when they silently agreed on a yellow sundress with purple flower pedal pattern.

He was wrapped around her little finger, and he loved it. A strange dynamic he never thought to be in, but she plucked him from a crowd and without a spell, a command or gesture they became blissfully entangled.

But she too was his.

They knew it without having to say a word, she without falter wanted to please him as much as he wanted to please her. They were the spell, the magic of love, in a sense that would have once nauseated him.

They would die to see one more breath, they would live just to know they once were, without question, perfect.

They were excited about this one morning in particular, after all it wasn't everyday one would have coffee with Borse, a living, breathing demigod.

As they veered to the corner and saw the coffee shop in sight, Angel abruptly stopped. He looked at her and couldn't help but smile. Big brown eyes fixing every wrinkle in her yellow sun dress. She pulled a hair from her white vest and adjusted herself so as not to reveal too much. "You're beautiful," he said.

She smiled and looked at him, then whispered "I win," her fingers slid past his ears adjusting his loose curl to act right, "I don't understand how you can look so calm." She said, now tugging out the nonexistent wrinkles in his shirt. He carefully grabbed her hand, "It's only coffee," he said.

"Last person to have coffee with Borse and the Priestess was Keagan and Gael. You know, the first Sargent Hunter in thirty years, one of your bosses."

Ronal felt his insides twist, "I know who he is."

Keagan was one of the many who helped train him in the past year, between him and Tristan Lioncrest, he learned a lot more than he expected he would.

A Hunter was a tough job. Answering the calls of Maidens in distress, with either Malevolent spirits or the misguidance of humanity. It can range anywhere from fighting a horde of Malevolent, to simply bailing a Maiden out of a psychiatric ward, what Keagan and Gael do on a regular basis. A Hunter had no home, only a base to call to and at times the clothes on his back. A job Ronal thought on long and hard, only to get his reputation high among the Knights.

It was difficult for him to be taken seriously among them, he knew his worst habit was talking, he was skinny, a know it all, and he actually knew what he was talking about. Which not a lot of people seemed to like.

It was hard for him to relate with most of them, Tristan was really the only one who didn't mind his company, they talked for hours while they trained.

Ronal did his best to put his weight where he could, picking everyone's brain when it came to Runes and training for hours into the night with weapons. It was however infuriating to hear the Knights mumble every time he passed by on how 'lucky' he was to have a powerful Companion and a powerful Maiden.

"We'll be fine. You'll be fine." She said looking at his face. She knew him all too well and took a deep sigh with him. "I don't think there could be anything bad in this, and if you do get promoted that means you won't have to worry about working. Borse takes care of his Sergeants."

"I just got Knighted last night." He said reminding himself more than her, "I don't think I'll be getting promoted this soon." He put her face between his hands, carefully, lovingly. "He's probably just congratulating me."

She nodded and wrapped her fingers around his. "You have two degrees one of which he will find very useful if needed." Ronal gave her a look and she gave a stern one back. "Let's just go then," he conceded to her satisfaction.

They crossed the street and Ronal opened the windowed door for his Maiden, the strong enticing smell of coffee and sweetness filled his nose instantly. She smiled and breathed it in, and he waved his arm a bit too polite for normalcy and she strolled in with a matching grace.

There were only a few people in the little cafe, most of them hunched over laptops, eyes wired, and fingers tapping away at their

keyboards. Most look to be college students, faces still young and panicked. He envied those days back in college.

Philosophy was not easy to master, and neither was Military Operations, something he found fascinating since he was a child and he let himself get swept away in it.

They made their way past the five benched tables and to the patio in the back. The early morning sun was shaded by large black umbrellas. Ivy grew thick along the stone wall of the building as well as the black metal fence.

He saw them almost immediately, Borse was not a man that could easily be missed, he was tall and broad with a face cut from rock. His dark crop of hair held a little grey and his deep green eyes showed his power. Not of Will but the strength of a Caid. The immortal soul in a near immortal body screamed from those eyes.

Next to him, the very beautiful, well accomplished, Doctor Richards. Her straight white hair let loose and flowed down her back. Her face smooth but frail deceived her actual age, from what he could gather she was approaching her mid-nineties and didn't look past 40. She dressed as the part of a young soul as well, a bust barely visible in a black top with glimmering silver specks at its center was a large silver crescent moon embroidered into her top. Her skirt draped just above her knees dark as the night.

They both rose from their seats as Ronal and Angel approached. Borse cracked a grin, a rare sight to see, and shook Ronal's hand. The beast's grip caused his knuckles to pop and those eyes dug deep inside of Ronal before letting go and giving a heavy pat on his shoulder, "Glad to see you got some rest, Knight." The Caid said, and Ronal's insides felt like they were going to explode from nerves, "Thank you, Consanair."

The Maidens exchanged kisses on their cheeks. "Good morning, Priestess." Angel said, voice shaking, only enough for Ronal to notice. "Good morning, dear, did you sleep well?" Angel smiled and nodded, avoiding words as much as she could.

The two of them pushed the metal chairs out for their Maidens and they both sat down, then Ronal took his turn before Borse.

A car horn honked in the distance, and the gentle Lo-fi playing in the coffee shop seemed to drone out Ronal's thoughts entirely. Angel

grabbed his hand, and let go quickly, wiping her sweaty palms on her dress.

"I'm impressed on how you kept your calm last night, Ronal." Borse said in his rough voice. "Thank you, Sir." Ronal said trying to fight the smile creeping across his face.

"Most initiates can barely utter the oath, let alone keep a steady hand. But you," He wagged his finger "You had everything under control. You knew exactly what to say and when. Very impressive."

Ronal found a chip in the paint on the metal table and began to pick it, smiling like the fool he felt like, "Again, thank you."

"But that's not why we are here," Borse leaned back in his chair and rested his arms on the rests, "we have a lot to talk about, Knight."

Ronal nodded, and he caught a glance at both the High Priestess and Angel, his mouth moved, and nothing came out. Borse lifted his finger and smiled, "Do you want some coffee? Or maybe a scone? They have the best scones here." He said casually. Ronal chuckled in response "No, thank you, coffee is fine."

That was the type of man Borse was, loved to drag things out. He could talk for hours about something as simple as coffee and scones. He was also a man that would say what he had to say when needed. He would stare a man in the eyes and say three words and the job would get done before Borse turned his back. That's the way he was, A Caid could shape the world with a single word.

Ashkoon did. And Borse did too.

The only two males living who could use The Art. Blessed by the Mother herself with eternal life and capabilities a person like Ronal could only imagine. Borse and Ashkoon sat at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Borse used his powers to better the world, in silence and with no credit. Whereas Ashkoon shaped it in his favor, destroying nations that didn't suit his purpose, and recrafting it to pit them against other countries in a twisted game he's played for thousands of years the Caid of Man thrived in wars and burned Maidens at the stakes if they overstepped when he was around.

After The Caid War nearly wiped out half the population of the world thousands of years ago, and after nearly all the other Caid died or went missing, Borse came to Ashkoon with a peace treaty, and they made a Blood Oath that's held firm to this day.

To Ronal it seemed like a strategic advantage on both ends. But that was a thing of the past and something for the future. He hoped he would never have to see...

"Are you alright, lad?" Borse interrupted Ronal's train of thought. "Yeah," He stopped those thoughts from going any further. "Sorry. I tend to let my mind wonder, hyper thinking, I guess." Ronal said almost shamefully. He just sat down, and his mind was already running in directions they didn't need to go.

"And where did it wander?" Borse sounded genuinely curious. He looked over at Angel who smiled encouragingly.

"Honestly?" He said as he tapped his finger on the table. "I was wondering, what is your strategy? I mean," Ronal cleared his throat as Borse leaned back in his chair. He glanced over at Angel who was encouraging as always.

"I've seen all that you have done for this world and the people who follow you, but I can't see any real way we could achieve a truly peaceful world with people like Ashkoon and his Innocent still existing."

"To be honest," Borse began. "No goal of mine was to ever achieve worldwide peace. No, we may have evolved past our primal cousins, but mankind will always carry that lust for blood. The greed of wanting, whether it's the newest cell phone or a nation. We will destroy ourselves before we can reach a universal nirvana."

Ronal was shocked by the response. But of course, it was completely true, and spoken from the mouth of the Caid of Blood. Someone could look outside their window and see a world filled to the brim with turmoil. Ronal, nodded, "Is it the Caid's duty to help us grow?" he mumbled, eyes back at that growing chip in the paint.

"I think we should grab some coffee. Care to join me, Angel?" The Priestess said as she stood up. Angel gave a look of obvious disappointment. "Of course, Priestess." Angel stood up purse in hand and began walking with the Priestess to the barista.

"I mean, what are your goals? You got to have a goal in mind for humanity." Ronal said. His mind was reeling everything he ever thought about the immortal man before him was all wrong.

Borse laughed, "This is why I like you. Every other Knight I speak to wouldn't dare ask questions. You show no fear in the pursuit of knowing."

Ronal chuckled but found himself intently leaning in.

Borse tapped his fingers on the table and his eyes drifted for a moment, "I can give you a tragic story about my existence, but you would find half of it useless and the rest, gibberish. No, really, the answer is simple. Even I succumb to the primal urges of man. Men and women follow me against my will. For what reason I'll never know. Maybe it is for the quest for peace. But you will never find it with me. I was born in the Bogs of the first great war, and I was a tool by all that found me useful, even the most righteous Caid knew what I was."

"And what are you?" Ronal asked blankly.

"A Child of Causality, Mr. Ingam." Borse said with a touch of sadness in his eyes, he continued.

"The ones who found peace around me were of their own consummation. Not of my design. The god you seek to end this," He waved his hand at the air around him. "He will be coming soon, and when he does, he will need guidance and hope. That can never come from me."

Ronal was entranced not by the speech itself but the pure honesty of it. It still shook him to the core that the world's only salvation to Peace never had any intentions to offer it. Unless that man Borse spoke of could change this world.

"Tell me about him..." Ronal idly took a sip of a coffee that appeared before him and gripped the hand that was wrapped around his. He never noticed Angel arriving, but he was glad she was here. He will always feel better with her close by.

Dr. Richards spoke up. She too, holding coffee in her hand. "A surprise for certain," The doctor took a sip of her coffee, the foam stuck to her upper lip. She wiped it away and smiled.

"I met a young man, a roommate of Gaels and with deep ties to the Children of the Moon." Borse adjusted himself in his seat but said nothing. "He is certainly stubborn and a tad morose, it seems. An atheist from what I could gather. But Gael says he used the Art protecting himself and his Companion from a Malevolent, just yesterday morning."

Ronal let his mouth drop; Angel spoke in just as much awe as he was. "A Caid? The Motheir hasn't appeared since the beginning of the Caid War. Since Madiline herself! It would be impossible for him to even exist without her."

The doctor investigated her coffee cup as she waited for Angel to finish, when she did, she tapped on her cup and spoke quietly. "We think he might be another Child of Causality, or he could just be an aged soul

and the first male to breach the threshold. Or he could be a Caid, it will be impossible to know until the circle can get their hands on him.”

“So, what will happen now?” Angel said, leaning in and eyes wide. The doctor spoke after another sip from her cup. “Now we get him to the circle, kicking and screaming it would seem like. We gave Gael a week to coerce him. And I intend to assist where I can and how I can. I’ve already reached out to Gwenavine, and we may have to cram him in a box and ship him to her.” Angel nodded, and Ronal took the opportunity to speak, “And if he is a Caid?”

“That’s why you’re here Mr. Ingam,” Borse smiled as he saw the curious expression across Ronal’s face. “I can spare you the details, but I prefer not to, you see, due to recent circumstances I may not be long for this world.” He grabbed the hand of his Maiden, she played with her skirt and cleared her throat with a sigh.

Borse continued, “Ashkoon has my bloodstone. And I assure you, he intends to use it. I broke our treaty and soon he will be coming after me.”

Ronal suddenly felt sick, his chest began to ache, and his head became clouded, his body froze with his cup halfway to his chest, “It’s active?” He asked, eyes focused on the paint chip, and only hearing his heartbeat, and doing his best to control his breathing.

“Yes,” Borse said plainly.

Once an Oath is broken the bloodstone becomes active and it begins to weaken the soul it is attached to and puts a wall up between the body and the will. The only way one can kill a Caid at least the only way Ronal knew of.

“I’m sorry, I have so many questions.” Ronal said and when Borse nodded Ronal began. “What did you do to break the oath and what exactly does this have to do with me?”

Borse waited a long second to answer. He looked at his wife and then sternly at Ronal. “I made a huge error in that oath I agreed to, something I would never agree to, I won’t ever tell anyone besides the ones who already know. So that will be an answer you won’t get from me.” He sighed, forest green eyes looking sadly at Angel and Ronal.

“When you do find out the truth, don’t remember the man who made the oath. Remember the man who broke it. And please remind the Children of the man who sits in front of you now.”

Ronal's jaw began to ache. But he let the man continue. "Where you come into play with all this is a role, I think will be beneficial for the world for generations to come." He gripped his wife's hand, the doctor smiled and continued where he left off.

"Devon McNeil is a solitary type; he will be prone to recluse and even more prone to lash out on those he cares about the most. He will not take loss well. And he will need one just like him. A friend to rely on for any reason. That will be your task. I think it'll benefit you both in the end."

Ronal wanted to laugh out right, "And what are your plans to protect us from the oncoming war?" Angel grabbed Ronal's arm, he looked at her and she gave him a hard long look. Apparently, he stepped too far. He didn't care though he needed to know. Even if it wasn't the answer he needed to hear.

"I hate to sound heartless, but I cannot concern myself with fifty-six covens and nearly a million maidens and knights. I can't even fully protect the ones in my Coven. One hundred and ninety-three people in the village surrounding my mansion and over a thousand active members on this county alone is too much for a single man to protect. No, in the coming tide, we all need to rely on each other. The Knights must do their part and protect. My job was to guide the ones who lead and the ones who lead will tell you what needs to be done."

"Let an old man live his final moments the way he wants to. Let his family have those moments and then, perhaps, a war born man will die in peace." Borse sighed and smiled at his wife. She looked calm but deep in her eyes the sadness began to seep.

Ronal felt the sadness and empathized greatly. But it was not a suitable answer. "Let's say the Innocent charge in and kill all the people in the village, as well as every Maiden and Knight who gets caught. That blood will be on your hands Borse." Ronal said between his teeth.

Borse raised his hand, Ronal looked at it then at the green eyes that seemed to age by the second. Thick lips of the god twisted and dug into his mouth, as Ronal began to realize the encroaching rage a heat began to fill his belly and as soon as it appeared, the hand lowered and he tapped his fingers and smiled, clicking his tongue.

"Five million four hundred thousand six and sixty-two. Those are the lives that I failed." Borse eyes showed the weight of that number as he spoke it.

“My sergeants have the command to run and protect those they have in their hands, Ronal. I can make the call now, but I won't, they must see what lays in front of them. They must know blood and dredge themselves in it, as I did four millennium ago. A task I wish for no one, but they know what they signed up for. And now you do too. A great mind like yours was never meant to draw blood, if I had my choice, you would become a Rune Master. But here we are. You can run if you want, take your Maiden with you and no one would blame you. I won't consider you an Abandoned and I'll strike your name from any record. Your choice Ronal Ingam.”

Ronal thought for a moment sadly he already knew the answer. He looked at his Maiden, Angel looked beautiful, as she always did, she smiled at him as she wrapped her arm with his. “Not for you and your worthless war. Not for a hope for a brighter future. For her. Only for her.”

“Perfect,” Borse said he leaned back as if a weight was lifted. “Now Sergeant, tell me what you would do if you were in my shoes.”

Ronal's eyes drifted upward to the sun breaking through the clouds, he took a deep breathe in, *become friends with a Caid, then make sure he doesn't go crazy*, He sighed out that idea and closed his eyes, taking in the warmth.

“I know a few things we can do, either way it's not going to go well for us.” Ronal said truthfully, thinking of all the inexperienced knights there are.

Borse leaned in, “Tell me about it.” His grin was monstrous, and Ronal complied.

He hoped the planning they made was just for show. He hoped the caid he spoke too would listen. He hoped for a way the world would never see any bloodshed. That hope was fading fast as he spoke, and the realization of the short time they had begun to sink into his bones.

CHAPTER 14:

IN LIGHT OF IT ALL

Devon slept twelve hours of a nightmare filled sleep on the couch, where Gael could monitor him and shove food in his face every few hours. In the morning Devon was introduced to his new, even stranger roommates, Kara and her brother Kevhin.

They were watching the news on Gaels tablet when he woke up, he wasn't too sure on what it was about, something concerning the new law passed on gun control, or lack of guns to control. Now only the Police and the Military are allowed weapons and anyone else would spend life in prison if they were caught with one.

He caught them both looking at him when they had the chance, only to shoot their eyes away in the other direction when he met their eyes.

"Sup," he said, and they both turned and whispered, eyes darting to him every so often, Kevhin looking the gloomiest, *what's their damn problem?* He thought as he peeled his orange, eyes focused on getting every single scrap of white meat out without hurting the fruit. *Oh, well besides them showing up while I was being attacked by a half-naked spirit who wants to eat my soul. Or maybe it's the magic thing? I would be freaked out too.*

He let his mind wonder to all the stories he read with magic. From Warlords taking over entire continents, to average men who had the world handed to them because of their capabilities, it all flooded to him and filled his mind, the benefits of having this power.

Gael plopped herself down next to him and broke his train of thought. "Are you going to pick at that all day or are you going to let the poison slowly kill you?"

He grumbled never taking his eyes away from the orange.

"I did a lot to keep the poison at bay, but you need to be sure to get enough vitamin C and keep putting on the ointment on the wound."

He growled and began breaking apart the orange, shoving a sliver in his mouth and taking a bite. She sighed and patted his leg, "Good job, bud."

"So, when do I learn to do cool stuff, like Balefire and control people's minds." He smiled at her, and she quickly shot her head away from him then she stood up, slipping on her slippers that she always kept just slightly under the couch "Guide me with the grace of the Motheir," She mumbled barely audible.

Kara also silently dug into the side of his face with her glare, *you didn't like what I said? Good!* he glanced at the black-haired girl. She arched an eyebrow at him, and he raised one back, their eyes met, and he dared not blink, she squinted pursing her lips and tightening her fists on her lap and Devon leaned closer widening his eyes showing her he wouldn't dare blink.

Gael let out a long heavy huff and they both looked her direction in unison, "YOU never will, I don't even think a single human being has that capability, and I think it'll take you a few hundred years to even hold a flame to what your books have told you what is possible."

She finished putting on her slippers and hid her feet under her long white dress. "The whole purpose of our existence is to create and protect... I swear we've been over this before...." She stopped her ramblings and looked at him, tilting her head just slightly and a smile curled on her lips, her eyes dug into him like a cat to a bug. "You've spent this long kicking and screaming over this and now you want to talk about 'learning', well Devon, thought it would take you a few more days, maybe even a month."

He stared at her for a moment, mouth twisting as she waited for his mind to formulate a full sentence. "First of all, it hasn't even been a full week," he started, shoving another piece of the fruit in his mouth. "Secondly, I think I've done a fairly good job, considering, I mean, this is all new to me, ya know." He began to scratch his chin but a cold stern look from Gael made him stop.

“And lastly, if I’m gonna blow shit up I might as well blow shit up.” That earned a laugh from the Kevhin guy and Devon could swear he heard a chuckle from Keagan in the other room.

Gael turned and took a large step forward, she looked at him over her shoulder, a menacing silver eyed glare that made his hair raise. “Your eyes!” He gasped and she hackled in response.

Her hand lifted with her palms out and suddenly Devon was drawn to his feet unwillingly, by a force unseen, unable to move, barely able to breathe. “You want to blow shit up?” She smiled with silver eyes down and still concentrating on her clothes.

“By all means, find one that has *Abandoned* and tell me what they teach you. That is, if you find one living.” She looked up at him, silver eyes focused. He struggled against the weight on his chest. “Gael this kinda hurts.”

She ignored him, “Then I will hunt you down, find you in your little rathole and tear your throat open.” Her growl seemed a little too perfect.

“Ok I get it please put me down,” He began to move when she did, every step she took, he was forced to take with her only a few feet behind her, she was strong, but Devon somehow knew he was safe with her still.

“You wonder why you feel chills when you’re alone, why you dream of things no one else does. You see a world that no one else can and why you were gifted with the Art! Everything is at the palm of your hands, gifts unimaginable at your feet, and all you want to do is blow shit up.”

Something flew at him where he could barely see, it hit him hard against his head. He was finally released, he stumbled to the wall and looked at the ground where a book lay. “I’m sorry,” He groaned. “I was just-”

“Being an idiot, which you are far from,” she said as she grabbed a light coat and wrapped it around herself, never giving the benefit of looking at him. “Read that book and you will find a far more amazing world than what you’ve been reading.” She grabbed her keys on the key hook and as if nothing happened, she shouted. “Going hiking with Mom!” She glanced back, “You know, Dr. Richards.” A smile slid across her face as Devon let out the hardest groan he ever let out.

“I’ll be home in time for dinner.”

Keagan promptly responded from the other room, “Love ya, Kitty.”

“What are the chances that this Dr. Richards isn’t the same therapist I saw the other day?”

On the way-out Gael laughed, “Slim, D, very slim.” The door closed with a flick of her wrist.

Devon picked the book up off the floor. *Way to make a complete ass of yourself, Devon, don’t know how you did it, but you managed to.*

Kara looked at Devon with wide eyes and then a smile. “She’ll come around soon enough.” Devon rolled his eyes and looked at her brother, who only shrugged. “Everyone will like the way you handle things. Most people anyways. It’s those eyes of yours-” her eyes drifted away for a moment locked on to nothing and her mouth muttered out incoherent air.

“How would you know?” Devon asked coolly as he grabbed his coat from the coat rack. “She sees the future.” Kevhin responded defensively. *Great! friggin wonderful!* “That’s cool.” He grunted as he made his way out the door.

Last thing he heard was Kara continuing to talk “Well it’s a bit harder than that, you see-” Devon closed the door and made his way to his jeep.

He made sure to not make eye contact with Gael as she drove off. When he started his engine, his gut knotted. He gave a good long stare at the book in his passenger seat.

‘Children of the Earth’ it read on its tan, hard face. It was written by none other than ‘Maiden Gwenavine the Fifth’ he chuckled to himself. *Fuck it.*

CHAPTER 15:

MAIDENS IN THE OPEN

Don stood at the gates of the capitol building. Today would make it day two he had without a decent night's sleep. Sure a few hours after work last night counted, but not for much. He found himself tossing and turning in the early hours of morning, convincing himself that this was all the 'right thing'.

His gut told him otherwise, and now he felt like he was teetering on the edge of a coin, one side the Innocent and on the other, a void in his mind he couldn't quite figure out. A hole in his heart that told him to run, hide and never look back. The curious side of him kept his feet moving, the questions he had mixed in with the fog of his tired mind *This is the right thing... this is for the good. Right?* He repeated in his head as he walked, head lowered, and mouth firmly shut.

Nori was a few steps ahead of him shaking hands with General Goode and a white-haired man that could only be the Grand Master Ashkoon. Don stayed back from it all. He found himself staying away from Jason, Reggie and Al as well.

So, he walked on his own between the two huddles of people, thinking. The white-haired man looked back to Don; his silver eyes showed eagerness on what the day is to behold. The General soon followed and finally Nori who waved him on.

Don looked back at the three. Reggie's eyes lit up, but disappointment soon followed. Everyone there wore casual clothing, save for the white suited Grand General. He held himself differently- regal was the first word that popped into Dons head.

And although he wasn't the tallest, he made it seem as though he was, his hands never left his back as he nodded to Don to join them.

"So, you're the man I've heard so much about." He proclaimed with an accent that Don couldn't figure out, his high cheekbones and strong jaw set tightly on his face as he smiled. Despite the white hair, the man could

pass for forty, but Don knew he was older. Just by his experience alone he would have to be in his sixties at least. "Donavhin McNeil, join me." The Grand General said his name with a hiss, and his eyes made those words a command.

The three made their way up the steps and past the front entrance of the capitol with Don close behind, his gut knotting heart pounding. *This is good, this IS good.*

Nori made a toothless grin and patted him on the shoulder. General Goode did the same, his plump hand hitting hard on his back made the sore muscle on his neck quiver, reminding him of the day before. General Goode was a large man, not quite fat and not quite muscular but some odd mix between. His dirt-colored hair had grey at its temples and combed just a way to hide the signs of balding, his bloodshot eyes rested heavily in their sockets and his chubby face was beginning to show droop and heavy creases.

They followed The Grand General as they passed the tourist group beginning to form in the front foyer. The capital always had a certain smell to it, like it was uprooted from the 1800's and planted in modern times. A mix of old wood and chemicals that don't exist anymore still lingering like a ghost.

Don began taking off his belt, getting ready to pass through the metal detectors but Nori stopped him with a cocky smile. "You're with the bigwigs, don't worry about that." He whispered as the alarm sounded when the Grand General passed. The guard nodded his head and waved the others through.

Ashkoon's eyes stayed forward, and his posture tighter as she slowly strolled forward, giving no one a second thought, it seemed.

A few of the tourists stared at Don as he went through the detector. Most, with good reason, looked annoyed, a few scowling at the Grand General. "He likes doing that, we could've just taken the other way but-" Nori's whisper was cut short by Goode. "Get prepared Takashi, get dressed on the way," Goode said as he walked past the two.

"Yes, sir." Nori complied. Grabbing a tiny latch on the corner of the wall that Don would have never noticed, and he opened the door to blackness beyond it, he looked over his shoulder.

Nori and Don locked eyes and an unease washed over him, something he never felt with Nori before, a thin veil about to crumble, or perhaps one that was never there before. And that moment Donavhin realized with great sadness, he doesn't know the man before him.

Nori winked, and the door closed shut, to fade into the pale walls once again to be unnoticed. Don shivered.

“Are you nervous?” The General asked and Don shrugged as he and the group walked a long corridor that he never noticed before. Don had been to the capitol many times growing up, it all became almost unnoticeable. From the long hallways to the paintings on the walls, Don thought he saw everything but this hallway.

Grand General Ashkoon stopped at a door virtually unmarked. He turned around to the group and as they caught up, he smiled.

“Excuse me, I've been rude.” He said to the three behind Don and the General. “I've been waiting for a long time for a moment like this to occur. You see, behind this door lies a network, an organization I built from the ground up. This is only a tiny cell I created all over the world to monitor and eventually destroy the Wicked.”

He was beaming with excitement, “Today will be the day the world will remember. You will tell your children and their children, where you stood when the Wicked finally fell. And let me tell you this now. You will be proud in choosing the right side.”

He opened the door.

Two men stood at its opposite end, both in bright white uniforms that marked them as Innocent. Their hands tight behind their back, and behind them, a long wide concrete staircase that led to a hallway filled with people moving in a hurried pace.

“This is the only security check that matters.” General Goode whispered to Don. He proceeded to stand next to the guards and ushered the four in. Ashkoon of course, casually walked past them and down the stairs.

The General called for formation, the four lined up with hands tight on their sides and backs straight. The door closed behind him, despite the chatter below him, the hard clank of the door echoed in his head, like a prison door closing for the final time.

“Are any of you carrying any weapons.” One of the Guards said.

“No, Sir.” The four said uniformly.

“Do you intend any ill purpose upon the Innocent or any of its facilities?”

“No, Sir.”

“Are you of sound mind and body?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Prepare for a body search.” He spoke. Each man raised his arms behind their head with elbows out, Don let out a quiet hiss as he raised his arm, General Goode noticed immediately but said nothing. The guard who spoke nodded to the other guard, who began patting down the bodies and inspecting what each person had in their pocket.

When he finally reached Don the guard sifting through his wallet spoke to him “How did you get the scar?” He said looking at the scar on the inside of Don’s biceps, he nearly forgot about the old wound he had since he was a child, his mind quickly stung making his eye twitch. “I was playing with fire when I was a kid; my brother burned me by accident.”

The guard smiled at Don’s answer, “See this?” He pointed to his neck where a scar puckered, “I was running from the cops, jumped a fence and opened my vein. Nearly died.” The man boasted. “Enough pleasantries,” General Goode grumbled, “you two can flirt later.” All the men laughed but the Guard, who handed back Don’s wallet with a wink.

Don shook his head, but it didn’t seem to disappoint the Guard. “Are they clear?” The General said quickly, the two guards complied, and the General urged them down the stairs.

As he took the last step down the long staircase the men and woman in the hallway ceased and saluted. Don took the Innocent for granted; they were definitely more than just a Fraternity.

They were an army.

He calmly walked to the other side of the hallway. Don nodded to a few familiar faces, who smiled as he walked by, the General put his hand to a glass screen the size of a sheet of paper, it quickly flashed green, and the door opened with a click. Goode opened the glass door and ushered the men inside.

“Don’t get used to this.” He smiled at the men. “I’ll show you hospitality today, but tomorrow I’ll make you earn it.” Don put on a smile despite the air thickening around him. “I’ll be sure to earn it, sir.” Reggie proclaimed. Dark eyes stuck in a trance as he looked inside the door.

The room was huge; He stood at the very top of another concrete staircase this time it molded with the wall leaving its other side with no railing.

The back wall held a large glass plate; behind showed the concrete wall with the golden crest of the Innocent at its center, a falcon head with two lances crossed behind it. This was the first time he saw the full symbol.

No one was allowed to see more than their own rank, the crest being the highest rank and a circle being the lowest. Don wore the circle when he was in uniform, as well as most of the Innocent he met besides Nori, who let him see the two lances crossed.

In front of it half a dozen men sat in chairs with thin transparent monitors in front of them, each one typing away on thin glass keyboards and staring at the screens intently. They all wore the Innocent uniforms, but none had rank, at least from what Don knew of, only rope tied to their sleeve. All black with thin cords of white.

Ashkoon stood before the giant glass wall speaking to a man in a white mask, wearing of course, the white uniform of the Innocent. Don didn't know much of this newfound side of the Innocent, but he knew that man as an Agent- the name given to an Innocent that successfully worked their way into a Coven.

He strained to see the man, who immediately noticed Don. As he turned to leave, a Crescent moon showed beneath his collar. "Careful McNeil, that's a person who you need to know nothing about." The General said as he walked down the stairs. "Focus more on the big screen." He said, then made an order to one of the men to turn it on.

With a flicker the large clear glass showed a map of Austin. On it, a red dot moved to the outskirts of the city. "Is that..." Don found himself unable to speak further. His mouth hung open as he followed the General down the stairs.

"That is the most advanced satellite the world has ever seen, looking down on our city with pinpoint accuracy." He turned to the four and smiled. "I can see gum on a sidewalk, a tack in grass, anything I need to see. Right here, live and on my command."

Jason gasped. Don didn't say a word, woefully and quietly letting the ice sink into his bones and feeling it chill every inch of his body. He knew, now more than before, that the Innocent was not a group to be messed with and the Children of the Moon were right in their crosshairs.

"No, you're forgetting something General," Ashkoon said the title with a growl. "This is my Empire. You only exist at your spot to make my life easier." Ashkoon smiled deeply never taking his eyes off the screen, only giving General Goode a spit second glance, barely tilting his head.

The room stayed in silence, no one dared breathe. "N-no- No Grand General, that was not what I meant-" Goode stumbled over his words as his feet stuck in place, a bead of sweat dropped from his cheek. The man quivered.

"I know exactly what you meant Goode." Ashkoon said as he turned around hands clasped behind his back his eyes stabbed through General Goode's soul. "I do more than just pay the bills," His voice a calm storm, with each word tearing through the air like a knife. "I am more than just a blank check." Goode nodded in agreement, sweat now dripping from his face.

"Remember who created you next time you speak Daniel Goode."

"Yes sir, you know I am deeply sorry, sir." The General wiped his brow with his fat fingers.

"I know." Ashkoon smiled but his eyes still shot daggers. He turned his head back to the giant glass monitor. "Begin system checks." The General commanded, his voice rasped.

Each Innocent at the monitors began their tasks, furiously typing at keyboards and looking at their monitors intently "IA one online, do you copy soldier." One of them spoke. "Copy." The voice of Nori echoed in the room.

With a swift swipe, the information moved from the monitor to the glass wall. His heart rate, name and rank appeared on the top left of the screen.

"IA two, live. Do you copy?" The next man down the line said. "Copy." The Innocent said as his information appeared under Nori's.

Three more copies and three more sets of information appeared in order of rank. Nori at the top as a Command Sergeant with two Corporals and two Privates below them.

"What's the ETA, Corporal Smyth?" The general asked one of the Innocent, his voice steadier than before. She seemed to lead the group, *so black cords mean Corporal?* Don thought as he looked at the woman.

"Five minutes, General." She said never taking her eyes off the monitor. She was pretty. Her smooth round face was pale; her dark brown hair was tied tight and in a bun behind her scalp. The General smiled and looked at Don, who folded his arms; he was uncomfortable standing in the middle of the organized chaos. Uncomfortable for a lot of reasons but that one seemed more reasonable than the others. He hoped.

It was a long five minutes, but when they arrived at the green point on the map Ashkoon spoke softly, "Switch to the cameras, I want to see this."

"Of course, sir." Corporal Smyth said as she hit a keystroke. The map on the screen shifted to a 4-foot square on the bottom right corner to

replace it, five squares popped up, each one with the perspective of a Soldier.

They wore a glorious white armor, The thin chest plate rolled down the sides of the ribs and attached to a plate on the core. Leaving the hips exposed only slightly, for what could only be for easier movement. The plating on the thighs stuck up between that gap, just enough to cover everything but the groin. The shoulder pads moved seamlessly to armor on the arms to the elbow. All painted a smooth black. They wore bright white skin suits under the armor with their faces covered by black smooth helmets.

One of the men behind Don whistled, General Goode smiled slightly, most of the Innocent around them seemed to sit a little taller as well.

“Let’s make history.” Ashkoon said quietly, almost to himself. As if hearing it as a command, the men left the truck and began walking in a thick wooded area, not too far outside of Austin. The wood showed the early days of spring. Each tree began budding out new leaves and the dark brown bark was still damp from the small shower rain they had the night before.

The men looked cautious as they formed a formation that resembled an arrow. Don kept his eyes glued to Nori’s perspective, which was held at the tip of the arrow. Each man moved silently, careful not to break any fallen branches. The quality of the sound and video was astounding. Better than anything Don had ever seen. He could make out the slightest sounds of birds chirping below the occasional roar of a car passing far in the distance.

It wasn't long before they reached an opening in the wood, and clear on the other side one could faintly make out two women in the distance, tiny figures but crisp enough to know they were women. Nori raised his hand and gestured for them to split up.

Two men broke apart and split down the inside of the opening, keeping low and well hidden.

Nori kneeled and waited, watching the woman as they began to undress. In the distance Don could only make out the pale pink bodies. It wasn't until the two Corporals drew closer that Don could get a clear view of the women.

One was older but her body still held tightly to its youth. Her hair was grey and glided down her back. Her face was familiar to Don but no name rang a bell. His gut sank at the thought that he could know them.

It sank even worse when he saw the beautiful girl beside the older woman as they talked. Her dark hair seemed to glow as she let it down. Her curved frame held tight as she undressed from her white dress, wide hips and bust that would make any man turn red; she was a woman Don would easily give himself too.

She was beautiful.

“Careful boy,” The General smiled. Don’s face felt hot. “That is how they entrance you. Before you know it, you’ll be left soulless or worse dead.” It was hard for Don to see any ill means in the women, they smiled and laughed bright smiles on their faces like it was just an ordinary day. *To them it is, now at least...* He bit his tongue and continued to watch.

The sun glistened in the deep green grass, the clear sky above made for a perfect day. The two women nuzzled their heads together and held hands. With a bright smile on each of their faces they began to change.

Their bodies twisted and molded, hair began to jut out of their skin and faces began to form snouts. Don gasped, one of the men behind him made a noise but Don didn’t want to look away. They shifted on all fours. The older who now shifted to a Lioness, and the younger who now was a spotted leopard.

“That’s amazing!” Jason echoed in an otherwise quiet room, Don, like most, was too focused on the giant screen to even care what the man had to say.

The two cats began to dance around in the opening; the snow leopard nipping at the Lioness heels and the Lioness playfully grabbing at the Leopards throat and nape. This continued for a solid minute before Nori spoke. “Ready when you are.” He said voice sounding impatient.

“Calm now, Sergeant. We can wait till their tired, and then we strike.” Ashkoon said, teeth bared with excitement.

As if nature knew their intentions the wind shifted, and both the large cats raised their heads looking in Nori’s direction. “They smell you, attack now!” Ashkoon commanded and the five men began to move to the clearing, swords drawn.

“Its moments like this I wish we could carry guns.” The General grumbled looking towards Ashkoon whose eyes still on the screen smiled slightly.

The hair raised on the nape of the large cat’s necks as the men enclosed. They showed their teeth, but the men held tight, encircling the two. “As a reminder, they can kill, proceed with caution.” Ashkoon spoke calmly. His smile grew wider as the circle of men drew tighter.

“Run, Child.” The Lioness spoke beneath her growl. Don stopped breathing, just for a moment long enough to make it feel like sand tearing down his throat when he sucked in air. *She’s trying to protect her? If their so evil why don’t they attack?* His mind raced with a hundred more questions a split second before the Maidens had their chance to defend themselves.

The Lioness lunged for one man’s throat, tearing it open and leaving her dredged in blood.

Another man charged, stabbing her at her side. The Leopard knocked him down and sliced his throat open. Nori managed to jab her in the hind leg. She whimpered and leapt back next to the wounded Lioness.

“Run.” the Lioness moaned; a beautiful voice hidden behind the guttural growl of a beast.

“RUN.” She yelled as she leapt for another man.

A slice and whimper later the Lioness was on the ground. Red blood smeared on green grass. She heaved for breath with air that was hard to come. She still tried to stand but Nori put his foot down to her throat.

“Find the other one.” Nori growled, “Find her!” He commanded and one man went on the search.

The Lioness heaved but slowly began to speak. “The Grace of the Mother... Ashkoon... How could you?”

“Repeat after me, Sergeant.” Ashkoon spoke. “Because Priestess, I’ve grown bored with peace.” Nori repeated the words. Ashkoon’s smile grew deeper.

The Lioness stretched her wide mouth into a smile. “A Caid lives that is not you or Borse. You feel it in your bones, as do all Unveiled, a power beyond anything ever imagined is beginning to Awaken.”

“Skin her. She will make a fine coat.” Ashkoon laughed. A short hack of a laugh, but enough for the whole room to jump. He turned to Don and the three behind him and began to walk to the stairs.

“Prepare for war.”

The echo of his footsteps rang in Don’s ears, not a breath was spared to anyone in the room. As he passed, silver eyes with a glint of madness pierced through Don and right into his soul.

“We attack Borse in two days. Let him mourn, let him weep.” Don looked back at the screen just after Ashkoon left. Nori was halfway through skinning the Lioness, she was still breathing, crying out in pain as Nori tore her skin from her meat.

Don felt a lump form in his throat, he looked away just long enough to see Jason spew his breakfast in a trashcan close by. Don closed his eyes and took a deep breath in, hearing her cries echo in the concrete prison he was locked in.

He forced his eyes open as the cries stopped; the pelt now in Nori's hand, he lifted it to the sky and let out a quiet laugh, enough to tear into Don and let the horror stab deeper than before. Don focused his eyes to the other screens, one man searching for the Leopard deep in the woods.

The other was watching the perimeter as Nori kicked the corpse.
This isn't you.

A small rustle in the woods just outside the brush. Only Don noticed it, but he kept his mouth shut.

One death was enough for the day.

He knew that kind of compassion would not stand with the Innocent. But that hollow part of his mind screamed at him, telling him he just witnessed a tragedy and the start of something more devastating than any war before it, this was genocide, this was *wrong*.

He needed a way out and he knew he was stuck, *Play their game. Grab everyone and run.* Don found himself crouched down and holding his head, the room looked at him and he was visibly shaking.

He felt the fat hand of the General on his shoulder. *Don't touch me! Don't fucking touch me.* "You ok, McNeil?" The monster asked and Don nodded his head.

Play their game; you have two days to find a way out, Don rose with a sigh, "That was brutal." He laughed and looked at the room. A few smiles but most of them stayed with their tasks. "That bitch got what she deserved." *I'm sorry...I'm so, so, sorry.*

General Goode laughed with Don. "That's right! And two days they all will know our wrath!" The room cheered when Goode spoke Don along with them. "And you McNeil, you have a lot of training to do until then."

"I'm ready!" Don lied. Goode slapped him on the back and went about congratulating and boasting. As he watched the monster waddle across the room, one thing stuck in Dons mind, the how and when to run.

CHAPTER 16: BLOODY PAW PRINTS

Devon, sitting under a large Oak that was beginning to bud new leaves, was deep inside his own mind.

Reading page after page of the book Gael threw at him, written by the same Author that just a few days ago he learned about, Gwenavine.

He was reading every word like a child's fable he knew so well and every word made perfect sense, and he felt it in his core.

Familiarity hidden behind a headache and an endless fog with only glimpses of what used to be, and this book, was just screaming at him that the reality that he lives in now needs to be shattered and smashed into nothingness.

He thumbed his book as he plucked a fresh blade of grass and placed it on the page that marked the next chapter named 'The Power of a Name'. Admittedly he didn't make it that far, only a little less than halfway, it was progress though, he had time and plenty of it.

The park was as beautiful as always, even with the oak tree being the only tree to start showing signs of spring's arrival. The quick, cool flow of wind mixed in with the warmth of the noonday sun made perfect weather. This was the only time of year where it wasn't too hot or too cold to be outside to enjoy it.

The large crowd of people proved it, children swinging on their swings and running through the water fountains. Laughing and playing with each other.

The adults wondered arm and arm with their loved ones or jogging or any other seemingly exhausting activity Devon wanted

nothing to do with. At least they were having as much fun as the children were.

Some sat and chit chatted on stone benches under canopies and gazebos, if it wasn't occupied by lovers flaunting their love to all that could see. And his personal favorite, the main reason why he came to this

park, was the old men with hands as tough as the stone benches they sat on, patently making their moves in chess as they spoke of the better days.

He rose to his feet and began to walk, his mind still swimming with all the information he had just read.

The entire purpose of a Maiden is to keep balance between the Spirit Realm, and this Realm of Existence. The spirit realm itself was a wondrous thing, another dimension so closely tied to this, that it has become a part of it, myth, fables, and religions all derived from it.

Everything was born from the Ember, an entity that is, or was, a dense form of all the energy in the universe, the first form of consciousness and the being that sacrificed itself to bring all life, in all realms into reality.

The first being was the Motheir, also known as the Alchemist, a God created only to create, and create she did, allowing evolution to take place she merely pushed in the direction it needed to go.

Her and the Fatheir, or Gaelach traveled the realms creating life and other Gods called Caid. Until they stumbled upon Earth and on this planet they chose to create mankind

At least that's what the book read, Gwenavine admitted they could be wrong. It was just theory, and they were happy to admit that. The only things set in stone were the two realms and everything that came from them.

In order to be a Maiden, one must constantly live between those two realms, sacrificing materialistic objects, time, and energy on both sides of the dimensions. They must fully understand both planes of existence, as well as themselves.

A quote stuck out the most to him "To know the world, one must know and understand themselves." Something he heard before but, in this case, it would mean the more they keep themselves balanced the easier it will become to use the Art.

Apparently calling what the Maidens do magic, is a slap in the face for what it really is, instead they call it The Art and the energy they use as their Will.

Some Maidens would have the ability to use more Will than others, but that power wouldn't make them more respected, instead respect is earned through knowledge and experience. The more a Maiden could bring to the Art the more one would become revered.

They, much like any casters in any fantasy book he got his hands on, use the five elements. In this reality, there are seven known elements.

Earth, Fire, Air, Water, Spirit, Shadow and Blood. These are well established Elements and have been used in the Art for centuries. Shadow seems to be the newest established Element, and the rarest.

I gotta pick Keagan's brain later.

They acknowledge that Life, Death, Dreams or Illusions, Man and Time are Forces of nature that may not be elements but can be used to shape the world and only Dreams and Illusions are able to be used in the Art. The others are still being explored or lost to a devastating war thousands of years ago.

A person is constantly growing, changing, and evolving with the world around them. Gwenavine said that it's essentially different for everyone, one person would require years while some will understand immediately.

Some were born hardheaded and stubborn to how they see the world and others are more willing and open, *like me*, he thought with a chuckle as he hopped into his Jeep.

Devon began to drive back to his house, mind half focused on the road. Reeling in more of what the book told him and trying to logic it out. The best way to think of it is like breathing. From his experience any ways.

"It's a reflex!" He said to no one, still slightly unsatisfied at his answer and slightly embarrassed to be talking to himself.

Devon kept his mouth shut, mind still spinning. *Aiden can help me with this. Where is he? Mall with Kara and the rest?*

His thought train jumped to Keagan and men who seemed to have a major disadvantage when it came to using any Will, they need a buffer for the Spirit realm and a buffer for Spells, Runes.

But not for him, he apparently didn't need Runes. He didn't fully understand how that was possible, he was perhaps an anomaly.

A Child of Causality Gwenavine put it. Like Borse, or Madiline.

The house was just as he left it.

He slammed the door to his jeep and made his way up the small slope to his front door. His mind was so caught up in his thought process that he passed up spots of blood, staining the concrete walkway, with only a minor glance.

It didn't affect him until he saw the door cracked open and the knob covered in dry blood. In his panic he failed to notice the bloody paw prints that turned to footprints as he swung the door open.

In his worry he looked at Aiden at the end of the hall his eyes wide and just as panicked as he, "The Maiden, Gael..." He said as Devon moved past him, "Gael!" he shouted as he followed Aiden's finger.

The door was already open, Gael lay in the tub, her calf cut open by a deep wound that spanned from ankle to knee, was propped up on the tub leaving a pool of blood.

"Gael!" He hurried to her, tear-soaked eyes darted to him, and he realized with a deep blush she was nude. She put on a practiced smile as she sniffled, and he turned away quickly. "I'm ok." She lied her voice quivered as she fought the tears.

"W-what the hell happened?"

"A very bad thing." She said as heavy tears fell from her face. "I was training with-"

Her tears broke in a heavy mournful sob.

"Oh, she's dead!"

Who?" he asked, looking at Aiden who had covered his ears and had a pained look on his face.

"Her pain, I couldn't..." He murmured with darting eyes between the two of them.

With a sniffle, she spoke words cracked and broken by tears.

"Mom...the Innocent came."

She was visibly shaking, tear-soaked eyes filled with horror. "They skinned her in front of me." She choked, "She died protecting me."

Devon felt her sorrow seep into him, the room seemed darker bleaker, *who would do that? Why?*

"You're ok now." He assured her his voice cracked, "That's all that matters now. We need to get you to the hospital." and as he said those words, he saw The Hound appear, a slow walk past Aiden and himself to the tub where Gael laid.

As he turned, he looked at her, her face to see it grow even paler than before. "Help comes." The Hound rumbled; a weakly hand of Gael brushed his black ever moving mane. "I don't need a hospital." She insisted. "My-" Her voice quivered, and her eyes grew heavy. "My Keagan..." Her pale lips smiled faintly and her eyes snapped shut.

"Gael?" Devon gasped. He ran to the tub, a black tear rolled down Aiden's cheek, the hound whimpered, "She is leaving us," it said as he nudged her lifeless hand.

Devon felt ice fill his veins as he grabbed her hand.

"Stay here, don't-"

Her warmth was gone, the gentle glow around her began to dim, the lingering smell of lavender faded around him.

“We have to do something!” He shouted at them. *I can't lose a friend. I won't lose her.*

The Hound shook his head as he sniffed her hand, Aiden walked next to him taking off his gloves. “I can't, we can't,” he said as he looked at Devon.

“But you can.”

“Take me and what I have and heal. It has been done before. It can be done again.”

Flame lit eyes peered into Devon, “I can't-”

Before he could protest any further the long-nailed fingers of Aiden touched his forehead and with it a great heat rushed through him.

Every inch of him breathed fire and pain. Every ounce of him echoed with energy and life twisted with flames and suffering.

Lost within it, his mind raced with doubt and fiercer and more brutal were the echoing words of Aiden.

“Heal her.”

In his mind he saw his grandmother, her nimble fingers over the chest of a young boy, thick blond hair covered in dirt as he held on to his hand, a spider bite from a brown recluse.

Aiden was there, his small hand placed on hers, a memory Devon could never forget, his fondest memory of her, her kindness, her love, her *Will*.

Just like he remembered the poison dripped out of his skin and like it was never even there, the bite faded away. “*Just like that!*” Aiden's voice echoed within his mind.

And with it, the flood came-

Lost between thoughts and memories, Devon saw himself grow from infant to young boy.

He saw his father Kneel before two women with a dark-haired man looming behind him. His grandmother and grandfather age over periods of thoughts and memories far from his own.

I remember you! He cried out.

It was him all along!

Mr. Jingles!

Aiden's memories flooded Devon, one that sent chills down his body, familiar yet so distant.

Little Devon McNeil hid under the huge bush of tomatoes in his grandma's garden. His fingers were crossed over his mouth as he tried not to giggle...

"Focus." Aiden spoke and Devon opened his eyes. Deep within the pain he felt another flame, a flame for one thing, a flame made to heal.

He put his hand on her chest and focused as much as he could on that flame, it drew into him and unlike the air that fought him, it became a part of him, his heart, his soul, and the flame, wrapped around each other, becoming one.

Her eyes shot open and with a wide gasp, she grabbed onto his arm and looked right at him. Taking in deep heavy breaths as he looked into her eyes, now silver. He could feel her pain suck into him, feel her sadness crawl over his skin like glue.

As the moment seemed to last, he felt something draw behind that pain something brilliant and beautiful.

An ocean of peace, calmness, and understanding- wrapped around it was a primal warmth, feral and wise. "Stop!" She gasped. But he couldn't hear her, he was stuck in the bliss that was her.

"Devon!" He felt a cold snap, the flames dissipated, and the fiery pain fading from his pores and along with it, the blissful calm.

His head hit the wall and the Hound on top of him. He was gasping, feeling the last tingles of the pain, the heaven that was Gael.

Shame covered him like a wool blanket.

He turned his head to see Aiden laying on the ground, panting and Gael in the tub chest heaving deeply. His head spun when he saw her. "I'm sorry." He gasped as he looked at the Hounds golden eyes shadowed in darkness.

"Too much, too soon..." He growled, showing his teeth. Devon cringed at thought of those teeth stained with his blood, he nodded in response. "Don't be so hard on him. He did save my life." Gael said more puzzled than the rest of them.

The Hound got off of him with a growl and Devon stood up blinking heavily waiting for the dizzying white to fade from his vision.

"How was that possible?" he asked, still breathless. Gael gave her practiced smile towards him attempting to stand up herself. "I have no damn clue." She said collapsing back down with a plop and found herself staring at the wall in front of her, the trauma slowly seeping into her hazel eyes.

Devon looked to Aiden who was still on the floor, "Are you ok?" He asked. Aiden stood up, the flames inside his eyes slightly faded. "Much more powerful than before." He shook himself, then began to walk out of the bathroom, "I have to feed." he said weakly as he walked past the corner.

Gael's silver eyes stuck to the corner for a moment, then slid to Devon, widening larger than the moon.

Mr. Jingles, I can't believe it! As Devon watched Aiden leave in amazement, his memories came in a fogged blur, but they came, the questions began to stack, however.

He still didn't know why he couldn't remember Aiden from before and most of all what his grandmother had to do with anything. But he remembered playing with the Imp, and those eyes being a comfort in the darkest nights.

Gael broke him of the trance, "Thank you Devon, I now owe you a big one." She smiled at him, and he suddenly realized, yet again, that she was wearing nothing. He felt his cheeks go red and he quickly looked away.

"Get over it Devon," she said rolling her eyes and sneering. Devon's eyes avoided her at all costs, now focused on cleaning the pool of blood with a dirty towel he snatched up from the floor. "You are a powerful being D, frightfully so. Someday the world will be at the palm of your hands and Borse will guide you."

She sighed and looked at the new puckered scab on her calf. "Mother's tits." She groaned, "Mother's fucking tits." She said while watching Devon clean, Devon stayed focused, grabbing another towel in the cabinet just beyond the Shadow Hounds back end, "S'cuse me." He said the Hound looked at him and moved just enough.

Devon did his best not to think, just scrub the blood that just seemed to smear. And not focus on the naked Cat woman thing and the shadow dog and definitely not that he just healed someone with an imp that used to belong to his grandmother... *Are my parents polyamorous? EW*

His head pounded and he buried it back down, "Fuckin' Dammit." He said as he rubbed his bloody fingers on his temples, "Don't push it D, your brain might explode." Devon glared but Gael kept her eyes forward, "The woman that was going to help you with that is now Ashkoon's rug."

Devon went to speak but Gael let out another longwinded sigh that seemed more important than the other ones before.

"Oh Borse, how will you handle this?" She mumbled.

Devon continued to clean up the pool of blood in the silence that followed.

Finally, after much thought and pushing down another heavy headache he spoke, "I don't want anything to do with *this*." He said with a grunt, words harsher than he intended.

She looked at him silently and blinked, he went back to the blood on the floor and began pouring out his thoughts before he could help himself. "I don't know if you noticed but I never wanted any of this and I don't want to be a part of your-" His mouth snapped shut as he noticed her glare. "Your world, I never even wanted to see what I have seen, and after today I honestly want nothing to do with what's going on."

She nodded as if she understood, but still looked hurt, more so than she did before. "I want to know just enough to get you guys off my back, so I won't be chased down, as you put it, and I want to be left alone." The words rolled out before he could realize what he was saying.

At least it's the truth, he thought, Devon wished that this conversation could end. He hoped Keagan would show up but that thought made him shudder.

"I have to go, I'm tired." He really was tired, his body felt exhausted, and his eyes blurred when he blinked. He stood up and his head spun as he turned to leave. Just as he passed the threshold of the bathroom that stretched on with every step, Gael said something that made him stop in his tracks.

"Many people do not choose the Children and the Children do not choose who they want, but nearly all have been touched by the gentle hand of the Maidens and when a man as gifted and dangerous as you exist, the Knights will find a way to make him learn control, so we will not face another monster. You do not have to be a Knight Devon, or a Consanair", She laughed, "but you must learn, and I'm glad you realized that." Devon shuttered at the thought of how this Borse would find a way to *make* him learn.

He edged the corner to find Kara leaning against the wall eyes wide while she looked at him. He said nothing as he went to his room. He closed his door, as quietly as he could, he pressed his back to it and stared at his bed in front of him, mind wandering aimlessly.

Keagan screamed out Gael's name and he heard his booted footsteps hit the ground, he was out of breath, and Devon felt the horror Keagan felt seep over him, he felt his tears roll over his cheeks and the sweat dripping

out of every inch of his skin, but Devon was too lost in his mind to realize that he too was weeping.

His mind floated in thoughtless trance as he heard his roommate's share their tears, when he finally drifted to sleep, his back against the door and gut filled with fear, he dreamed of the woman in the field and later, a man with long black hair and tanned leather skin watching him. He somehow knew Kara was leaning on the other side of the door, eyes closed but still, in some strange way, watching him outside of his dreams.

CHAPTER 17: TO BE ALONE

A full day passed with an unbearable weight on the world around Devon, even the beautiful and cloudless day was being strangled by the darkness when it had its opportunity too. The scent of lavender seemed a bit stronger to Devon as he was left alone in his room, blissfully trapped in the ever-forming blob of macabre that lingered down his throat and into his groin.

He thought of ways to run away from this, every single ending had him back in the arms of the Children of the Moon.

He thought about his family, and what little he knew about them, he thought about the women his father kneeled to, one he knew was his mother, but thinking of the other one caused his head to throb.

He knew now that there was a moment in his life when the shift happened, where this reality used to be normal. But the headache came when he thought about it too much and all he could do was think about it.

Aiden was no help, he spent most of his time mumbling to himself, even when Devon finished a book and wanted to ask Aiden questions, he would disappear in a puff and not return for some hours.

It seemed his only refuge from the dreary lavender scented strangeness on the other side of his door was Valerie. He spent a lot of his time texting her, learning about her and she learned a lot about him. He was careful about what he told her, he wasn't ready

to tell her or anyone that his best friend was a horned spirit, and he was sure not to mention anything else for that matter.

It was the late afternoon when Aiden was acting his oddest, staring out the window and mumbling even louder. "How can I?" was all that Devon was able to hear as he was leaving his room for the first time all day. He was starving, but he waited until every person that came to see Gael that day left.

He stealthily stepped into the kitchen. Kara and Gael were sitting on the couch whispering about something, but they hadn't noticed him yet, thankfully.

He went about making his sandwich, slathering on plenty of mayo and making sure there was a thick tower of meat and when he was done, he spun around, sandwich halfway to his mouth, to see the hazel eyes of Gael herself, he let out a yelp that could shake the house.

"You're not the only one who can be stealthy, you know." She cocked her eyebrow like a loaded gun. He chuckled and took a step to his left, she stepped to her right, when he moved right, she moved left. She wiggled with that eyebrow still loaded when Kara appeared behind her wearing a cheeky smile.

He smiled back and looked at them expectantly. "Well, hi." He said to Kara, taking a bite out of his food. "Hi!" Kara said, examining him like a doctor to a patient, smile seemingly brighter as she let out a sigh.

"Can I please get by?" He chewed, trying to make his way through again. They both blocked the path and took a step closer; he leaned back, slowly and carefully taking another bite. "I haven't seen you all day, is everything ok?" Gael asked as he glanced over at Kara and back at him. Devon nodded as he chewed, when that answer didn't seem good enough, he swallowed, "Oh yea, I've been taking the ointment." He scratched his chin absently.

"That's good." She said watching him do so.

"How's your leg?" he asked waving his finger to the scar. "It's good, Fire is always a harsh healer, but I'll manage." She leaned against the wall and folded her arms. "I can't thank you enough."

Devon stuck his thumb up in response, "Ditto, kiddo."

The cocked brow turned to a furrow and then she rolled her eyes, "You've impressed a lot of people with your handy work," She added.

"I think it was mostly Aiden, I was kinda lost, honestly." he said truthfully.

Gael shrugged looking at her leg with a tight jaw, "Yeah but it takes a bit of strength to do what you did still," her eyes met his and she spoke, "Borse will be pleased when he meets with you tomorrow."

Devon nearly choked, "tomorrow?" he said after a cough. She nodded, smile deepening.

"I think I'm going to be busy." He lied. *Guess Valerie and I will have our first date... if that fails there's always Don.* "Yea actually, really busy, all day in fact." He began to squeeze by them. Kara looking up at

him with doughy eyes and Gael cursing as he accidentally stepped on her toes. "Sorry, ok, I'm gonna eat my dinner now. Bye."

Kara waved with a smile as he closed the door to find Aiden still peering out the window, licking his lips, *seems like he broke out of his trance.*

"We all feel it coming, it's not just me this time." Devon shot him an odd glance as he pulled out his phone. "In the coming days many will die, and you will too." *What an odd thing to say...* Devon thought.

"Fine then, I'll stay here not do anything and cocoon myself in blankets. That seems reasonable, perfect actually, it's not like I wanted anything to do with this anyways." Aiden only peered out the window blazing eyes catching the sun and taking it in.

Devon began texting Valerie, taking another bite of his sandwich in the process.

Up for a movie or something tomorrow? Send.

"How can you do all this? You're a fire elemental right? A Fae of some type, a Fae isn't even supposed to see the future or control time that's something left for the..." His words trailed off as he got a beep from his phone.

Sorry I can't, busy :(Valerie replied.

He grumbled and began texting his brother, Aiden began to laugh "I'm not a Fae. Can't see the future either, just part of the deal." Aiden said between the laughs. "Close when you said I was an Elemental, I used to be one." Devon finished his text and took another bite, tossing his phone down on the bed in the process.

"Then what are you?" Aiden only shrugged, keeping his eyes glued to the outside. Devon chuckled "I know, we'll keep it simple, you're Mr. Jingles." He began to laugh at the strangeness of it all but stopped himself short when he got a side long glare from Aiden, "Do not call me by that name no more, Little Poet!" He growled, the smoke leaving his lips thicker and darker.

"Ok-ok I'm sorry" Devon recoiled. Devon took the last bites of his sandwich and began peeling his orange. He was hungrier than he thought, probably because he refused to step outside his room with all those people coming and going.

"You know she had a beautiful voice." Aiden said eyes back on the outside and Devon nodded, remembering the songs she used to sing to him when he was younger. His favorite was Little Knight Lullaby. *It all makes sense now!*

“She taught me to sing.” Devon looked up at Aiden who acted like he didn’t say anything at all. “Is it normal to have your neighbors gawking into your window?” Devon shook his head. Slowly.

“I figured as much, Fae camouflage can be tricky even for me.” He gestured for Devon to come to the window. Devon abided idly picking away the skin of the orange. There standing just outside the parameter of the newly crafted shield that Keagan made, were three human-like creatures frozen still, looking right at him.

“Not human.” Devon shuttered.

“A little big for Fae don’t you think?” He threw the peels in the trash bin. One of those things was nearly as tall as him and the other two could double Aiden.

Aiden shrugged. “Size matters not. Just means, fuller, I get. Hmmmmmm?” Devon laughed, “You are in no shape Yoda.” Aiden glared at him, with a curled-up lip.

“What does it matter anyways? Is that what you’ve been staring at this whole time?” Aiden’s tail flickered, “Just admiring my soon to be meal.” He said licking his lips with his fat tongue.

“You’re going to eat one of those things?” Looking at the thin limbed human imposters, Devon felt disgusted. “You bet your fleshy ass I am!” Aiden flicked his tail and scurried to the door on all fours. Vanished and reappeared outside in front of his window.

Devon chuckled, eating his slice of fruit. He used to love eating Oranges now it just became a chore.

His door knocked and Devon flung his door open on instinct to catch Keagan looking right at him, along with Kevhin, of course.

They both smiled at him. He caught the tail end of Gael giving him a look as she went to the back porch. “Why is this house so weird?” He asked himself more so than the two staring him down. “A side effect from the awesome.” Keagan plainly noted. Kevhin laughed. The most emotion the man shown since they met.

“Probably not.” Devon smiled back.

Looking at their expressions it dawned on him. “This is the, ‘You will go with us’ part huh.” Keagan shrugged, smile vanished. “I’m sorry, D, I tried to give you more time but that looks like it’s not going to happen,” He looked at Kevhin and back at him, “we’re at war, now.”

Devon laughed, strolled passed them and grabbed one of his cigarettes from the table. “Not my fuckin’ war.” He dared *glanced* back at

the two men who wore solemn expressions as he made his way outside, nearly forgetting about Gael.

She seemed to radiate now, with the cool thick wind blowing beyond her. Her wound scabbed and nearly scarred, she had a look to her like it never happened, almost as if she forgot about it.

Her hand placed gently on the tree with a calm meditative smile on her face, she seemed to purr in the cool winds. Lighting his cigarette and taking a deep drag he made his way to the side of the house where Aiden was, "Let him catch his meal. Time for the big kids to have a chat." Her voice chilled as the wind stopped him dead in his tracks and he spun around. "Are you just bragging about using the Art?"

She smiled, "Look at you learnin'."

Devon for some reason bowed, "I am an academic after all."

She looked at him blankly, "You're so weird." She grumbled fighting a smile with a huff, "Look can we talk?"

"Nah, I don't know what else to talk about, I mean I do..." he took a drag of his cigarette, "But really I'm still trying to digest things."

She looked ready to burst so he bit, "What do you want to talk about?" He tried not to grumble.

"I told you, I owed you my life. I'm calling in that favor for me saving yours." She rubbed the tree then let herself lean on it. Devon bet himself that she was something like a cat.

"You don't owe me anything, remember the crazy naked spirit chick?" he pointed to his chin and she shrugged, "if you owe anybody anything, it's Aiden, it was him that healed you. Wait, so I thought you couldn't see him."

"I can now." She smiled "Handsome little devil if I don't say so myself. A lot more attractive than what I thought he would be." She peered over the corner with a broad smile.

"Why can Kara see him?" He found himself asking. "I don't know, ask her." She put her eyes back at him examining him like a rat. "Are you a cat?" he folded his arms.

"Quit trying to avoid the real issue here." She chuckled.

"No, so, are you?"

"This is getting nowhere." She said, raising her hands and turning away.

"It just makes sense, I mean, Keagan calls you Kitty, and you kind of act like one sometimes and then the paw prints, I mean-" She stopped him with a growl.

“Fine, you want to know, really?” Devon nodded, unsure if that was the best move to do, she turned to him and she began to speak softly enough to where he had to strain to hear her over the light gust of wind.

“A long time ago there was this lost little girl; she had no one to lean on, no parents that she knew of, she was alone, truly, and utterly alone. She, much like other children her age, could see Spirits. But unlike the other children, who ignored them and was frightened of them, she loved them.”

“She thought, one spirit in particular was her friend, but she was wrong, oh how she was wrong.” She made her way closer to him. “One day not soon after they were friends, the spirit led her into the woods and told her to do something’s the girl didn’t quite understand.”

“You see Devon, it was a binding spell, one to where the spirit would take over the little girl’s body and live her life in this realm becoming a part of its cycle. This of course would extinguish the girls’ spirit, no Summerland, no Eternal Well, just...nothing.”

She eyed him up and down and continued. “This little girl was lucky. Because right where she was performing this ritual it just so happened to be not far off from a camp site of an amazing, beautiful human being.”

Dr. Richards? He smiled deeply as she did.

“This amazing person and her Companion saved the poor girl but not without consequence. The little girl was dying and the two made a choice, a choice that has kept her alive today. They finished the ritual but changed it in just a way that two souls can bond, the only way they could keep that little girl alive. When two souls’ bond just right, the two souls keep their identities but work together as one. In most cases the bond is meant for a soul to be consumed by the soul.”

“Like a parasite leaching onto a host.” Devon said but by the way Gael looked at her she didn’t like the answer. “In this case no, she is a part of me as much as I’m a part of her.”

“The spirit?” Devon asked. And Gael nodded slowly, “I don’t remember much when I was younger, but the spirit that shares my body does. That woman was full of love and understanding, strength and a will that could shake the earth, that’s all I can remember, seeing the darkness and feeling her warmth as I felt life fill my soul and body. They gave that too me...”

She sniffed as tears began to fall down her cheeks. “It hasn’t even been a full day... I don’t know how to live without her in my life. She was my mother, my friend and my mentor. And now she is dead.”

He raised a hand to console her, but she jerked away. “I would be too if it wasn’t for *you*.” She pointed to his chest. “Now let me do you this one favor, before you go and get yourself killed trying to shoot fireballs out of your dick and bring you to Borse.”

He laughed and she continued, “I promise you, with everything I have in me that I will do what I can to get you away, as far as you can go, from this wretched war after tomorrow. Borse will understand.”

He thought for a moment and then finally reluctantly nodded.

“And no offense but you’re really not that powerful and you don’t seem to have more potential than what you already have done.” she added with a tear-soaked smile.

“Screw you!” He laughed.

She smiled at him and quickly made her way back in. Aiden appeared with something that looked like a giant insect leg in his hands.

“Humans are so weird.” He said as he took a crunchy bloody bite. Devon only looked at him. “You want some?” He said waiving the limb in his face.

Devon gagged. “Fine then, eat a nasty orange thing and turn down some high-quality Fae.”

CHAPTER 18:

A DREAM OF ASH AND WRATH

It was cold, the cold you would imagine it would be in the furthest depths of the ocean.

The night sky was a void where stars should shine. Instead, the moon lingered overhead, blood red and glowing just enough to make Devon's eyes feel uncomfortable, in fact, his whole body felt the shiver of a world misplaced and broken.

The moon shifted in its bloody hue, moving like an ocean of viscous goo, it dripped rancid black honey on to the earth.

A wind came, breaking the thread of goo from the world above and with the ice-cold chill ash danced, like a swarm of gnats, barely visible but enough to begin to coat his feet in a pile of grey soot.

He looked at the moon in curiosity, then the goo slowly spreading on the hard dirt, then at his feet.

He lifted his bare feet from the pile and placing it back down on the cold barren dirt. He took a step back, eyeing another glob of blackness falling from above.

He wore his deep blue pajama shorts and a very old Tool shirt he got when he was a teenager. It was as if someone plopped him out of his bed and into this world.

I could be dreaming, he thought, but he felt aware and awake.

His eyes slowly slid across the horizon, the soft glow of civilization was nowhere to be found. He was far away from home and far away from anything living, only the moon kept his company.

And the ash.

He turned his back to the moon and began to walk.

The cold digging into his bones he huddled himself together and fought the shiver beginning to form.

His eyes glanced backwards as another glob fell, he realized then he was climbing a hill, and one that was getting steeper with every step.

He reached the peak and saw a blank slate of pure nothingness before him. He turned to see the black honey coating the dirt with every large drip from the moon, reflecting the red moon above and the ash dulling the glint.

His eyes shifted next to him, his finger pointing down to a white glint,

I see it... he thought, suddenly feeling a presence not his own.

It was ancient and tired, but strong enough to put him here, and strong enough to make him point.

Devon began to dig, unable to control his actions but still aware of what he was doing. This dream was telling him something. He wasn't sure what, but soon the will that controlled him eased up and his own curiosity took over, desperate to know what exactly this all meant.

A face appeared, wide ruby red eyes looking up to the moon, with its mouth agape. It was a hard face, one that's seen the world and used it. A face he had seen before but he couldn't place when and where.

Borse?

He began to dig even further. Soon a bear pelt made of stone draped the statue's shoulders and blended into his long wild hair.

A bare chest with scars and a torso harder than the stone it was made from.

The statue's hands gripped a claymore as if he was presenting it as a gift, nearly as tall as Devon and it throbbed with veins of ruby.

Devon huffed and wheezed as he made his way further down digging up the sculpture and seeing, no, *Feeling*, fear seep into his soul.

He would blink and see a battlefield where men laid slaughtered dredged in blood and a man, no, an abomination of a god at its center, heaving with a maddening smile, he was wrath, in its purest form, and he was frozen in stone before him.

Mechanically he reached out, hand lingering above the claymore for the slightest breath then with an ease of the world around him, touching the chest, he felt the need to touch it more than anything else, it compelled him and entranced him.

Warm heavy sorrow seeped through it, the numbing despair and threads of wrath, reverberated through his hand and to his core like ice slicing bone.

The statue felt hotter than the sun and on touching it, it folded around his hand like wax leaving a handprint.

What can I do? He thought to it, *what is there for me to do?*

A rumble broke the nest he and the statue shared, and he fell from the shattering cliff.

The soil crumbled into the torrent of ash above him as he fell into the blackness, the statue falling below him, began to tarnish and age.

Then crumble into nothing, showering him in white and red.

Just as panic was about to leave his lips mist covered his eyes and he stood up.

A thick blanket of mist coated the newly crafted world below him and the blood moon still leaked its black rancid honey.

As he took a step forward walls of stone jutted up from the ground, to quickly crumble, ivy coated walls grew and died with every step he took and finally a wall jutted up before him. Hundreds of paintings on it of men and women lined the impossibly tall wall with ivy quickly covering them as they rot away into dust.

A cellar door bored its way through the wall, Devon reached for it, and then it crumbled into a rotten heap before he could grasp the handle.

He stepped through it and the mist covered world appeared again with beautiful ivory white crystal trees that glinted deep red under the moon. Loud screams echoed through them, enough for him to jump back.

Devon felt a fire on his back and immediately a radiant light broke through the ever evolving and dying world, turning everything, it touched to bright hot gold.

Devon began to run, just as crystalline trees sprouted from the earth, shimmering the golden end behind him. As one sprang and bloomed the one behind him shattered, he still ran, feeling the heat begin to sear his skin.

Towards the darkness of the sky, and the bleeding moon before him- He ran.

His heart beating out of his chest he sucked in hot rank air. Hearing a deafening drumbeat louder than the screams of the wars, louder than his thoughts or his footsteps.

A voice boomed in the light, "Who are you?" The voice chanted between the drumming-

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

The light began to sear his back. He cried out in agony, but it was deafened by the voice.

“Who are you?” It demanded.

“I am ETERNAL.”

He shouted for reasons he couldn’t fathom, and the voice was silent, the drumbeat became nothing, his breathe became ice, his mind clear, his heart eased and then-

The light consumed him. His flesh burned and his body turned to an ethereal form of gold.

Then shredded from a force beyond his own Will.

He couldn’t breathe, He couldn’t move.

He just suffered and suffered no more.

Devon gasped for air. His eyes wide in the darkness as he fumbled out of his bed and quickly into the kitchen, panting for air. His heart raced with the dream still rolling in his mind, “Who are you?” The voice echoed in his skull.

His hand shook as he filled a cup of water, his breath heavy after he chugged it down. “Who are you?” it asked again as he tried to shake it from his mind.

“Devon McNeil of course.” A soft voice said behind him. Devon spun to see Kara sitting on the countertop.

Her raven hair reaching slightly past her shoulders and big dark eyes looking at him curiously. She smiled as he looked at her. Her white top revealed her pale skin and thin frame. Her short black boy shorts barely covered her long thin legs.

His face heated but in the darkness, she didn't notice, at least he hoped. “The one the only, a name that will be remembered. A name forgotten. Everything, or nothing, something, perhaps... I'm not sure yet... The paths are still a bit hazy for me.” She smiled and began to kick her bare feet.

“Paths?” Devon asked still surprised, he didn’t realize he spoke out loud.

She giggled then spoke. "People have choices, some more than others, some only one. You have an unbelievable number of choices ahead of you. I can't see them all." She squinted her eyes.

"No, just a few."

"Like what? He asked.

She seemed to glimmer in the darkness. "I can tell you if you want." She leaned closer and looked at him top from bottom.

"I'm sure you don't want to know about that. That one... oh yes that I can tell you... you shouldn't be too hard on yourself you know. It's not your fault."

Devon crooked an eyebrow, "You didn't tell me anything."

"I didn't? I could've sworn I did." She shrugged.

Devon shook his head and began to walk back into his room. She sighed as he did, biting her pale lip.

She jumped down from the counter and began to walk away.

"Devon." She said voice suddenly sad. He turned to her. "Chances of me being there are not very good...." She looked at him with a long gazing stare.

"Let go." She smiled and Devon did his best to smile back.

When he closed the door, his lips twisted to his gums and he let out a hiss, *Odd one*. He laughed feeling the air thicken around him, as he looked at the gentle glow of Aiden resting next to the window.

He didn't sleep for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 19: THE BACKROADS

The long drive to the Village wasn't all that bad. Miles from the smog-filled city, the smell of cedar and wet grass filled Kara's heart and reminded her of home.

It was early still, and the spring sun just finally peaked out of the clouds from the small stint of rain they had in the middle of the night. Everything was finally coming together, and things began to feel like her path was becoming clear again.

Her eyes couldn't move past the cat feet dangling on the top of Keagan's SUV, feet that made her feel even more comfortable, something about Aiden did that to her. She knew it had to do with her dreams, dreams she dared not mention to Gael, *not just yet*, she had to be careful with what she revealed to her, Devon and Keagan's lines were like no other she had ever seen, and she had to figure those lines out before she said anything.

The crawler that stalked her and her family was killed, but with Aiden there, she knew something else was going to happen, that seemed to be the hint, anyways. The little creature seemed to have just as many paths as Devon, but every time she saw him, a Path or more would be missing and Devon had another one, another choice that she couldn't quite figure out.

The Paths were always a consistent part of her life, blurred and warped thick segments of an aura, colorless and reaching steps ahead of a person, and if she focused hard enough, she could see them reach out beyond time, and if she really focused she could see moments as they happen, a snippet into someone's life, sometimes clear as day but most often blurred and changing.

Dreams were more concrete... if she could translate right.

She spent too much time away from her dreams to interpret them now, almost a year of dreamless nights being pumped full of 'medicine' to make her nightmares go away, made her dull, and disconnected to her own Will and her ability to *See*.

Kara!

She looked to Gael and Keagan, her salvation, the ones who answered her brother's call. She owed them everything, she owed her brother so much more, and she was lost for far too long. Twenty years of homing in her foresight, just to be nearly wiped away like that was not something she wanted to do again, but thankfully they were headed to the Three Hill Village and there, with a *Caid* nearby, nothing can harm her.

"So, tell me what brings you guys here?" Devon began. The first words he said all morning, his nose was buried deep in his phone from the moment he woke up, to now. Her head automatically turned to him and then Kevhin, who was lost, looking outside at the Shadow Hound. *Is he talking to me?*

"I was just curious, it's just, we haven't really talked... never mind..." Kara looked back at Devon and huffed, she looked into those infinitely strong and beautiful eyes.

Those eyes said so much about him, his deep thoughts, his wisdom, and an unmatched sense of empathy, *Oh how I can get lost in them...* She felt her face heat when he gave her a toothy grin, Gael may not see any strength in him, but Kara could easily, and she didn't need foresight to see the young man in front of her will change the world forever.

"I hate when people do that, just go out and say it." She said it a little too harsh, leaving him to shift and grumble as he looked out his window. "It's just I need to save you someday, might as well get to know you." He laughed and cringed with a shrug, never breaking away from the window, watching the blurs of trees around him.

Gael clicked her tongue at the comment and continued her whispering conversation with Keagan. "I'm just," he looked at her, *into her* then shied away looking at the dangling feet in the window, "trying to learn, I mean after all I am..." He grunted then looked at her, "Next in line." Gold and silver wrapped across his body, and he began to glow brilliantly.

Kara!

"For what?" she blinked, and Devon was looking at her with that goofy grin again, no silver and gold crawling across his skin a second before.

She laughed out loud, *Dreaming!* She said, *Finally!*

Her dreams were finally speaking to her, no more hints or maybe, now was the time to ask questions!

A euphoric surge pulsed inside her then pure terror in the next beat, *this must be big...* She absently thought in the deepest recesses in her mind, she looked at Kevhin who was still transfixed on the Shadow Hound, droplets of blood dripped down to his collar. "It's important, sis, he needs to know. The shadow can't hide forever." Blood sprayed across the window as he spoke.

"Kevhin what happens to you?" She asked breathlessly, "Look at the Paths, when you wake up, of course." He said gasping through his teeth, "And trust me sis, I am nothing compared to them." Darkness began to envelope the car.

The Shadow Hound howled, and Keagan's eyes turned black, and Gael began to scream.

Devon began to hum and rock back and forth gripping on the headrest in front of him, "The Eternal Well, not there, not there, Spi, god Spi why didn't you tell me! Kara..." His head snapped to her, his shirt began to soak up blood at his side, his eyes began to drip purple, and his teeth began to chatter, his hair grew long, his nails longer, the purple turned to gold, and he suddenly smiled a broken tooth smile...

"Does it hurt when you die?"

KARA!

"I have to control this," she said to Devon, she stood up, and just as she did the world shifted.

Devon was there, his hand covering half of his face the other half frowned and his green blue eye revealed a world of sadness, "Why didn't you tell me..." He said smoke rising from behind his hand.

She looked around her; she was in the middle of a road, the same road as the SUV drove away, a lurching wisp of shadows chasing it.

"I can't lose him." A rough voice came from his lips, a voice not his, "You understand, seer, he needs to live." It was the voice of Aiden coming from Devon's mouth, a voice of sadness and despair. "Who is he?" she asked automatically.

Kara!

Behind him the horizon was black smoke and white-hot flames and the SUV driving to it, "Please tell me," She whispered, the sound of hundreds of creatures snarling and chewing on flesh, filled her ears but above all of it was the screech of tires and metal twisting and snapping.

Wake up...

"Not yet," she said as she looked at Devon who began to laugh, "tell me what I need to know." She demanded.

“They come to purify, they come to feed.” Clutching on to his face, the sounds of screams in his voice with the clatter of swords below it, “They come to stop me, the moon will turn and I... I AM WILL.” His voice echoed in power, his skin leaked gold and titanium. He sighed, “I am the Eternal.”

KARA!

“*NOT YET!*” She shouted.

“Who will come? Why is the shadow so important?” Devon laughed a laugh filled with a million screams. “To know everything, to know nothing!” He lowered his hand and in his golden eye, a million years passed by, a million wars, a million lives and only one death. “A mistake... I'm sorry Keagan... I can't help you.” Devon wept, “This is for her... for-”

She gasped as all the Voices behind his said a name, the name of the shadow.

His name... His name is...

Kara woke up, her head pounded, and her body ached, above her Kevhin's face was in a mix of panic and worry. Behind him Devon stood with Aiden by his side, both giving her the same look of worry.

“They're coming,” She whispered.

“Who Kara?” Kevhin dapped a handkerchief on her cheek that stung, “The Crawlers,” Kevhin stopped and stood up.

“Gael!” He shouted. But as if they already knew Gael and Keagan were already looking into the wooded area around them. Kara looked at the Shadow Hound and reached her hand out to him. He came to her, and she rubbed his chin.

“Faol.”

The shadow hound tucked his ears in with the Aura around his bones quivering, *the shadow knows, the shadow knows that the time is near*. She could hear Keagan groan as dread filled him, not for the reason he thinks, she in one simple name changed the lives of millions.

“I am sorry.” She began to cry, but he only soothed her tears and rubbed her hand against his muzzle.

She looked at Devon who gave a confused expression, Aiden kneeled holding his ears and mumbled.

They know, they all know, that's why the crawlers are coming, that's why...

“His name,” looking directly into the eyes of Devon, the hound nuzzled against her.

“His name is Faol.”

CHAPTER 20:

THE SCYTHE OF DEATH

Devon looked at Kara, she was a wrangled mess. Her pretty face had a deep cut on her cheek, and her left leg was obviously broken in several places, her quivering lip was beginning to swell in a small knot when she looked at him with bloodshot eyes.

The Hound, Faol, looked at him with his ears tucked down and his head lowered, those eyes screamed at him, in a panicky angry set of gold, *I didn't do anything!* He thought as he turned around and made his way to Gael and Keagan who leaned against the wrecked SUV turned on its side.

"Are you two, ok?" he asked as he stuffed his hand in his pocket to reach for his phone. They looked around with wide eyes, Gael sniffing the air and Keagan chewing on his lower lip. Devon took a quick peek at his phone, it had no bars, not surprising for this far out.

Keagan had his phone out too, furrowed face coming to the same conclusion Devon did. He tucked his phone back into his coat and his free hand dug into his long deep green coat.

"Devon, we have to talk about what just happened," Gael put a hard tone on her voice when she noticed him.

"Ok," Devon said, "we got in a wreck, Kara's hurt pretty bad, maybe you should do the healing thing, or something." Gael murmured to herself as her eyes flicked to silver and her fists bawled up.

Keagan sighed, "Not about that. Just for now, keep your mouth shut about Faol. He doesn't exist to you got it?"

Devon laughed. "Open your eyes, Devon, see a brand new, beautiful world. Oh, and hey, that shadow dog doesn't exist.

He's made up. Seriously though, I think she's in shock- holy shit your eyes changed, do mine change too?"

"Gold..." Kara said weakly.

Keagan grunted, "We don't have time to talk about that now," he huffed giving Gael a look of pure desperation, "Please." She said with her

silver eyes, “his name is sacred, if it gets in the wrong hands...” Her words trailed as she took another sniff.

Devon combed his fingers through his hair and grunted, giving a strong look into Gael’s eyes as she looked past the tree line, “Alright!” He said with a sigh, “What did I miss here?” he slapped his hips, “Keagan can’t drive, Kara’s in shock, don’t say big dogs name, what else am I missing?” He was looking out the window when it happened, one minute the trees and hills and the next, cracked old tar only a few inches away from his face.

“I can drive! Something hit us, man.” Kevhin said just slightly louder than Kara’s giggle. Devon could buy a deer hitting them, but even so, there was no blood trail or corpse to say they hit anything at all. “What hit us?” he asked, looking at Aiden who shrugged reluctantly.

A deafening roar came from the woods, “What the flying fuck hit us?”

“A crawler, and there’s a clot close by.” Gael said with a sniff.

“What the fuck is a Crawler?” Devon shouted over another roar.

“It’s something bad. Very bad,” Her mind seemed to be fixed on something else.

“Like a vampire...” Kevhin said absently. “Only ugly, and from the Other Realm.”

“Isn’t that what a vampire is?” Devon grunted.

Kevhin nodded in a shrug, which quickly vanished as another roar drew closer. Devon turned to Keagan who had a sword out and a stone in his hand.

“Really, man?” Devon gasped.

But his words went unheard over the roar, and Keagan barking orders. “Heal Kara, Gael, were going to need to move.”

Gael jumped and ran to the broken mess of a girl. “Devon, you and your buddy, go with-Faol...” He seemed to strain over the name. “And go ahead of us, Run, don’t try and fight, just *run*.” He pointed to a large hill with a water tower on top of it with the pointy end of his sword. “Go there and don’t turn back.”

Devon nodded and began to walk; passing Kara being held by her brother, as Gael, with her eyes closed, touched her forehead. He cringed when he heard a snap and Kara crying out.

“Damnit Devon, I said RUN.”

The earth seemed to tremble when dozens of screeches and howls echoed in his ears. Taking that as a queue Devon began to run, *Right, don't wanna see it.*

Devon hurried to the side of the road, Aiden beside him and Faol close behind his tail.

"Why don't you want to fight? We can take them!" He heard Aiden say in the wind.

He ignored him.

Soon he found an old dirt trail, a straight shot to around the massive hill. He turned into it and as he did, he got a glance at what was behind him.

A pink mass broke from the tree line and huffed.

Then another.

Devon's eyes shot forward then dared another glance, he squeaked.

Three twisted masses of tight flesh and teeth bulldozed their way to them, not quite a bear, not far from an ape, their muzzles were long with tusks and teeth protruding from it in no order and tongues with burrs coating it. They had no eyes to speak of, only a smooth skull where eyes should be and holes for ears.

"That's not a fucking vampire!" He shouted to Faol.

"No," The beast responded, "they are the Abominations of Blood." He was gone inside Devon's own shadow, only to appear again in a blink just underneath one of the monstrosities, snatching one of them by the neck and tearing its flesh open, spewing out rancid puss and black clots of blood. It whined to the blow but fell in a heap, dissolving into a pile of pus and skin.

"Not stealing my fire!" Aiden mocked as he vanished in a plume of ash and smoke, two blinks later and a plume of smoke came hurtling to one of the beasts, as it edged ever closer to Devon.

The little demon caught up to the monstrous beast, and with a leap, he clawed his hands into one of the beast's hind leg and ripped it off, the limb bubbled and hissed in his hands as he beat the creature to a bloody pulp, laughing hysterically as its bones cracked and splintered, a laugh that matched its whimpering death, until it became nothing more than a bubbled heap of puss on the road.

The horrid stench of copper and rot lingered in the back of Devon's throat as he heaved, spewing his breakfast of the dirt road, his teeth chattered and his eyes burned, but he dared look to see Aiden tearing open the throat of the last Crawler and ripping it from its spine.

The clatter of wet bone hitting the concrete and Aiden, a ball of flame, launched fire to the sky as he held the head up high with a bellowing roar.

“I am the Scythe of Death! I am Pain! Fear me Tainted Ones for I will grant you only horror!” He slammed the head down and it burst open on the concrete in a hard and audible crack. Faol howled in compliance of their victory as the words echoed across the fields. Devon was on his knees, covering his mouth and holding back the knot in his throat that was ready to lurch out at any moment, his skin trembled, and his body was numb.

Scythe of Death?

CHAPTER 21:

PUTRID BLOOD

Keagan looked at Gael whose silver eyes finally opened when the cut on Kara's cheek faded, "Thank you." Kara said rubbing her cheek, "It tingles a little," her smile was faint, and Gael slowly rose, reaching her hand out to Kara.

Kara took Gael's hand and rose with a groan, Kevhin was there in an instant, taking her other hand, "Do you always need saving." Kevhin said and the two women gave him a glare that closed his mouth shut.

Her eyes wandered around the trees, and Gael sniffed the air, giving Keagan *the Look* and his grip around his sword tightened to a white-knuckle grip.

Kevhin looked with great intent to Keagan, since the day at the hospital the man has been giving him a lot of that look, and Keagan felt like jumping out of his skin, he wasn't sure why exactly, he was just doing his job. Keagan openly chuckled, a quick subtle one that caused Gael to notice and him to refocus.

You screwed up once already, not again. Never again, a voice reminded him in the back of his head. And the howls getting close drove that focus in deep inside his core.

He threw one of his Runes at Kevhin. "Stay focused on it and the target and keep yourself calm while doing it."

Kevhin looked at the stone, "How the fuck am I supposed to do that?" He mumbled and Keagan responded quickly, "Think of a moment, or time where you were calm and peaceful, then keep that

at the surface above everything else going on and focus on the Rune and the target."

Kevhin nodded and sighed, rolling the stone between his thumb and index finger, "I think I can do that..." he stared at it like a moth to a light.

Gael tilted her head, lip twitching and eyes squinting in just a way to tell him he was probably making a mistake. *Without Faol I'll need all the help I can get.* He assured his own doubts, he hoped his hunch was

right, that they were after Gael and him for murdering a Master Crawler, not Devon.

It's not entirely rare to have multiple species of Malevolent working together for the same goal, the Siren was powerful, and power usually leads to followers in the Spirit Realm, but a Siren would just as prefer to be left alone after losing a fight than to continue to pester the same victim, Awakened or not.

Just as he grabbed another stone from the pouch of his pocket, he saw a blur of a creature three times taller than any human, lurking from the edge of the tree line, Gael hissed. "Focus on them, buttercup," he said as he pointed his finger at the siblings, Gael groaned and stomped her way back to them, giving him a pout that could turn the hardest man into a ball of mush.

"Be serious, please," he winked. She folded her hands under her breasts and a clear, silver glinted umbra appeared around the three, "I hate it when you tease." She mumbled. Kara laughed oddly, looking in the direction Devon ran.

He focused on his surroundings. Lowering his sword to his side, he held the stone in his hand and concentrated on his target, his sword, remembering his calm and staying in that moment for a second longer than normal.

It was 9 years ago when he stepped foot into the Village, the crunch of ice on his boots and chill in the air reminded him of another place that felt so long ago. That was his past now, and here, before him, dressed in white faux fur coat and barely anything under it, the glow of a goddess around her, even in the darkness of winter, she was his future...

He pushed it back into the recesses of his mind. He felt the hilt warm in his hand as the blade began to glow red hot. Without the Bonding Rune, there would be no way for him to fight back against the crawlers, the polished Labradorite stone with two circles overlapping and a hexagon in the middle and two lines wrapping around the stone on each axis.

This rune links the Spirit realm and Human Realm, the sword was his connection to both, the rune the catalyst.

The world seemed brighter as he used this rune, he could feel the sensation of life between life thicken the air and speak to him in an voiceless tone, telling him, the one that wrecked his SUV was close, and coming to him fast.

To his left he heard a huff, and he swung his sword, a fraction of a second too slow for the quick moving blur.

Toying with me? He thought as he put another swing this time he made contact, but a cat scratch that barely drew any rancid blood.

Why?

He counted four howls in the beginning but now it was just the one, the largest one, *distracting me?*

He looked at Kara who was huddled up to her brother with Gael directly in front of them, her silver eyes partly transfixed in concentration and partly just as curious as he was. Another flash of pink pale skin at his side, he stabbed at the blur, the hiss of his red-hot sword hitting flesh. *If not for her then-*

To the left.

The heat of the Crawlers paws nearly grazed his side as he side stepped, to the right, he raised his blade, cutting the claw twice the size of a bears clean off. Putrid, black blood painted the concrete and the paw dissolved in puss and began to reek of death.

“Devon?” The creature growled at the pain but kept its blurred pace.

“Oh shit.” Gael gasped, *Motheir’s grace, damn it, I was wrong!*

He dropped the stone on the road, still concentrating on it and his sword connecting them by his Calm. He put both hands on the hilt and waited for his chance to strike. He caught a glimpse, and he struck aiming for the hind leg, he felt the sword slide through the flesh and stench of scorched flesh burned his nostrils.

“Gotcha.”

It stopped its blurring pace, growling at him as it held on to its wound with its only hand. Gael growled and Keagan took his stance, he fought the urge to smile, even the reek of the creature that turned his stomach was no match for the urge to rip the creature apart.

Twice his size, the Crawler, roared as it slammed its massive fist on the tar road, blood drizzling from its nub held close to its chest. It's pink and grey skin Stretched across its skull so tight the bone of its muzzle was exposed as it snarled at Keagan. Hundreds of teeth jutting out of its face, and a dozen palm length claws scraping into the road as it huffed and roared, waiting for Keagan to make his move, and Keagan did.

He ran to it, dodging its bite and slicing deep into its shoulder. It swung at him, only to lose its hind leg in a spray of rancid blood. It fell to the ground screeching, its eyeless face distorted in pain.

He quickly jumped into its ribs, jutting his sword under its jaw. It roared with metal sticking out of the top of its skull.

The wretched smell of tainted blood on Keagan's clothes made him gag. The beast let out a gurgling cry as blood and puss spewed from its mouth.

A bolt of light came, and he stumbled back leaving his sword behind. The beast howled in pain as another shot down, another came, and another. Over and over again the lightning from the Rune in Kevhin's hand shot down at the creature until it was a black marred mess on the street.

"We have to get to Devon!" He called out in the whiteness in his eyes. He felt a hand over his, and they began to run. Gael panting in front of him, her soft hand feeling warm as she began to heal his vision, he did his best to shake it away to no avail. He heard Faols Call, a howl that echoed in his brain.

By the time his vision came back, they made it to Devon, who was hunched down with his head buried between his knees and inches away from his own vomit, his body trembled, and his face was pale.

He still couldn't see Aiden, but he knew he was there close by him, he could at least *feel* him. "I'm fine," Devon said out of breath, "Just a panic attack." He added shamefully.

Keagan finally let himself laugh. A short one that was cut shorter by a glare from Gael and Kara.

This is our future. Borse has a lot of work to do.

Devon was his friend, a good friend and a great person. True, he had his moments but at a time of war, like now, panic attacks can't happen.

"Let's get moving. More might come and the sooner we get to the Village the better." Keagan began to walk on the old dirt road leading behind the hill. Gael shot him a glare that shot through his skin and pierced his soul.

Kevhin was close behind, then Gael and Kara. Devon and Faol were the last ones, Faol quietly reassuring the panicked Devon as his eyes darted up and down the line either mumbling to himself or the spirit that walked beside them, either way Keagan was convinced that bringing him here was a bad idea.

CHAPTER 22: THE VILLAGE BETWEEN THREE HILLS

The Scythe of Death...

Echoed in Devon's mind as they walked their way to the pain filled void in his memories. The heat in his chest and tight shoulders told him this was no haven, he was potentially walking into his prison, or worse.

The hackling of Keagan ruminated in Devon's ears, the mocking laugh said everything that he thought, he was nothing, a weak and powerless thing that can do nothing and will always be nothing. The downward glare that he gave Devon every time he looked back at the line they formed on the road, it said it all.

I'm not something to pity, He thought to himself as he balled his fists, looking at the field on the side of the great hill. Hundreds of insects chirped, hummed, and buzzed around the sparse but clustered set of trees and waist high grass. Tiny sparks of something else leapt from branch to grass stalk and back again, *probably Fae. Probably man-eating sparks of death*. He thought unamused by his own joke.

The world he thought was beautiful and home became twisted and strange the instant he turned his head to see the creatures chasing him. His friend, a creature closer to him than his own brother referred to himself as the Scythe of Death. The monstrous piles of pus and blood left by Aiden was what really

made him sick, *were they just as evil as the rest of them*, his eyes darted to the Parade of Strange in front of him and he laughed.

They wanted to kill you Devon, and you know it. Are they just as bad as lion and deer?

He looked to Aiden whose eyes seemed to wonder along with the silver sparks, *a killer*. He looked at Gael whose dress now torn to shreds at the ankle and hair that was flowing down, now up in a tangled mess, *a*

witch. Kara who still limped, with eyes lost in thought and straight ahead, *Another Witch.* Keagan, *Killer.* Faol, *A hound of darkness.* Kevhin, *killer.*

He stopped in his tracks and tears began to roll down his cheeks as he fought the urge to laugh, but with one gratuitous heave it all left him, the laughter came in a roar.

They stopped and stared, and he continued, unable to control it laughing until his ribs hurt, hunching himself over and fighting for air between chuckles and once he regained his composure he spoke to them to ease their curiosity-

He pointed, "You the Witches and you the monsters, let us march in our Parade of Strange, gather all we can and with gusto- into hell we go!" He walked and they did as well.

"Really, D?" Gael mumbled and Devon kept his finger straight, smiling wide.

"What the hell does that even mean?" Kevhin chuckled with Kara.

"It means Devon's being dumb again," Gael snorted, and they all laughed, and Devon laughed with them.

It only took a moment, but Devon lowered his hand and let out a long sigh, shaking his hands as he walked and looked up at the warm sun and breathed in the air, "I just- I just don't know what else to do."

Keagan keeping his head straight, blond hair glowing in his loose ponytail shrugged as he stayed his pace, "To be honest man, who the fuck knows if that was it."

Devon bit his lip, Gael hurried her pace and nudged her knight in the ribs, he barely moved from it, but he looked at her when she whispered, then looked back at Devon, "I know it's hard, you're doing ok." He tried a smile that didn't seem to fit, and his thumb went up. Devon did the same, smile and thumbs up, "Thanks man."

They walked in silence for what felt like a century.

The land began to slope upwards, and the grass began to grow taller and thicker along the ever-widening trail. Birds chirped as they worked their way through the first brood of cicadas screaming their songs to the world.

The trail ended to a stone crafted parking lot with a small bunch of cars and a pair of Electric minibuses, and behind it the glint of solar panels with a small stone building in the middle of it that appeared to be made of one hunk of rock.

Keagan stopped for a moment and gruffed, mumbling something to himself and Gael snickered, “You’re so cranky!” She mocked and continued forward, smacking his butt as she passed him.

He stayed close to her, shoulders obviously tighter and face a bit gruffed, as they walked the side of the parking lot to a cobblestone pathway to the top of the hill. The twins stayed close behind them and Devon and Aiden a few steps behind them.

The trees became thicker and livelier as they walked on, the Oak trees were the largest and thickest Devon had ever seen, Cedar Elms and Ash looked ancient and thriving. Devon brushed his fingers across a moss-covered red oak that gave him chills and a blissful Daja Vu.

His mouth felt sewn shut and his mind blank, but his skin seemed to react to a growing electricity in the air. The smell of lavender and earth was overwhelming as they passed the thin wall of trees to the crest of the hill.

Devon’s eyes focused downward to the very center of the three hills, where a garden began to bud. The beginnings of ivy crawling on perforated stone walls and sprouts of root vegetables beginning to show its vibrant green on freshly turned earth. It was easily the size of a football field and around it, dozens of earth made homes, either from stone or dirt itself, covered in ivy and moss. Most homes had one large pane of glass where people were busy living their lives, cooking, reading, or lounging on hammocks or rocking chairs.

Kara ooo’d as they made their way down the steep slope holding on the cliffs wall, pointing to a pack of dogs resting across the hill from them, “Companions?” one raised its head, a deep maroon with glinting ruby eyes it was thin like a greyhound but three times its size.

It leapt from the edge and strolled its way through the village, “Are they all dogs?” Kevhin asked and Keagan shook his head, “Not at all, some are humanoid, others are birds,” He pointed to the sky where a giant black bird hovered in the sky, Devon shivered.

“They usually take the shape of what we’re more comfortable with seeing, in most cases, other cases,” He pointed up again, “they are shaped by the stories told about them.”

“The Thunderbird has been around since the dawn of man, she is more than a story, she is a legend.” Aiden said climbing the wall with ease and Gael nodded, “Wait till you meet her Companion, I’m sure you three will get along well.” She snickered and Keagan groaned.

Devon smiled but only for a moment, he was too wrapped around the place that felt more like home than the home he was raised in.

Once he put his feet on flat ground the maroon Greyhound met them at the threshold, she whispered something to Gael who only needed to bend over slightly then ran away, ruby eyes glued to Devon as long as they could be.

A dozen children seemed to appear, and Keagan was high fiving all the boys while the girls curtsied to Gael and Kara and they both did the same. They all scurried away quickly as soon as a loud whistle echoed in the valley.

“Leave them alone, you boogers!” an old woman shouted and the children went about their games, waving goodbye.

She was only a hair smaller than Gael and a tiny potbelly on a thin frame, her skin was crinkled paper and tanned a deep red, her hair was white and her deep brown eyes held a weight behind them as she slowly walked her way to them, and beside her a thin creature, with legs made of roots and face made of rock, large black eyes taking up the whole upper part of its head and a thin tight mouth.

“Ya’ll seem to have gone through it.” She said in a deep twang, Gael curtsied deeply, “absolutely Honorable Maiden Parker, seems our honored guest attracts all the malevolent,” She pointed to Devon and the woman’s eyes widened but said nothing as she stared deeply into Devon, “This is Devon,” Gael said, “McNeil,” Parker finished, and Gael nodded, “How’s your father, D?”

Devon felt his throat tighten, his eyes swelled, and his head began to pound, “I know you...” He said absently.

The Old woman strolled to him, “My poor Little Poet,” She said as she looked down to Aiden, who waived with a smile, “What did she do to you?”

Devon shrugged, and she put her hand on his cheek, and then hugged him, Devon smelled in her sweet lavender smell and sighed out, “why me?” He whispered and Parker looked up to him, “She was wise, but her reasons are her own, we can’t stop what the Caid of Sight laid out for us, we can only love what is given to us, before it is taken away.”

Devon broke his eyes from the old woman, and he found them at Kara, she looked like she was about to burst into tears while the other three mouths were wide.

She patted his back and broke away from the warm embrace and her face turned in to a bunch of wrinkles in a broad loving smile filled with

greying teeth then looked down to Aiden, "Guide him well, little one," Aiden nodded, adjusting his gloves and shifting his paws in the dirt, "I will do what I must, honorable Maiden," He sniffed, "It's good to see you again." He added.

She nodded and turned grabbing Kara, "Look at you," She said, "So full!" Kara yelped but laughed and smiled, "Thanks?"

"Always say what you must say baby girl, for the best future possible, do not let certain people sneak their way inside your head to what will benefit them, preserve yourself first."

Kara nodded and glanced quickly at Devon who shrugged again, finding himself holding back a laugh he didn't know he had in him.

"What a time, what a beautiful time, A seer and a Caid, so deeply tied to us, coming back home. Where Borse will guide you both." Devon's gut sank at that name and Kara didn't seem too pleased either.

"I am eager to see the future you two will shape for us." Parker sighed and waved her hands, "Now ignore this old bitty and go see Maive, get yourselves squared away for tonight."

Keagan took a step and looked back, "Does, uh, does Chance have the tow truck today? I didn't see in the parking lot?"

"He sure does," She said as she pushed them along, "He parked it by the south side." Keagan seemed to ease a bit and began walking a bit faster, Gael a few steps behind him.

Devon smiled as he passed Parker and waved, she grabbed his hand and opened his palm, "It's all going to be all right." She said and placed a paper wrapped peppermint nougat in his hand.

His head began to hurt in the familiar way it did, but his eyes swelled as he looked at it, "Oh shit! These were the best ever!" he caught himself saying, "Can I have another one please." She smiled brightly, "See, one step closer," She slid another one in his pocket, and he suddenly kissed her cheek, "You're the best, Maiden Parker." It rolled out of him feeling more natural than walking, he began to catch up to the group and the headache reminded him of a pudgy blonde-haired buy with a bit of an attitude, "let what's his name know I'm around!"

"Lance!" she shouted oozing enthusiasm, "and you tell him when he comes back from his hunt in a few days."

He waved, popping in the explosion of mint into his mouth and groaning in glee.

Kevhin looked back at him in wonderment, "Who the fuck are you, dude?"

Devon stopped, *Who are you?*

“I-I don’t know...”

Kevhin’s eyes bulged, and he began his walk again, Kara smiled gently and waved him on, and Aiden did the same, neither spoke but the sweet mint in Devon’s mouth lost most...*Some...* of its sweetness.

He kept his head on a swivel, allowing himself to trail behind just a little bit to see the world that was once stripped away from him unfold before him.

Past the garden and few huts down the cobblestone walkway, they soon made their way to a house just like all the rest, with a red headed woman standing in the front, tending to some ivy that crawled its way up her wall. When she noticed Gael, she shot up and ran to her. She too, a familiar sight.

“Oh, what happened to you?” She hugged Gael and looked at Devon with a broad smile over Gaels shoulder. Devon glanced over at Keagan who crooked a smile. “A pack of Crawlers attacked us on the way up here. It happened about 3 miles up the road.” Gael said.

“I’ll get Chance right on it,” She spun around and vanished behind the stone wall. Soon after she appeared with a broad man, tall and thick with no fat on him, his head was shaved to a shine and besides his eyebrows the man looked like he had no body hair on him, and he was of course, shirtless and wearing shorts that only went halfway down his tree trunk thighs. “Knight Sargent Keagan!” He stuck out his hand as he strutted his way to Keagan passing the girls.

They shook hands and began walking away, “I haven’t seen you since the promotion, Congrats!” They both laughed as Kevhin and Devon tried to keep up. Another cobble stone trail began to reveal itself from the tall thick grass next to the cliffs edge, and as the three men ahead of Devon began to walk up it Keagan spun around, “Why don’t you stay here with the girls.” He said to Devon.

Chance looked at Devon and visibly cringed, “No room in the truck, sorry.” Kevhin’s brows lifted, and Devon felt his gut sink.

“Yea, sure,” Devon turned around and began walking away, *what can you do? Have another panic attack, that's helpful.*

When he made his way back to the girls, they too looked at him with the same expression on all their faces, *unexpected displeasure...*

“Humans are so weird.” Aiden said, Devon was in no mood. He stopped short and leaned against the wall of the house and lit his cigarette. Aiden and Devon locked eyes for a moment and somehow Devon knew

that Aiden understood. "I feel so weak." Devon admitted quietly. Aiden scratched his head, "Strange creatures indeed."

"Devon!" Gael shouted at him. "I want to introduce you." Devon grudgingly made his way over to the small group of girls, Kara stood silently, her eyes darting between the three of them.

The redhead eyed his cigarette in disgust and he immediately put it out on his shoe and crammed it back in his pack before he took another step.

"Devon, this is Maive. We grew up together and has always been like an older sister to me." Devon took his hand out to shake it but the girl curtsied instead. Feeling yet again, foolish, he laughed and bowed awkwardly. "Devon McNeil, right?" she said, smile still imprinted on her face. "Yeah, don't tell me you know me too?"

"I am Dr. Richards's daughter."

Devon connected the dots in his head, *the receptionist!* "I thought you were the daughter of that guy?"

"I am."

Devon moved his fingers through his hair, "Are you serious?"

"Oh," Gael chimed in. "So, you've met Borse, already." The girls began to laugh as he felt his face drop, even Kara made a giggle under her palm.

"Is everybody in on some fucked up joke? Next, you'll tell me my mom is a Maiden and she'll be here any moment." Maive put her hand on his shoulder still laughing. He wanted to jerk it away and leave this weird Village and his roommates with it.

"You have no idea, don't worry though we'll take care of you, just be patient!" Devon glanced back at Aiden and Aiden cringed.

Devon's mouth was suddenly tightly shut, remembering Aiden's memories leaking into his own mind and seeing his father with two other women, one was the mother he knew and loved. "How is she by the way? She was shaken when I called." Smile untouched by the words she just said.

How can you be laughing after your mother died? Take care of me? He glanced at Gael who seemed eager for a response, "I haven't talked to them yet." Gael's face looked disappointed, but Maive still seemed to shine, "They don't even know I'm here."

"That's ok," Maive said, "lets focus on tonight then we can talk about the Sons of the Champion returning."

“Wait...What the fuck?” Devon said, feeling nude suddenly, still tasting the mint in his mouth and every moment since he stepped foot into the Three Hills Village crashed into his head. *What the hell does my family have to do with all of this?*

Who are you? Echoed in his skull and his fingers began to tingle.

“Oh yes, Devon McNeil,” Maive snickered, “I knew we’d get you back one day, the rest of the clan is just a matter of time.”

“I need a moment.” Devon said as he walked away.

“Geez, Maive, way to overwhelm him, you can break his mind doing that.” Gael said.

Devon hurried climbing towards a slight slope on the cliffs edge and he stopped in his tracks, eyes tuck upwards to third hill, the hill that he used to look up to as a child and wait for his father to return, there a mansion stood, as solid as ever, a mansion that housed a Caid, and the most important members of the Children of the Moon.

He looked back at the three girls, “Son of a Bitch,” He shouted past the throbbing headache.

Kara took a step towards him, and he took a step back, “We’ll be inside, D!” Gael said as she grabbed Kara’s arm gently, “You should process this for a bit.”

Aiden climbed a rock next to him as Devon kept his eyes glued at the Mansion, “You ok, Little Poet?” Aiden said, patting his shoulder.

Devon didn’t break his sight for a second, even though his eyes watered from the headache he still glared at the three-story house.

“Into hell we go...”

CHAPTER 23: INTO THE NIGHT

An hour passed and the three girls came out of Maive's home together smiling and laughing with no care in the world.

They all looked beautiful.

Their glow around them seemed to dim the late afternoon sun, and Devon squinted when he looked at them and felt his shoulders ease, if this was a spell, they put on him he would gladly take it.

Gael still walked with a mild limp but managed to curtsy to Devon as she caught him looking, bowing down enough to cause him to look away from her low-cut top. Maive did the same, frilling her black sparkled skirt and showing her slightly more modest bust.

Kara noticed and began walking towards him rolling her eyes with him, "Girls and their boobies," Kara said, and Devon laughed, "you're one of them."

"I have none," She pointed at her chest, "these little things won't get me as far as those," She pointed at Gael with her thumb and Gael laughed, hearing the joke from far away, "Careful," Devon said, "She's a furry too,"

Gael furrowed her brow and huffed, walking away towards to the cliffs edge where Keagan and crew walked away too.

"Sorry..." Devon said sincerely, and he got no response back, only an unhappy look from Maive.

He sighed and looked back up at the mansion, his eyes lingered there for a moment as he felt Kara's gaze.

"Ah-hem sir." She said and Devon turned her way again.

She spun in her dress and waived it in a frill, it was a sheer light blue, with a white slip dress under it, her black hair danced with her spin and as it finally rested across her pale face, she smiled with thin lips, "Tell me I'm pretty," She pouted.

"You're pretty..." Devon felt his face get hot.

She smiled brightly as she leaned closer to him, "You know-"

Kara suddenly spun around and huffed, the boys seemed to have returned from their adventure and Keagan seemed to be in a lighter mood.

She turned to him again, and he met Kevhin's curious grimace, "You should come back and talk to them, don't worry the worlds not going to end if you don't," She tapped her forehead and winked, "I just think it's good you get some practice in," Devon went to speak but she lifted her finger, "Its fine, take your time too, things are about to get," her eyes stuck to the ground, "Ok, talk to you in a bit..."

Kara took a step back, eyes still on the ground, then she spun and began walking to the crowd. Gael and Keagan were hugging and Gael looking at him with a menacing glare.

"I really am sorry," He whispered, and Gael finally showed her teeth in a wide jeering smile. He sighed and turned his head back to the mansion, trying his best to remember the vital part of his life that was taken away from him. He was so young, and it was so long ago it all seemed like a dream that he fell back in.

He looked to Aiden who sat crossed leg on the wall of the cliff, "Can you tell me anything that might help me remember?"

Aiden looked at him intently, "I want to tell you everything," he said gently, "But your brains might explode."

Devon groaned, "Was I happy?"

Aiden nodded, "Of all the lives I've crossed, through all of my time in this existence, I have never met a being as full of joy as I did a Little Poet, I know he is there. But he will come in time, and when you meet him, he will gift you what you need in life."

Devon said nothing, and Aiden didn't push, they both looked to the hill and sighed.

Soon they all left and made their way up a long rising slope up the hill to the mansion, Devon trailing behind them, Keagan and Gael arm and arm, with Faol close behind them, acting like they led the parade, with Maive and her husband behind them.

The twins, Kevhin and Kara, behind them and Devon in the back with Aiden who looked to be regretting this decision as much as he was. "Is there any way you and me can disappear in one of your puffs of smoke?" Devon asked.

"I can, of course, but what good is that going to do? At least were in this together, right?" Devon nodded in response.

Once the slope ended and the mansion began to show its glory in the golden sunset, now a sliver above the tree line, Devon felt his heart beat a little harder.

And that drumbeat in his chest was her call to bug him again, Kara gave him a quick look back, then turned around and began walking to him, stopping him in his tracks.

She gave him a long look before she spoke.

“The sun is beginning to set. This day is going by way too fast.” She sighed, Devon glanced down at her, and she smiled. Kevhin spun his head back but kept walking.

“Want to watch the sunset with me?” She asked as she grabbed his hand and put him at a dead stop. Aiden laughed quietly as he kept walking.

Don't leave me alone with her! He thought, shooting daggers at the back of the little fucker's head.

He looked beyond the Mansion and took a deep breathe in, seeing the golden sun and the shadow it cast on the world around him. Kara held on to his hand tightly smiling brightly.

“Why me?” He asked her as nicely as he could.

“Because you're Devon McNeil. My friend.” She said, never taking her eyes away from the sunset. “We could be more than that, you know.”

“What?” Devon fought the heat on his face. “We could have two boys,” she continued, ignoring him. “Edmond and Lance. Ed would have a choice between being a journalist, like his dad, and an engineer. Lance would become a firefighter.”

Devon dug his eyes into her, and she smiled deeper, knowing exactly what she said. Edmond was his father's name. And Lance was the name of the chubby boy distant in his memories. “How do you know that name?”

He tried taking his hand away, but she held a tight grip. She continued, “Because, they earned it...” She sniffed. “But when the end comes, they will die. And wherever we run Ashkoon will follow. Everyone will die.” She looked at him. A long hard look, her eyes digging deep inside his soul.

“Everyone, Devon.”

“Why do you tell me these things, Kara?” She smiled and her eyes began to swell with tears.

“Because Devon, you need to listen.”

"I'm sorry," He said, "I don't know what I'm listening too, tell me something useful."

"If I do, you'll do anything to stop what has to happen. So will they." She nodded to the house. "You should see you in my eyes..." she said with a sigh, a tear streamed down her cheek. "Let me make the choice when the time comes, accept death, and let go." Abruptly she kissed his cheek, standing on her toes, she lingered for a second before letting go of his hand. "Love Devon, love them all, even the ones that hurt you love until it breaks you then love some more... Oh, and never stop being human."

She walked away arms folded to her back, she caught up to Kevhin smile plastered on her face.

"I like her." Aiden said as he appeared next to Devon. Devon caught himself laughing. "But she's so weird!" He said to the sunset. He turned and began to follow the group. Keeping a safe distance from them, hands deep in his pockets and mind deeper in thought.

The happy trail of people was stopped and Devon got his first good glimpse of the Mansion. It was Victorian styled, painted an eggshell white with a dark stained wood accent to its borders. Encircling the whole foundation, a Patio decorated with strings of lights where people were drinking from their glasses and talking loudly. Every light in the three stories of the mansion was turned on, bringing a yellow glow to the oncoming night. The stars were beginning to shine, thick in the sky they glinted and paled in the full moons arrival.

"Ammore," Keagan said with a bow to a woman dressed in the same uniform as he was. She did not curtsy or bow, she just watched him with a hard look in her eyes. Her thick dark dreadlocks glinting with something metal at each tip. "Keagan." She said blandly. "I'm glad you made it here, *alive*."

Gael and the woman standing next to her both shot her a look. She seemed to ignore it, instead standing up straighter. Keagan cleared his throat and rose, "Y-Yeah, I-I'm ssstill here," He laughed looking at Devon then lowering his eyes quickly, Ammore looked indifferent and even more indifferent as she looked at the rest of them.

Her eyes stuck on Devon for a moment, her mouth twisted, and Devon raised his hand, "Careful, brain might explode, apparently." He didn't know her, that he was sure of, but she knew him, "Ammore," She reached out her hand, "an absolute pleasure to meet you," Devon took her hand and smiled, "Thanks!" Devon said poignantly looking at Keagan who

rolled his eyes, "You seem cool!" She laughed, "I've done some cool things and got a cooler Companion." She pointed up and the Thunderbird clapped a small rumble above them.

"Oh, You're not lying."

Devon let go of her hand and they both said nothing, Gael instantly began to speak causing the parade of strange to look their direction.

"I love your dress Caitlin, it's very beautiful." Devon could disagree, the dark purple dress looked like a secondhand store reject. It flowed outward and crinkled up at the bottom, A black and purple floral corset at her midriff, making the woman's chest pop out of the strapless top. It hung on to dear life, revealing all too much on the red headed woman who stood next to the intimidating Ammore.

"Thank you!" she said grabbing on to her skirt and fluttering it. "I found it at Top Drawer..." she went to blab on about the prices and how nice the service was leaving the rest of the group in silence. Gael nodding her head enthusiastically.

Ammore was glaring at Keagan and for once Keagan's proud posture looked ready to break. Devon was enjoying it but not as much as he wanted. Keagan, even treating him like he has been, was still his friend. But he seemed to be quietly taking the punishment as well.

When a breaking point in the conversation started Gael abruptly said her goodbye and grabbed Keagan, "Nice to meet you two." He said and wave and Caitlin gave him a fanged tooth smile.

He set his eyes back in front of him, a dozen people passed by them in a small crowd towards the doors of the mansion, patting Keagan on the back, or waving at Gael.

Most of them, if not all, stuck their peering eyes at Devon and Kara. His skin shifted and crawled, teeth tightening and head beating as hard as his heart Devon reminded himself to breathe.

"You're doing well, Little Poet." Aiden said as he noticed.

Devon felt a bit easier knowing Aiden was next to him, he felt easier knowing Gael and Keagan were there as well, but they seemed to be lavishing in the attention leaving the back end of the parade to be treated as the spectacle that they are.

They climbed the five wooden steps upward to the patio, the railing carved with ivy and glistening stones in the wood each stone cracked with two circles over lapping and various geometric symbols in the middle, Devon glided his finger across them and he felt a tiny tingle in his finger tips, "Old runes," Aiden said noticing, "you only get a limited amount of

times with an element before it breaks the connection.” Devon eyed the Imp and he smiled brightly, “What?” Devon shook his head and his eyes stuck to the large double doors.

Etched into the wood, a woman with curly hair blowing in an unseen wind stood in a field of lavender, her hand outreached with five geometric symbols rising above her fingertips, in the other hand raised in the air and delicately holding on to a large butterfly.

She wore a sheer dress, showing her form as it blew in the wind, and more ivy strewn across her body almost like a cape, “so much Ivy,” Devon grumbled, Gael turned to speak, a smile lighting her face, “So there’s this myth that has to do with a certain champion, he gave Madiline a vine of ivy as a gift the first time they met, the shawl here was from the Lioncrest, and this... oh Devon are you ok?”

Devon did his best to smile, but his head felt ready to burst, “Brain exploding.” He rubbed the center of his head and Gael cringed for him, “Oh, sorry Devon.”

He sucked on the mint in his mouth, it was nearly gone but it seemed to help, “Ah I deserve it...” He grumbled, not knowing why it felt so right to say. Aiden quietly patted his thigh but said nothing.

“Ready?” Keagan said with a smile to Gael, and she nodded with a large grin. He pushed both the doors open and she hurriedly passed him with a purr.

The long, wide hallway was stained in a deep blood red paint and bordered with more wood carved ivy. The white stone floor polished to a perfect shine, specks of silver and black contrasting the deep rich colors around them.

Gael spun with Maive holding each other’s wrists under the largest chandelier Devon ever saw. Three rings slowly spun in a geometric dance around three octahedrons that spun the opposite same dance inside. From them hundreds of tiny glass jewels dangled and reflected the falling suns rainbow of light with a deep shade of gold to dominate them.

They laughed under the golden rainbows and Kara gripped on to her brother’s arm who looked at her with wide blue eyes and then back to Devon who shrugged.

“Its so shiny.” Gael purred and Maive giggled.

Hearing a man cackle at the girls Devon looked at the room next to them.

“Sorry.” A man in the same suit Keagan was in said when he looked at Devon.

“Let them be, dude.” He said, a bit harsher than he thought, and the man quickly turned around and walked away. Devon took his time to look into the large room in front of him avoiding the eyes he felt on him as best as he could.

Bookshelves triple stacked as far up as the ceiling, with several ladders and a staircase leading to a balcony that cut the massive library at its center. A dozen people were in there, lounging on floor pillows as large as beds, or standing with drinks in hand reading or talking.

A few looked up and waved or bowed at them, eyes lingering to Devon or Kara a bit longer than the rest, Keagan and Chance would waive back quietly.

It occurred to Devon, when the first one bowed that Keagan might be more than what he appeared. *A General?* He looked at Keagan and felt a sudden bit of awe, *Who knew you had it in you.* He thought but Keagan Gael and Maive just smiled at him when they noticed him looking.

“I think your right,” He whispered to Aiden, “Humans are weird.” He looked down and suddenly felt naked.

Aiden was gone.

Spinning around he found him standing on the railing of the patio with his ears tucked down and a frown stuck on his face. He tapped on an invisible wall that dented with his finger.

“Gael.” He said as he made his way to the invisible wall. “Can you let him in please?” It felt odd saying it, but he felt like a part of him was missing as he looked at Aiden’s sad eyes.

She glided her way to them and put her arm on Devon’s shoulder. “I can’t, that’s for Borse to decide, it’s his house. I’m sorry, it’ll have to wait for a moment.” She blew a kiss to Aiden who put on a practiced smile, then turned with a pat on Devons shoulder.

“He’s just going to sneak in, you know.” He mumbled, she was already back in the hallway. Keagan shrugged, “Sorry man.”

Kara looked at Aiden for a long moment and did her best, smiled and blew Aiden a kiss, Aiden raised his hand to waive as Kara took her time, giving one long look at the Imp before turning.

“It’s ok,” Aiden lied, “I’ll see you in no time.”

“Go, be a human, mate or something.”

Devon laughed, “They’re so weird though!”

“You will do great, you will always do great, Little Poet.”

“Thanks, you gonna be ok?”

“I will be, I can be without the hoopla for a bit,” He jumped down from the ledge and took a few steps into the grass, his eyes seemed to grow brighter than normal in the oncoming darkness, “I will see what it is like to spend time with the Companions for a bit, perhaps sneak in after a while.”

Aiden smiled, his tail flicked and he raised his hand, “Be you, Little Poet.”

He was gone in a puff of smoke and Devon felt a sudden twist in his throat, he turned and caught up with the rest of them, his hands dug deep in his coat pockets.

CHAPTER 24:

TYING OFF LOOSE ENDS

The Hallway opened up to a large ball room with hundreds of hanging strings of light all leading to the center of the room where the crowd was the thickest, “You will love to see this, D.” Keagan said and waived him on into the thick crowd, Devon looked around, there must have been over a hundred people in that room alone.

There were loungers where Maidens relaxed, sipping wine on top of each other while men in deep green suits talked amongst themselves, people leaned on the staircases opposite to each other, curving against the wall where large panels of decorated arched windows shown the falling sun.

The second story seemed to be a party on its own, the sounds of someone strumming a guitar and releasing his soul out to the world reminded Devon of his grandfather strumming his acoustic, the man hardly ever spoke but his fingers spoke volumes when he had that guitar in his hand.

He fought the urge to slide away inside the crowd and climb up the stairs to see the person playing, instead he looked up to the overlook expecting to daydream of wandering to the music.

His eyes stuck in place for just a moment, and he felt a lightness fill his insides and his eyes felt thick in a blissful sense.

Her skin was caramel, her curves fit neatly in a red dress and thick oceans of black curls rolled down to the middle of her

back, she turned, *It can't be!* He thought and suddenly Kara slapped his chest, “Not yet.” She said, and he grimaced at her, “What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?”

“I thought I saw someone I know.”

“You know a lot of people here.”

“No, I don't.”

“Stop being weird, D.”

Devon was speechless, raising his hands he groaned.

“What? Devon being weird again?” Gael laughed.

“She hit me!” Devon exclaimed.

“Probably deserved it.” Kevhin laughed.

He scowled at Kara who stuck her tongue out.

“I give up.” He admitted looking up where the red dress woman was and to no surprise she was gone.

“You gotta kinda do this...” Kara whispered.

“You don’t have to help me.” Devon said between his teeth.

“Yeah, I do.”

They stopped, Keagan raising his hand up to the center of the room where a roped off statue stood cracked and nearly crumbling.

It was his nightmare come to life, wrapped in ivy and held together by wire was the stone statue of a ruby eyed man, bare chested, with a bear pelt draped over his shoulders he held out his claymore with open palms, this time the claymore was real, and polished to a shine and looking at it made Devon’s skin tighten.

It felt alive, and if he focused it seemed as if the sword was beating, a slow rhythmic cadence that drew in the air around it. He took a step forward, in instinct alone he wanted to reach out like he did in his dream, *this can’t be real.*

“It’s a bit boorish, don’t you think?”

“It’s terrifying.” Devon responded.

“That’s one way to look at it, at the time I was a terror.”

Devon looked behind him.

Face as hard as stone with a twinkle in his green eyes, Borse stood as tall as he was, Maive and Gael in both of his arms, both smiling brightly. The same smirk was plastered on his face when he first saw him outside Doctor Richards building.

“Sup.” Devon found himself saying as his heart wanted to be thrown out of his chest. Borse roared in laughter and everyone around him followed, *I guess it’s normal to make sure a god likes you.*

“Tell me, Devon McNeil,” Devon looked behind him where Kara stood wide eyed, “How’s your headaches.”

“Blinding and annoying.”

“Any weird dreams lately?”

“Nope.”

“How’s your father.”

The room grew quiet, the air was as thick as honey, Devon felt the weight of the room crush the air out of his chest and he shrugged, "Guess he's ok. I'm the disappointment in the family so were not that close." He lied, and when Borse didn't seem to buy it, he laughed and Kara laughed too, causing a cluster of laughter among the crowd.

"How are you? I'm deeply sorry for your loss."

"This is my greatest loss yet, my heart breaks as we speak, and I will spend the rest of my time in this realm mourning."

His green eyes seemed unmoved, instead digging into Devon like a bear to a young deer.

"I can't imagine it."

"You won't need to."

Borse was solemn, mouth barely moved and the room around him grew thicker by the second, if that beam of light was going to consume him like in his dream, he wanted it to happen now.

"Come," Borse said, letting go of the two girls and he smiled brightly, "Let us speak in the study."

He spun to the crowd, gently moving Kara to the side and nearly knocking Kevhin down in the process, He spoke to the crowd holding his glass up in the air, "May we all celebrate this solstice for Priestess we mourn and the world she gave. May we welcome the new this spring, A new Seer, a Caid, and A Priestess who have all come to us with open arms."

The room clapped and Borse spun Devon around who got one last look at Kara who seemed to be shivering, Borse said nothing, smiling and parting the crowd with Devon a death grip tight to him.

A door opened, one with a bear on it, and a fire erupted in a fireplace, then, the door shut.

Devon turned, he and the god of Blood and War locked eyes.

...

Kara watched the door close with the rest of them, then everyone dispersed and began to talk in their little cliques. Once the murmurs became a gentle roar of a crowd Kara looked at Kevhin and recomposed herself from the blinding paths that seethed from Devon now.

"Shoo." She said with a smile and pushed him away. "No," he protested, "I looked away for 3 days and mom and dad locked you up, nope not going to do it again."

“Kevhin, seriously?”

“Yeah.” His face soured and he looked around, “what if a Crawler comes back or something?”

“Yeah, you were great help last time.”

He dug in his pocket and fished out the Rune Keagan gave him, “Got something now.”

“I’m surrounded by men with swords and pouches full of those,” she waved her hand at it, “Plus Maidens who just need to flick their wrist and turn those things to dust, I will be ok.”

“What if...”

“We also have two Gods talking in a room together.”

He looked around dark brows furrowed, and he chewed on his lip.

“Go, find a Maiden, fall in love,” She pointed to her head, “tonight will be a good night for that.”

His eyes grew wide, and he smiled, “Any leads?” he said looking around.

“Not near your little sister.”

His finger lifted the way their father used to command, and he instantly put it down, “Stay safe, if you can’t find me, run to that room and stay close to them.”

Kara smiled and nodded, it was in all actuality the last place she wanted to be was near that room and if everything was to fall in place tonight then the last being on earth that was safe to be around was Borse.

“Oh absolutely, do you think I’m dumb.”

“Yeah.” he said with a smirk.

She waved him away and when he faded into the crowd she spun around and made her way up the stairs.

You still have time, don’t sound too chaotic to them but be fast and be punctual. A few people stared as she passed but she had to find three very important people, and one of them wasn’t a person at all.

She looked outside the elaborate arched windows, counting them and trying to find the most important piece of the puzzle yet.

I wonder if I just leave the window open... She closed her eyes to focus.... *Nope won’t work.*

At the tenth window she stopped and there he was digging his way through the barrier with little trouble, Aiden’s fiery eyes were brighter than normal, and he was beginning to glow, the glow sent chills down her spine, but she loved him even more for it.

She clicked the latch open and gently let it open, and she whistled. Someone murmured something behind her as she stuck her head out and waved at Aiden who ran his way to her.

“Oh, she’s the seer.” Someone said and she looked back, a dark-haired woman looked at her wine glass in her hand and smiled, “Hii-” she said drunkenly.

“Hi, I know it’s hard to come up to me and want to ask a million questions, I get it, I want to too, but right now I gotta take care of some things.” She winked, “Tell you what, after the Ritual I will meet everyone right next to that pillar over there and I will tell you everything you need or want to ever know.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet!” she slurred.

“Oh no! You are Brittany!”

The woman’s eyes lit up and she walked away, whispering to her other friends, “How did she know!” Kara slid her smile off her face as soon as they turned, and she went back to her task at hand.

Aiden was already halfway up the wall, careful not to burn too much of the thick ivy and he smiled brightly as he saw her, “My moonbeam, I am pleased to see you.” He said as he lifted himself on the ledge with one arm.

“Hey mister,” She smiled brightly, “business talk.” His face grew serious, “I am all ears, Maiden.”

“I need you to not say anything until you have to, understand?” He nodded lips tightening up, “I mean you can talk to me, but after this conversation please don’t talk... Do what you have to do, but don’t talk.” He will listen, him and Devon will be the only ones it seems but it’s worth giving it a shot, “The Capitol.” She added, his face twisted in confusion, but she dared not to elaborate.

He looked at her longingly, “Will he be safe after this?” He asked and Kara shrugged, “He will be as he is needed to be.”

Aiden let out a deep sigh the tendril of smoke becoming slightly thicker than before, “I’m sorry to have disturbed you Maiden, I have grok for you and I cannot thank you in your assistance with this.”

She smiled, “Aiden,” she looked into his fiery eyes, “I love you, for the beautiful soul that you are.”

“Then you must know how much I love you.”

She nodded and he began to crawl up further, “Second chimney on the right, go all the way down and move to the left.” She said and closed the window.

She turned to see a sea of smiling faces, “After the Ritual.” She promised and made her way past them to the top of the stairs.

A man and woman played their soulful music and as two people glided by, arm and arm smiling Kara tapped the girl on the shoulder.

“That was fast!” she said abruptly seeing the two of them for the first time, she blushed.

Seeing his path was an epic enough, but hers!

“You two are such a beautiful couple,” She said with a smile and the Maiden smiled back, “Thank you.” trying to hide her frustration.

“Look guys, just listen...” she looked at them and their eyes grew wide, I only need to talk to one of you but its good you’re both here,”

“Do not follow Borse’s order,” their mouths dropped, “I know its shitty, but it’s a morality thing... anyways... right, that’s what you guys will debate after this,” she waved her hands in the air, *I can’t believe I’m acting like a mess in front of them...* “Just be his friend if you want to be his friend.” She looked at the man, slightly taller than his Maiden and a bit too nerdy for her taste he still was handsome but the Maiden was even more beautiful. “This conversation never happened,” She bowed awkwardly and waved, then left them quickly.

One more! She thought as she pressed through the sea of oncoming on lookers, she was careful to keep her eyes focused ahead, and slightly lowered, too many paths can give her a migraine and she didn’t want to deal with one the last night she will be alive.

She scoured the room slowly moving through it looking for bare feet and a red dress, and finally in a corner surrounded by a small group she saw them, “Hey you,” She said and the black haired woman looked up with dark eyes and smiled politely, Kara began to tear up, she fought it but her throat felt the unbearable weight and she wiped her face, “Please,” She sighed and looked at the others, “Please, always do your best to protect him... your Knight.”

They will laugh together, and cry harder, they will be perfect but flawed, she closed her eyes, “the world will burn...” She whispered, “Only for...”

She shook her head, “Woah, don’t want to spoil too much,” She laughed, *so weird, don’t be weird, fuck I’m weird...*

“Sorry?” The woman said, “Are you Kara Airden?” she went to reach her hand out, “Don’t stress yourself too much, love.”

Kara shook her head, “Nah, I’m ok. Just...” Kara looked at the man next to her, she grimaced and glanced at his tattoo on his neck, *Ew...* His dark eyes peered at her distant and dull, “Gotta go.”

She smiled, “You’re beautiful!” She waved and turned around, and made her way to the bathroom, third door down the hall.

Her thin face framed around an ivy mirror; she noticed the thread of silver wrapped around her retina as she wiped the sweat from her face.

“Please work,” She said body quivering, “it has to work...”

She looked into the mirror, beyond it green and silver eyes seeing into an endless sea of a future she may never know, and she felt that presence she felt as she floated between reality and possibility, “Its going to work right?” She said to it, the ancient and woeful weight coated her body as she saw lives come and go and hear a song that is immortalized by love and hope.

It is as it will be, It said.

We are just passengers to the Causality of the Ember.

Kara began to weep, body lost and soul mournful, she embraced the ethereal god and it too wept for her.

“I don’t want to die...”

CHAPTER 25:

BORSE THE MAN

The door closed shut behind Devon and the slight glint in Borse's eyes faded right before him, his mouth twisted, and he stuck his eyes forward and walked past Devon.

Dark stained wooden floors echoed his footsteps. The fire lit the room, etching out the darkness only slightly, shades of gold and red danced between them, and Devon felt a shiver down his spine.

"You feel it too then?"

Borse strolled through the massive study, sliding his fingers across the leather lounge facing the fireplace, he reached for a crystalline bottle at the center of a round stone table.

He popped the long-pointed cork and sniffed the brown liquor and poured the smallest pour in crystal cups. Callused hand wrapped around it, and he lifted it to Devon.

His eyes were red, not bloodshot, no white or green, pure ruby red, he raised the glass again, "Come, now."

Devon walked slowly, cautiously to the God, and reached his hand out, "Your eyes are red now," he grasped the glass and Borse twisted his lip only slightly, fixated on the glass in Devon's hand, "As red as the day I crawled out of hell." His voice filled with sorrow.

Borse turned his attention to fire and his head lifted to the beautiful art between them.

The fire mantle, wrapped in wooden ivy, framed a mural, the center Madeline and her red hair adorned in lavender and butterflies, one hand to her neck and eyes facing downward to

Borse in a battlefield on top of a pile of bodies. Above her, framed by her hair, other men.

To her left a man smiling framed by feathers and bright hair blowing in an unseen wind, above him a large, bearded man with a flame in his hands, and below him a thin older man with moss in his long beard, and closest to her, a bald man looking morose.

"Caid of the Elements," Borse pointed to the four, "Airden, Agnah, Geoiss, and Daryan." He pointed to the other side, where three more men

were depicted, “Xanos,” He pointed to a man with scaled rainbow skin, “Arwin,” a man with a crown of roses and a black robe, “And Spi,” a thin man with very long black hair.

“Air, Fire, Earth, Water.” He pointed back to the four men, “Then the three brothers, they’re less simple, “Xanos is... was Dreams, Arwin is Death and Spi is- was, the most complicated of all of us, illusionist, Mind...seer.”

Devon held his drink halfway to his lips and looked back at Borse, *So Xanos?* He thought absently.

He then pointed to the other side of the room, there a small portrait of a man with long white hair and a rapier in his hand, behind him a silver falcon statue, his high cheekbones and tight face showing an ageless handsomeness that felt surreal, “That, is the Caid of Man, the one who burned Madiline and began the Caid Wars, the Hunter, the Falcon, your enemy, my murderer, and the creator of the Innocent, Dane Ashkoon.”

Devon’s eyes glued to the portrait, and he took in the drink without a thought in his mind about it, “Not my enemy,” he said daring a glance at Borse.

Borse did not react, he drank his glass and put it down, and turned to the desk in the center of the room. Behind it a wall of shelves with many artifacts from what appeared to be all over the world, stone with Geometric shapes carved into them, cracked and preserved with resin, a piece of bark encapsulated behind a shadowbox with black splotches on it, a stone dagger, looking ready to crumble at the slightest breeze.

“I built this mansion two hundred years ago, as a safe haven for all Maidens.” Borse said as he picked up an arm’s length wooden pole from a rack next to a rusted suit of armor with more geometric shapes carved into it.

“Of course, then, there was nothing here, nothing but silence and peace.” He said as he looked at the pole with heavy eyes. “But I was born with nothing but enemies, and they will always be drawn to me.”

He eyed Devon, balancing the pole between his palm, “As you were, and as they will be.”

He tossed the pole at Devon, which he let fall. “Pick it up,” Borse commanded. “Let me see who you truly are.” Devon picked up the sword feeling like his father scolded him.

Alright I’ll play your game. He thought, grabbing the end of the pole with both hands.

“You’ve opened your mind just a crack, and in time the crack would have eroded, and your mind would be flooded with the world you once knew.” He looked at Devon almost disappointed.

“We do not have that luxury, McNeil, I will not convince you of the enemies at my doorstep, you will witness that soon enough.” Borse grabbed his own wooden sword and tested it, “I must demand of you to push the boundaries your past has set for you and look to the future.”

“Wish I could do that, Borse.” Devon said dryly, “I don’t know what happened to me, but I feel like it happened to stay away from you and the others.”

Borse laughed, “No,” he said, “There are no others, Ashkoon and I are all that is left and soon he will win his damned war.” He pointed his wooden sword at Devon, “and you will have a new war to fight.”

He took a stance and tapped Devons wooden sword, “Fight me, Child, for this is all that we are.”

“Why?” Devon asked but Borse swung clipping his shoulder, a tap hard enough to bruise, “Stop.” Devon begged but Borse hit his rib.

“No, you fool.”

He swung again but Devon blocked it, “please.”

Borse smiled deeply as he swung with intent and Devon blocked again, “We were born as a Causality of Nature,” he swung with weight behind it, but Devon caught it. “We will die by the Bindings of Fate as it commands.”

He struck Devons kneecap, and he was suddenly on his side.

“Get up, again.”

Devon complied, “I didn’t ask for this.”

“And I didn’t ask either, only one of us did and he has destroyed all that once was.”

Devon pointed his stick to the portrait, “Where is your god stopping him?” He growled and Borse switched his stance to one hand and put his arm behind him.

“Ask the bitch when you see her, he is her sin more than any of us.”

He jabbed and Devon stepped back, thwacking the sword away and Borse tried for another jab.

“The Fatheir unseen for a millennium and the Motheir hidden among the cosmos, did you wish the pantheon to be omnipotent? All knowing and gentle.”

He quickened his pace, swinging wildly, Ruby eyes glinting gold and focused, a wide smile touching on a madness Devon feared.

Blow after blow Devon tried to block what he could but it just didn't end, "No child, we are not granted fairytales in this reality, we are given an Alchemist as a mother and a Dreamer as a father, Karma is an illusion and illusions are manufactured by Will."

He stopped.

Throwing his wooden blade in the fire and took a deep breath.

Devon fell to his knees- his body began to tingle, and a heavy tear rolled down his swelling eye.

Every blow rolled over him and his breath was uncontrolled, he heaved in the air, feeling the knots form and his eye begin to tighten up, he looked at his hands clutching the quivering blade in front of him, and a knot formed in his throat.

"Then why be like this?"

Borse kneeled down in front of him brushing his thumb across his cheek and they both looked at the crimson smear on it, Borse rolled it across his tongue and closed his eyes.

"Because, Little Poet," He mocked, "that is what is demanded of you."

Devon watched his eyes fluttering behind his lids with disgust, "I can't avoid this can I?" His voice quivered with his body.

Borse slowly shook his head, and with purpose the ruby eyes opened, and the statue face appeared again, "One day you will see, we are but clay that will be molded to what is needed."

He stood up and reached his hand out, "whether by Fate, or by our own Will, we cannot be human, we cannot be part of them."

Devon took the gods hand, and he lifted him up with ease.

"Have you ever had the same opportunity I have?"

Borse shook his head taking the wooden sword from Devons grip, "They want you to be like them, they needed me to defend them. We are very different beings, and yet our fates will be the same," Borse ushered Devon to the lounge with a tap of the wooden sword.

"I have seen it happen time and time again, a Caid's death is a solemn one, and one that will be forgotten shortly after. Just like man, just like the animals they are. We are all just drops into the Abyss of the Eternal Well."

Borse turned to the fire, pausing for a moment as small, gloved hands clawed out the fire pit and Aiden appeared on the mantle. Their eyes met, a thick tendril of smoke left both sides of his lips and his eyes glowed brighter than Devon ever saw before, Borse tossed the other sword into the fire, "Seat yourself Imp, but do not get in the way."

Aiden looked at Devon but said nothing, his mouth twisted as he swiveled his head back and forth between the two then with a smoke-filled huff he crawled on the wall to his left.

Devon felt an ease roll over his shoulders looking at the glowing eyes in the corner of the room, Borse glowered at Aiden then seated himself in a leather chair that looked handcrafted and as ancient as the god that sat in it.

"I pity you."

Devon furrowed to great pain.

"You could have changed this entire planet by now, you... no we, could have taken down Ashkoon with ease at this stage in your life, I could have taught you what it is to be a god!" Borse's fist clutched, and crimson dug deep into Devon, "but here you are, barely a man, weak in heart and weaker in spirit, your mind is broken and broken by your own blood."

Devon's heart ached, his head pulsed in pain and every bruise screamed at him, he said nothing, but a heavy tear stung his wound.

"And here I am, dying before you, about to become mortal enough to be killed and I speak of pity."

Aiden was glowing, the sweet smell of his smoke became more pungent, his breaths heavy and Devon could see blood dripped from his bitten lip.

Borse didn't notice.

"Ashkoon has my bloodstone, do you know what that is."

Devon shook his head- another tear stung his cheek.

"It is a Rune made of my blood, once an Oath is broken the seal is broken and that blood will begin to poison my blood to weaken me."

Devon's shoulders eased, his eyes grew wide and Borse smiled.

"And now you pity me."

He turned to the mantle and dug his index finger into a brick, and one of the ivy leaves twisted, "I will be dead in two days, if I am lucky, I will see Arwin again and he will undoubtedly extinguish my soul as he did with other Caid before me."

Devon lowered his head, but his eyes stayed glued to Borse's hand as he twisted the wooden leaf and pulled out a hidden drawer, "I will not go back to the Eternal Well, and I will not be left to roam as a Spirit."

"But..."

He reached inside the wooden drawer, and pulled out a small box, he tossed the drawer into the fire and opened the box and dug his fingers into it.

It was as crimson as his eyes, it pulsed as the sword pulsed, with a bright glow of red swirling inside it. Two lines crossed it on both axis and at the origin, two circles interlaced and inside it five triangles meeting in the middle at the tips.

"I was told a long time ago, that a boy I pity will come to me and I was to give him this, and my throne."

"What?"

Borse tossed the stone at him, and Devon caught it, it was warm and smelled like copper, if he focused long enough, he could feel a pulse not his own in it.

"If you see that man," He pointed, his hand shaking slightly, "Call my name, and I will give you the time you need to become one that I do not pity."

He rose and with a great stride his palm went to the center of Devons forehead. A shock went through him, his body pulsed, and his heart jittered. Devon let out a gasp and his throat seized. His eyes met the Caid's, they were placid and contempt.

He felt his body itch, and electricity shot through him. He was being healed, his eye became lighter, a scab fell from his cheek and his quivering stopped.

Borse let go and Devon caught his breath, "I leave you the ones that followed, I bestow upon you the burden of devoir- this kingdom- my kingdom will become ash and blood and you will be too weak to stop it. Rebuild it, throw it away, I don't give a damn."

Devon was woozy, his heart fighting to leave his chest and his eyes heavy.

"I hope we will meet again, and I hope I am faced with a god and not a boy."

Devon went to stand but he was caught, "You will rest now. And then we will see how the night unfolds."

"Borse, why are you doing this?"

Borse laid Devon down, “So I will know peace, that the boy worthy of my pity will be what the world needs, and as I was...”

“A Causality of Suffering, that will be no more than a drop in the Abyss of the Eternal Well.”

Devon’s eyes sealed shut, he heard heavy steps leave and felt the warmth of Aiden.

He said nothing to Devon and soon he vanished as well, the sweet stench lingered in his nose, and the warmth of the fire before him kept him warm.

In time Devon fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 26:

THE CALM

Wake up, handsome.

Devon, between sleep and consciousness, saw a figure deep within himself, silver with threads of gold coiling around its ethereal form, it formed a finger and a hand, then an arm.

Devon, you're not going to leave a girl in suspense, are you?

Devon felt a smile spread across his face.

The figure tapped the exact center of his forehead and vanished into the blackness.

"I'm waking up." He mumbled to the both of them.

She laughed in a way that filled his eyes with water, a fullness that he felt since the moment she looked at him at the bar.

It was gentle with a taste of sincerity, it was beautiful.

Take your time, she whispered in his ear, the world can wait for you...

And then she said it, the words rolled over his body and gently opened his eyes, words that chilled him in an unexplained warmth-

I will wait with you.

Valeries eyes glinted a hint of silver as they faded back to the golden brown he loved to stare in to. A light dimmed in her palm then extinguished with a thread of smoke.

Her caramel skin seemed to absorb the golden light behind her, and a mix of lavender and magnolia coated her. Thick black curls rolled down her back and framed her soft, exquisite face.

He sighed as she did, her smile met his and she raised her champaign glass and tipped it on her full lower lip. They froze for a moment, not saying a word and filling the room with the comfort Devon never felt before.

Fuck, He thought, already?

She tapped her long red nail on her glass and shifted her bare feet, "Who would have thought."

Devon laughed, "I sure can't."

Her laugh was heavier this time, "So I hear."

Her eyes locked with his again, "Devon McNeil," She started, "So much I want to tell you."

Devon tapped his head, "Brain might explode, apparently."

She nodded, "You will most likely have momentary psychosis added with a hemorrhage and probably a seizure and then," She raised her hands in the air, "Boom."

"Boom?"

"Boom..."

"So, what can we do?"

"Small bites, handsome."

"Do you really think I'm handsome or is this a long con to get into power or whatever?"

Her face grimaced, "I'll let that slide, we've only spoke for a few days." She pointed, "Next time, I'm going to boil you alive."

Devon nodded, "Guess that was a dick question."

"Yeah... Short answer no, I didn't know you were Devon McNeil, like, McNeil- McNeil until I saw you step through this door and asked Maive."

She tapped her glass and stared off behind him, "I don't know how to react, I think you're a total stud though."

Devon's face lit on fire, "I think you are too."

They both laughed, "I mean, I think you're beautiful."

"Thank you," Her smile deepened, and her face turned the slightest red, "I wish I ditched this and went on that date with you," She sighed, "this is all so..." She waived her hand and blew a raspberry.

"Can we count this as our first date then?"

"Meh. I wanted you to take me to that new taco place off Lamar."

"Oh, you like tacos?"

"I do! Do you? Let's get married!"

Devon rose with a groan, "So mean," he said at her laugh, "You know you're not doing very well wooing your way into power."

She laughed even harder, "Oh Devon, my boy, don't you know I can put a spell on you any time I want." She said in her best Wicked Witch impression.

Devon rubbed his face awake, fighting his own laughter, he locked eyes with her and as their laughter faded, they sighed again.

"You already did."

“Did what?”

“Put that spell on me.”

“Devon, I really can’t do that.”

“Explain why I feel this way then? Why I just met you and I want to give you every bit of me. It’s irrational, it’s stupid and very much not me. There’s so much that has happened in my life this past week alone and you have been the best part about it.”

There was quiet, comfortable and still. She waited for him, and he waited for something, a rebuttal, her storming off, her snapping out of it and seeing the loser he thought he was, but she stayed so he continued.

“I don’t want to be this, but it feels so right, because I have never felt fuller than this moment, in this room where I know my best friend is a fire imp and my roommate turns into a cat.”

“I wanted to be a journalist, I wanted to travel and find beautiful parts of the world and write about it, now I’m here, looking at the most beautiful being I have ever met.”

“My quest is complete, and I was too afraid to leave Austin, you came to me, this all came to me, and I can’t stand it. I don’t want this, but if people like you or Keagan and Gael, exist then I will do what I can... to...”

He lowered his head into his hands, his mouth suddenly closed shut and his mind became noise.

The silence was less comfortable now.

She put her glass down gently and rose to her feet, taking the three steps to him she adjusted her dress and knelt down in front of him, “The world can wait, and if you want me to, I will wait with you.”

Devon looked up, her lips inches away from his he fought the urge to lean in, “Please.”

She grabbed his chin hairs and smiled, “Ok fine, this is our first date.”

Devon laughed.

She suddenly kissed his forehead and grabbed his face, “So for now the world waits.”

Devon nodded and she turned around and plopped herself between his legs, letting her curls drape over his thigh and wrapping his arms around her shoulders, and his body seemed to ease instantly.

“Can I do something?” her voice quivered slightly, “it’s this thing that I hear the girls talk about all the time... Forget it...”

“What’s the thing?” Devon asked feeling her nails brush his forearm as they both gazed into the fire, “It’s a way to relax someone, basically with spirit I will put my emotions through your Chakras, if I’m happy, you can be happy, if I’m calm it will help you be calm too.”

Devon felt the familiar sting in the center of his brain, his voice hoarse he nodded, “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

She took a deep breath in, she glanced at him with silver eyes reflecting the golden fire behind her, “Ready?”

Devon nodded.

A warmth coated his skin as she grazed it, and like a river it shot through him and wrapped itself around him, his eyes swelled and he took a deep breath in, leaning back on the lounge and looking up to the high ceiling, “You can do this whenever you like,” He felt a pulse one that stretched from his throat to his groin and she cleared her throat, “noted.”

Just a moment passed, but it was eternity, Valerie grazing his hand and Devon taking it in, feeling her warmth pass through his body, drunk off her smell and warmth, and at last, after the long disorienting week he felt calm.

She looked up at him, head resting at his crotch, she smiled gently, stroking his arm and fingers still. He felt a pulse of heat, and another stronger than the one before, and he fought to let his body give into it, but she turned, moving up, closing her eyes and breathing out a jittered breath, he looked into the mirrors that dug deep into him, pulsing a fire straight into his core.

She pursed her lips.

He sighed and leaned in.

A knock on the door and suddenly light poured in.

“Oh no,” Keagan whined.

Valerie squeaked and Devon cawed. Both jolting away.

“I am so sorry.”

“Keagan!” Devon grumbled.

“D, seriously, I was just...”

Gael shot past him, “Oh no, Keagan why didn’t you wait.”

“Please go.”

Valerie raised her hand to her waist and waived at Gael.

“Wait is she the reason why you’ve been on your phone for the past few days, Valerie you’re his date?”

Devon groaned, gripping a pillow over his face.

“We met at a bar, actually,” Her voice broke.

“Well... well, the one-time both you go out and you meet. Fate be damned,” Gael wiggled a little then her voice became cordial, “I apologize, Maiden Valerie for my Knights blunderment, we were procured by your mother, The newly appointed High Priestess, to rally up the new Consanair, the ritual is about to begin.”

Devons head ached, but he still managed to get a glance at Valerie, her eyes as wide as his and Devon to everyone’s amazement, even his own just shrugged.

“Ok, well, we will begin to head that way,”

Gael turned around Keagan made room for her past the door, mouthing “I’m Sorry,” she took one last look, prominently at both of them and smiled gently, “You two better be good to each other.” She whispered in the most threatening tone he had ever heard from her.

The door closed shut and Valerie collapsed back on to the floor.

“Those were my roommates, Keagan and Gael.”

“No, my dear, that was a powerful Shaman and her Knight Sergeant, one of two Sergeants we currently have.”

“Ah..”

“I’m sorry Devon, the world summons you.” She said looking down at her feet, “Can I be with you?”

Devon laughed but Valerie gave him the biggest set of eyes she could give, “I can’t imagine a better person than you.”

Valerie nodded, “We barely know each other, D. But I want to know more about you. The world will ask a lot of you,” Borse echoed in his mind, “But I want the whole of you, please promise me him. I can work with the rest.”

Devon stood up and took a step towards her, her silver eyes looked up to him and he brought his hand down and she slowly grabbed it.

Without a thought in his mind, he spoke words he never felt truer, “I will always be me, but to you, I will always be yours...one day, hopefully.” She gripped on to his hand and smiled, “A bit presumptuous, handsome. Maybe you want some of my Power.” She lifted herself up and Devon nearly lost his balance.

“Ah yes, the long con of me getting my memory erased and living as a hermit for ten years, just to get my ass kicked by a god, maybe we can throw in the whole bunch.”

He waved his hand at the mural, Valerie did not laugh, she adjusted her dress and then began to look him up and down.

“Devon, most of them are dead, or disappeared.” She grabbed his arm and began to fix his cuff, folding it neatly and straightening out its wrinkles, “and this mansion is currently filled with the living that are going to try and leech on to you as fast as they can.”

She unbuttoned his top two buttons and smiled, “You have wonderful collarbones,” she spread his collar open and tapped his chest with her palm, “Anyways, let’s just focus on getting you through tonight and the next few weeks.”

Devon thought for a moment, watching her fold his other sleeve, “Do you think I can trust Gael and Keagan?”

“I think so, the Richards and theirs are good people, Keagan is a bit aloof, but everyone here admires him, enough to appoint him the first Sergeant since...” She looked at Devon who fought through his headache, her lips twisted, and she spun him around, “I’m not sure what Angel and Ronal are up to but Angel and I trained together with a certain someone for a year and she was great then.”

“Remember I don’t know these people,” Devon laughed, and Valerie winced tucking in half his shirt and lifting his pants up slightly, “Why are you dressing me?” He laughed and stepped back, eyeing him again.

“If you are going out there as who you are, I want them to see you who you are.”

“But you’re the one dressing me still.”

“I can do a whole character profile on you and spoil this or you can trust me and let me dress my- you- the way that will help you gain traction and still have you feel comfortable.”

Devon sighed and she fluffed his hair with her fingers, “we need to frame your eyes with a part down the middle... like that.” She smiled deeply and nodded.

“Tristan Lioncrest-” Devon grabbed his head and groaned a vision of a dark-skinned boy around his age appeared and seared its way into the back of his eyes, “oh, I am so sorry.”

“Shit that one hurt.”

Valerie put his face between his hands looked deep into him, “You’ll be ok... no more shop talk. Let’s just get some air.”

Devon nodded, “You can tell me about your mom, I think. I hope. I’m curious...”

Valerie grabbed his fingers around his and they began to step forward, Devon put his hand in his pocket and felt the stone inside it, he winced at its pulse and took his hand back out.

He opened the door and as the light flooded in the chatter of hundreds of people silenced and all eyes were on them.

In the sea of faces Devon could make out Kevhin and a few feet away from him Kara who raised her glass at them both, she had her own crowd around her and she already looked tired of them.

Kevhin took a step towards him but stopped then raised his hand in a wave, Devon waved back.

Valerie leaned in and whispered, gliding through the onlookers as if they didn't even exist, "Key takeaways, She is close to many Honorable Maidens and only one of three woman who could look Borse in the eyes," She curtsied to Mrs. Parker who was dressed in a white gown, Devon smiled at her, fighting the headache that followed.

"Honorable Maiden Heather O'Dell and High Priestess Richards were the other two." She looked at him, silver eyes scanning him and she gave a wide practiced smile, a group of Maidens in gowns strolling by looked at them and whispered, some seeming disappointed, *Slick*, he mused, leaning into her a bit more.

"I won't be surprised if most Caid were the ones putting spells on us Maidens, they have seemed to have most of us ensnared in one anyways."

"Back to my mother, she was never married and is by all means my adoptive mother, she has been quite diligent on giving me the best education and we traveled far and wide for it. All the while she sat on the Council for the past twelve years and- oh there she is."

They turned down the entrance hall and a woman stood at the door, she was short, and thin framed and her back was arched high with her fingers clasped around each other. Her hair was black with ribbons of white and one finger thick braid splitting down the middle of her hair.

Her skirt was long and black, and a thin braided cord of blue and gold wrapped loosely around her midriff, the cord was ornate with dried flower pedals and a satchel of sage loosely hung from a pouch at her side.

Her top was black with a collar that reached nearly to her wide jaw, her dark eyes showing a wisdom untouched by her youthful face, she somehow appeared to be old and young at the same time, not a wrinkle on

her and holding on to a maskless natural beauty and statuesque form, while giving the aura of woman who has seen the world and could do it again.

Valerie cleared her throat, "This is my mother and new High Priestess Cassidhe Reed, Mistress of the Elements."

"Devon McNeil," her voice was wistful and stern.

"Ma'am."

Valerie gripped his hand, and she stared long and hard at it, "How is your head?"

"It's a nightmare, ma'am."

"Any peculiar dreams?"

"Absolutely."

"Fascinating."

"Yes Ma'am."

"We will speak further after the Ritual. Move along Valerie, please inform him of what to expect."

Valerie nodded, "I was doing just that."

"Of course, I will see you there."

She moved out of the way and proceeded to watch them as they crossed the threshold, her eyes lingered to Devon and then broke from him and she began to stride down the long hallway.

"How did I do?" Devons voice was hoarse.

"I think you did as best as you could."

They glided down the stairs and moved through the bundle of people who took a second look.

Devon's eyes lingered at a familiar looking face, dark hair and deep frown, Trevor did not look pleased to see him and Valerie together.

Won't bring that up...

"Ignore him," Valerie said, "if he can't accept him and I being just friends then he can't be my friend."

"Fair..." she gripped herself closer to him and sniffed him in, "You're starting to get the smell."

"Smell?"

He looked into the woods in front of him, where a row of people slowly made there way to a glow in the distance, all he could smell was the crisp air and burning wood, and her smell that seemed to stick lightly to her.

"How much have you read?"

"Not much, just general lore...er, History. And a few other things."

"So, you're about halfway through Maiden Gwenavine's book?"

Devon nodded careful to watch his step on the increasingly rougher path.

“Ok, well, as an Artist becomes more accustomed to the Art they can pick up a certain sent, most often is a lavender sent, it’s just how the energy transforms in our bodies.”

“Oh!” Devon gladly fought through his headache that accompanied the thought of how many times he smelled that smell in his life, “You smell a little different though, so does Gael, I think.”

“Everyone is slightly different, but you smell a bit like pine, underneath the Old Spice, anyways.” She snorted a bit. “Never wear that again, please.”

“So bossy,” He grunted out as he tripped over a root.

“It burns my nose, and pine suits you better anyways.”

Devon thought for a moment, and nodded, “Ok.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh no, don’t be, I appreciate your honesty and I think you’re right.”

There was a moment of silence as the crowd began to slow down, the fire was still a short distance away and the stars were becoming clearer under the budding canopy of the trees.

“So tell me about the Ritual.”

“Oh yes!” Valerie seemed to brighten up, “So its customary to hold a Ritual for any high-ranking Knight or Maiden after they are promoted, its usually their choice on what they want the Ritual to be about, this time my mother chose fire as her element, so we start a bonfire and give it our appreciation of what it has given us.” Devon made a face and she seemed to see it in the dim light, “lots of dancing and feeding it with our Will, Knights are encouraged to burn something of value to them, sometimes they dance or sing or play instruments.”

“What if she chose water?”

“Waters fun! Get to dance on top of water.”

“So, this is basically a bonfire party with a splash of mystical.”

The people in front of them fanned out, men going one way and woman stripping down and jumping into a huge circle of at least a few dozen women.

The warmth of the fire made it feel like it was mid-day, the Maidens silhouettes painted in gold and red moved to a beat Devon couldn’t hear, the few that were dressed twirled their dresses and skirts around as they circled the massive fire pit.

The ones that were nude moved their hands to the sky and back down to the fire, spinning with their sweat drenched hair moving weightlessly with their movements, some seemed to float and others breathed with the flicker of the flames.

“Congrats Devon.” Caitlyn said as she gave Valerie a white gown, “Thanks?” Devon responded but she was already heading down the line of people behind them.

Valerie already had the gown draped over her and she wiggled out of her dress, letting it fall to the ground and picking it up and folding it, “I was going to be nude, but you can’t see that on the first date,” She grabbed his chin hair and leaned up to him, eyes flicking to a brilliant silver, “go be with the boys, watch and learn...”

She kissed his cheek and took two steps forward and turned.

He turned and immediately saw Borse surrounded by his entourage of Knights, he waved Devon to him with a smile and Devon reluctantly made his way over.

You can always run, He mused as several of the knights patted his back and he locked eye to eye with the man that pitied him, *nah, this just feels right.*

...

Keagan was walking arm and arm with Gael down to the Ritual Grounds. She seemed to bask in the starlight, purring in his arm, and gently caressing his bicep with her cheek every few steps, *it’s good to see her this calm, after all that’s happened.*

She and the Spirit that was bound to her lived their lives freely and yet so routinely that it was hard to see her dispirited, and they brought him peace just by being present, something Keagan thought he would ever experience.

Eleven years since he was found in the gutter with nothing but his name and Faol, and 9 years since he met her and those two years in between seemed like a dreamless sleep, and now, he was dreaming.

Faol wasn’t far away but he gave a wide breadth resting and waiting in the shadows as he always did, the familiar eyes he felt watch him was a comfort for him, he was safe, and now so was Gael.

So, he eased his shoulders, looked onward into the night and allowed the calm to wash over him for the first time, even as the

Companions and every Fae and Spirit from all over gathered to see the Solstice with their own eyes.

Most seemed to gather near the growing pool of people and at its center he could barely make out Borse and someone he was intently speaking to in an ever-increasing tone.

"It's Devon." Gael said with a sniff, "Dads talking to him about the ritual, being preachy." She chirped, "I have a feeling tonight is going to get even more interesting.

He turned with a grin, "I hate when you do that."

"You're an easy read, wanna talk about it?"

He looked at the looming fire and then back at the crowd, "I guess,"

"I just don't see why Borse is just giving Devon his title, I mean, just because he's probably a Caid and a McNeil doesn't mean he can do anything in case something happens. I mean Devon barley grasps what we stand for and what we do, it's going to take time and--"

Gael bit his arm. Not hard, just a nip, but Keagan hissed anyways. "If Borse says he is what he is, then he is. You know how Dad can be, it won't surprise me if this is a long game already at play, and you know the council and Gwenavine will have him squared away in no time."

"He barely listened to you, and he knows who you are," Keagan locked eyes with her and she responded with a wide smile, "Oh, my beautiful Knight, I can guarantee you he will listen."

"Let us hope so, Huntress." A voice said from behind them.

Trevor followed behind them, his arms clasped behind his arched back, he quietly caught up to the couple. His dark shifting eyes focused on what was before them and he held a grimace deeper than normal.

"I can only wish Borse has made a wise decision tonight. I was hoping that he would find an heir more suited for the position." Gael clicked her tongue as a response and Keagan gently pushed her to keep walking. Hoping it will remind her of the good mood she was in.

It didn't, "Of Course he made a wise decision, the man is not without fault but he knows what Devon is, we all know who he is. He is strong, he is wise, he just needs a push in the right direction, Borse can give him that push, even with the limited time that he claims he has."

Trevor's eyes darted back and forth from each of their backs, Keagan could feel the heat of anger in the cooling night, but when he spoke, he spoke calmly. "You think tonight is enough time? While Borse sat with his daughter for his so called 'last meal', while Devon follows

Maidens around like a lost puppy, we all sit and hope that he can teach, when that is the last thing on both of their minds.”

Keagan gripped Gael closer to him and held on to her other hand and they both gripped tight, they both had to thwart their tongues, but Keagan was the first to break, “You do realize that’s my friend, right? Devon’s a bit rough around the edges but I have and will fight for him, he’s a great guy.”

He looked at Gael who was grinning ear to ear and he added, “that’s also her dad, and our boss you’re talking about.”

Trevor stopped and suddenly laughed, “You’re right, I’m sorry, I guess I am a bit jealous, I mean we do all this work, and he just pops in here and everyone loves him.”

Gael looked back at Trevor and shrugged, “If you could only see what I see, Trevor.” She said fighting the urge to hiss.

“Woah, I *am* sorry Huntress, I was being cruel, I admit it. I’m not giving him a chance.”

“The *Caid* have a funny way about them, things will work out Trevor, trust me. Let them spend their time in peace, this may be the last chance we all have at peace. He’s coming back to us and we have to ease him back.” Her grip lightened up just a little, she was assuring herself as well.

The heat erupted and Trevor huffed, “That kid is not one of us, look-” He snapped his mouth shut when Gael shot him a glare.

Keagan moved a branch out of the way for her as they approached the “I’m sorry Gael, Keagan, the past few days have not been my best it seems, I will just keep my mouth shut and just trust, I guess.”

Trevor ducked as the branch swung back nearly missing him by a hair, he shot a smile at Keagan who fought the urge to laugh outright. “We know him, I know him, I don’t think he’s fully there yet, but he could very well be...” Keagan’s words trailed as the hum of the ritual was drawing closer, the fire was visible just beyond the brush illuminating the night and casting long shadows around it.

They walked in silence as they drew closer, the Companions scattered around the glade, Ammore’s Thunderbird glided in silence and surrounding it a dozen more winged shadows under the moonlight.

The Hounds rested between the dancing Maidens and the Knights the encircled them, the Rowan hid themselves in the tall grass or behind the tree line only their large mushroom cap heads barely visible, and the

Bruha danced in their own little circle, branches in the sky and canopies waiving in slow motions.

And of course, hundreds of Fae littered the tree line, some winged and others gripping on to the ends of branches looking at the Maidens with a sense of awe in their dark, black eyes.

Keagan's head spun, as they drew closer and Gael stopped, taking in a deep breath and her eyes flicked to silver, "Steady yourself, my Knight, you're a bit flustered."

At her command Keagan closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the world around him, a flurry of Lavender and cedar filled his lungs and he breathed it out, finding his center and remembering his Calm he opened his eyes to see silver eyes looking back at him.

Gael kissed his cheek, she was already nude, clothes thrown on the dirt for him to pick up and her smile eased any plight he would have about that, "Go," he said, and she ran, and as she joined her sisters in their dance they chanted even louder, and there she was truly free.

Of course, what other way could she be?

It seemed as though the whole Village and then some were in the glade, he knew the other Villages had their own Ritual but most who could make it to the Three Hill Village did. Because this was Hairett Richards home and the Home of Borse, and where Cassidhe Dorrin resided.

Borse was getting louder, drawing all nearby gaze, watching the Maidens circle the fire his arms before him and his arm tight around Devon, who had his hands dug in his pockets and shifted around. They watched the dozens of Maidens and Keagan was sure they were both taking in the energy they were putting out, Keagan could taste the electricity in the air.

He pushed his way to the tight knot around the two, Devon's eyes were reflecting the gold from the fire brilliantly, *or is his eyes actually gold?* Borse was quivering and his face beaded with sweat, his eyes wide and euphoric he spoke above everything, "...The Eternal Well is what feeds us life, gives us our soul..."

Trevor was close behind him and he was soon accompanied by Ronal, a wire of a man with a short cut beard and round glasses. The man was smart, there was no denying the amount of information he knew, his ego on that fact could drown a desert.

"Do you see it Devon, The Power that flows that we call the Art, it is the glue that binds us..."

“I take it that the guy Borse is talking to is Devon?” Ronal asked, Keagan nodded as he pushed his way through the crowd. The last thing he needed was another long-winded conversation. “They’ve been huddled together like that for the past hour. Just taking. It’s strange to me how...” his words trailed as a powerful wave overcame every person on the grounds. Even the spirits seemed to wane to the *Power* behind it. The rhythm grew heavier, and the fire grew larger. Nearly reaching the tips of the large trees that surrounded the area. Some people cheered and a few more bodies joined in on the dance.

“That’s it Child! It yearns for you, the elements call your name do you hear it!”

Keagan took his opportunity to speak while he had the chance. “I have to talk to them,” And he made himself blend into the crowd, leaving Ronal behind, without a second glance. He soon found his way to the front where Devon and Borse stood.

He grabbed onto the broad shoulder of Chance and smiled as he turned to greet him. Borse raised his hand and Keagan halted his steps and decided staying close to Chance was the better idea.

“The Earth is still and stoic, the Water is temperate and ever changing, Air is boundless and consistent, the Spirit is balanced and persistent...” Borse spoke in a near whisper, his eyes closed he lifted his head up to the sky and looked at the full moon above, Devon was focused on the flame and only the flame.

Among the music of the Maidens, Keagan could still hear Borse as he spoke to Devon. The shadow of the flame illuminated their faces. Borse an aged face and wisdom, where Devon looked panicked with his hands in tight fists and eyes bulging from his head. He fidgeted as Borse spoke to him.

“Fire creates and it destroys, it breathes death and cauterizes wounds. We owe our existence to the stars that breathe life into our world. We give it so much fear, where respect should be. We treat it as a tool where it needs to be an ally.” Borse whispered the old teaching into Devon’s ear.

Devon stopped his shifting and began to stand upright. “That’s right, Devon, accept it, feel it as it feeds your heartbeat, and feel it as it gives you warmth.”

Devon nodded and began to gaze into the flame. “It’s- its calling to me.” Devon said, never to take his eyes off of the fire.

“What are you waiting for?” Borse spoke then said nothing else as Devon took a deep breath in. They stood there for a moment, the Hymn getting stronger and more powerful by the second. “It’s so...” Devon said nothing else but began to take dazed steps closer to the Maidens.

Keagan outreached his hand to stop him but a quick snatch by Borse. “He is beyond anyone’s control right now... It’s just him, The Flame and the Maidens now.” He gave Keagan Devon’s phone and wallet and clutched on to something brilliant and red in his fist.

“What if he does something stupid like jump in?”

Borse laughed, “I’m counting on it! How else will he and I know who he really is?”

“And what is that?” Keagan asked, watching Devon take slow steady steps past the Maidens who opened the path to the flame for him.

Borse never taking his eyes off him, “A Caid.”

CHAPTER 27: ACCEPTANCE

The drum beat that was the Flame called to him, the slow rhythmic boom echoed in his body and soul.

His mind was void.

All except for the beat that hungered for him, as he did it. The Maidens dance broke way as he walked to it, their Hymn matching the beat, wordless echoes of the temptation that it breathed. They sang to him as he passed, silver eyes drunk from the power that billowed from them and the Flame.

Why can't I stop? He asked himself in the nothingness of his mind. *Because I don't want to,* he answered, everything about him- in him- told him to continue walking, accept the flame, and accept who he was. *'Who are you?'* A voice echoed- the same one from his dream.

Come...

The Flame spoke with its forked tongue licking the sky. *Who am I?* He asked it as the Maidens began their dance yet again.

Let us be one. It spoke with the voice of the Maidens *Accept me, bear yourself.*

The Maidens song filled his ears.

The darkness was nothing compared to the golden light that surrounded him.

Devon of sound mind entered the rapture of the flame.

"We are here...." He said quietly as the flame consumed him.

He felt no pain as his clothes turned to ash.

No suffering as the flames breathed through him.

No, only ecstasy.

He accepted it as it showed him worlds beyond his own, Realms of unimaginable possibilities and he loved it as the sun itself beat into his heart.

He was no longer Devon McNeil.

He was the fire.

He was Life.

He was existence.

The Maidens screamed and moaned from the power omitting from him and into them. The Flame easily matched an untapped strength he never realized he had.

He stood nude staring at the star lit sky as the Flame and he became one. Existence flowed from him, and he felt the cold chills of tears flow from his eyes. The pain the Maidens felt became an illusion, a reality separate from the one he dwelled in now.

I am nothing.

He screamed.

The beauty of it shook him to the core. Fear evaporated from him like sweat, into the cosmic abyss that he found comfort in. It was only he and the flame, an eternity of peace, an eternity of life.

I am everything.

May we? The Maidens asked through the flame and Devon raised his hands to the sky, "Yes."

Threads of electricity wrapped around his skin, then it dug into him, hundreds of them wrapping around his meat and into his bones and then, in a gasp he felt it, an ocean of life break through into the depths of his body and soul.

The fire breathed into him, the earth hummed at his feet, the wind passed through him, and an ocean opened up to him.

The elements called his name and he wept, feeling open and free he laughed, and they rejoiced with him.

But they were not done.

His mind began to go numb, he fought through the ache as it pulsed against their Will. They ebbed and flowed, chanted in one voice and one word and like a levee, his mind cracked, and then the flood came.

Memories poured out into the cosmos and he lived them again as if it was the first time.

He wrapped his hand around both of their fingers, Momma was going away again but it was ok, he will see her soon and Mom and Dad will make sure to make plenty of videos of them for her.

"I have two moms!" He laughed.

His father kneeled with his back to Borse, his sword nearly as tall as Donny was pointed to his back, Devon looked away, he didn't want to see his dad get hurt-

"I swear on the blood in my veins and the soul I possess, I will be the Sword for every Knight, The Rune to every Sage, The Shield to Every Maiden. I will Defend those who cannot fight, Speak peace for those who can no longer speak, and fight those who cannot see Peace. I will be the Air, Gentle and Present, the River, Clear and Unbroken, the Earth, Strong and Nourishing, and the Flame, Passionate and Giving. And I give all that is me, to the Children of the Moon."

"Rise." Borse said, "Edward McNeil, General of the Children of the Moon."

Devon's eyes opened, he was whole again, and at peace. Mind, Body and Soul in unison.

He began to feel the fire recede.

NO!

Please don't...

The fire breathed one last time.

Taking in a gulp of air before it became no bigger than the size of a match flame. He cradled it in his hands. Giving to it as much as he could, "Please don't go!" He whispered to it. "Don't leave me!" He began to shiver as the coldness of the night seeped back into his bones. *It is time, Master, all must pass, all must be...*

"Stay with me, please, please..." his words trailed as the fire faded away into nothing.

Devon fell to his knees and began to weep. A warm body held him close as he shivered. He looked into Borse's firelit eyes. "I am..." He said to the Statue in his dream. A smile made of stone slid across his face, "That you are, boy."

Devon fell to the ground, his body coated in soot and ash he looked up to the sky in awe as if it was the first time seeing it. And he looked at the sea of silver eyes on the floor with him, Mrs. Parker crawled to him, and the Maidens followed, her gown in ruins, stained in dirt and sweat her old frail body heaving with tremendous weight, "My sweet child," she whispered to him and he reached for her, "Did we break her seal?" Devon grabbed her fingers, lifting himself up and gripping tightly, "Yes, Honorable Maiden."

A long sigh came out of the Maidens, those who were standing fell to the ground, he looked and saw Gael, silver eyes fading back to green and she smiled deeply, Keagan wrapping her in his coat, she was breathless, as were they all and she laughed all the same.

Followed by another laugh, and Maive roared as she jumped onto him, “Devon McNeil, A Champion among men, A fucking Caid, A Damned McNeil, right here!” she ruffled his hair and rolled around laughing hysterically, “I did it! We did it!”

Chance came, smiling as he wrapped her around his coat, slapping Devons shoulder, “You made them all crazy.” His eyes were wide and his smile even wider. He hoisted his Maiden up above his shoulders and she screamed to the sky, “For the Priestess before! We birthed a Caid and he is our brother, for High Priestess Dorrin, we gift you the Champion of Champions!”

Tears fell from her face and all the beings rejoiced.

Devons eyes lingered around him, Borse unmoved and silent, a statue as he always was, stayed glued to Devon in ash. He didn’t speak but Devon *Felt* a heat pour out of him, he could hear his heartbeat and know deep within himself, Borse was suffering.

He reached his hand out to him and Borse’s eyes grew wide, “you are too weak to heal this curse.”

A thin bearded man walked to them with a black sarong in his hand and Borse tossed it to Devon, “You have taken every ounce of Will from every creature on a mile radius and you are still too weak,” His face was gruff but he still helped Devon up, “Pity.” He handed Devon a satchel and he instantly knew what was in it, the pulse alone was weaker but still there.

“I’m sorry,” Devon said in a sudden shiver.

Borse rolled his eyes, “Ronal, let’s get the Caid fed.” Borse turned and faded into the darkness around them with long strides.

Ronal stuck out his hand, other hand itching at his beard, “Nice to meet you.”

Devon wrapped himself up in the sarong and tied the Satchel to the knot, “Nice to meet you too,” He said, taking his hand felt like nails on a chalkboard, he shivered again and Ronal winced.

“Let’s, uh, let’s get some food,” Devon said, looking around the sea of people around him. They both looked to the forming crowd, some grabbing Maidens and others staring at Devon.

Well, he thought, body shivering and stomach roaring, *fuck...*

...

“Muf...addu known,” Devon said with his mouth full of soyrizo taco.

Gael folded her arms under her breasts, she was finally dressed in what she was wearing before the Ritual, but her clothes were disheveled, and her eyes were barely open. She was using Keagan as a leaning post.

“I know what it seems like D, but I had no idea.” She said stifling a yawn, “I figured some stuff out once I told mom about you, though.”

Devon looked at Keagan who shrugged, the night sky was littered with stars and the bright moon made Keagan’s eyes shrouded.

They sat on the back patio of the Mansion, a gentle glow behind them and the mutter of exhausted Maidens and Knights buzzed in Devon’s ear, he could feel them, an electricity in the air around them that made his skin feel static.

And the tacos made by a Knight that was also a chef were given to him just after he got dressed.

“What did High Priestess Richards know?” Valerie asked after she wiped her lip.

Gael shrugged, “I don’t think much more than what we all know.”

“Which is?” Devon asked after his gulp.

“You’re a Noble, Son of Edward McNeil the General who retired in his prime and never associated with us again.”

Devon let out a long sigh, in the recesses of his memories something flowed through him, one where he held a flame in his hand as a young boy and then nothing, a momentary void but one that made him very sad, *It was my fault...*

“Things are still a bit hazy, but I want to talk to them...”

He reached in the coat he wore, one that belonged to Ronal.

His phone still had no bars and no service.

“You can talk to them soon,” Gael said half dozing, “Can I come?”

Keagan looked at her and rolled his eyes with a smile.

“Seriously how can you guys have no internet here?”

“The Villages are our Sanctuary,” Valerie said eyeing her taco, “It ruins it when everyone is attached to the outside world.” She took a large bite and made the lightest moan.

Devon finished the last two bites of his taco and leaned back, “Thank you Gael, Keagan.”

Keagan raised his thumb up and Devon did the same, Gael let out a wide smile finally opening her eyes, “Are you happy?” She asked, and

Devon shrugged, “a bit more content,” he admitted, “Still have a lot to figure out.”

“Liffle mites, my dear.” Valerie muffled between her food.

Keagan’s eyes grew wide for a moment when he looked at Devon, “We have to be ready for the worst,” His eyes lowered, “I-I want you to...b-be safe.”

Devon nodded, but his smile stuck, “I want you two to be safe too, I’m doing what I can, and trust me I want to do more.”

Gael laughed, “No fireballs though.”

“Not yet.”

Gael sniffed and her eyes opened wide, her laugh was cut short, and she looked behind Devon, “High Priestess.” She bowed slightly.

Devon looked behind Valerie, High Priestess Dorrin stood behind her hand on her shoulder and dark circles for eyes, making the grey blue eyes pierce that much deeper into Devon.

Valerie put her hand on her mother’s and winced in the slightest barely noticeable way.

“Word Consanair,” The title shot through Devon like a spear in the throat, he stood up quickly and Valerie followed wiping her face gently.

Dorrin turned and began to walk back into the Mansion, and as Valerie took his hand she stopped and turned, “Sorry Valerie, it will be just us two.”

Valerie sighed, but that was all the protest she allowed herself, her hand let go of his and he gave her a long look, “Can we have a moment?” Devon asked and Dorrin looked away to the night sky, “Just one.” She mumbled.

His gut knotted and he felt his palms begin to sweat, and to his and everyone’s amazement he grabbed Valerie and held her tight, “Thank you for a perfect first date,” He whispered in her ear feeling a pulse of heat.

She squeezed him tightly, threatening his back snapping and pressed her head to his chest, “I got my tacos so I think we had two dates.” She said into his chest.

“Two for one...”

Valerie looked up at him, rising up to meet him eye to eye, inches away from his face, “...yup.” Her voice broke.

She leaned in.

The warmth of her lips filled his soul as they pressed into him and he pressed into hers, her lips were the fire that thawed his body, he tingled and then felt a pulse deeper than his reverberation through him.

She pulled away, smiled and sat back down with a wistful sigh. Keagan's eyes were covered, and Gael suddenly found the grass fascinating, both had wide smiles on their faces.

"Ok," He squeaked, "see you guys later."

He turned around and cleared his throat, the High Priestess didn't match his enthusiasm, but he didn't care, he was drunk on Valerie and loved it.

She ushered him into the kitchen not saying a word, the Chef left the kitchen as he saw it, spotless, pots and pans hung in the center of a square rack above a black marbled countertop. Plates were neatly stacked behind glass cabinets that hung herbs under it to dry.

It was a beautiful kitchen, but this mansion was purposefully exaggerated by whoever created it.

As if reading his mind, the High Priestess spoke, "Does this suit you, McNeil." She said with a kindness in her voice.

Devon shook his head as he followed her to a hallway, "No ma'am. I don't think so."

She let out a grunt, "Yes Ma'am, no ma'am- do you only speak in barks? I appreciate the respect, your father seemed to pass that down to you, but you must speak whole, the world will demand that of you."

"Yes-" she eyed him, and he clicked his tongue, "I may be a bit nervous."

He let his fingers slide across the ivy sketched railing, contrasting the maroon wallpaper.

"Good," she said, "if you didn't than I think the sacrifice your grandmother made would have been pointless."

"Think that is why she did it?"

She smiled, reaching into her satchel and pulling out a Faux leather book, "I received this in the mail just this morning, Gwenavine the Fifth knows some secrets, and now, as do I. Gwenavine the Fourth made those secrets at the expense of a hope."

"But..." She looked at Devon as she buried the book back in her bag, "none of us know the results yet."

"What do you need to know, High Priestess?"

"Let's end the formality when no one else is around, Devon. Call me Cassidhe, and what I need to know first of all is what is your intention with my daughter?"

They stopped in front of a door, and she looked at him, dug into him, thin lips growing thinner.

“I really like her, and I won’t hurt her.”

Cassidhe opened the door, a warm gust rolled through the narrow hallway and the smell of wet wood and old paper made Devons nose itch, “Go on.” She said and Devon complied.

The room was small compared to any other room Devon had seen so far, but packed to the brim with plants, every wall was a bookshelf, each filled with books and knick-knacks. A large arched window with a bench was on the far side of the room, where the brilliant white moon illuminated the forest that surrounded them.

A large square bench in the center of the room with cushions well-worn down to an inch, framed dozens of herbs with growing lights above them. Devon took another breath, it was beautiful and comfortable, and he couldn’t help but look at the shelves of books and touch the trinkets that were on them.

“This is, for lack of a better word Hariet Richards Den. This is where she learned, rested and healed.” Devon put back a piece of bone where he found it.

“Go ahead, play as she would have wanted you to. She loved to share and in time she would have probably given you half of this room, just because that’s the type of woman she was.”

Devon said nothing, there was nothing he could say, he only watched her stroll to the bench and sit down. Her shoulders eased, and she brushed her fingers across a bunch of rosemary. “She was my friend as she was everyone’s friend, and I wish I become as strong as she was one day.”

She eyed him for a moment, “She had a Caid that was already strong and established, now he is dying, and I have one that may as well be an infant.”

She eyed him, “One that is a fawn born in fall. You have a rough road ahead of you Devon, harder than you may think and I don’t think you are up for the task.”

Devons eyes were stuck outside, “I want to run,” He admitted, “and even if I didn’t lose my memories years ago, I still would have wanted to run.”

She plucked an herb and another, “I told Valerie something similar, but I will finish what I started, I love you,” her eyes darted towards him and he laughed, “I mean I love you all, I realized that when I saw Gael and Maive and see what happened to Kara.”

“I get it, I really do.”

“There is a war coming, Devon.”

Devon nodded, “I will do what I can, even if it means nothing at all.”

Cassidhe stood up, bunching the thick bundle in her hand and twisting it into itself, slowly walking towards him, “You have taken every bit of Will from every Maiden here today, even the Companions are weak.”

She reached for the mortar and pestle beside him and tossed the herbs in it and focused deeply on grinding the herbs, “and we gladly gave it to you, and your Well hungers for more...”

“We have been in purgatory, as we cater to your predecessors’ every need, waiting for an unknown that may have never come. And then you attracted a Siren and protected yourself using Will. You dream of meaning, don’t you? You see creatures that don’t want to be seen, you have a Companion unlike any other before and your blood is thick with us.”

She grinded at the herbs, a sweet wet smell filled the air between them her eyes intently focused and working, “I know your secrets, Devon, I had to pry, it is my job now, I know from the first day you cried to now... I knew you bumped into Valerie and whether Spi himself orchestrated it or it was pure coincidence I wish to never know. I had to come to terms with her being tied to your fate in a matter of hours for you have bound us all to you, *her* to you, as casual as you stand now.”

“You will make her suffer, and she will cry and mourn you as you change and shift into a God, I will have to bear her suffering once more as I did when she lost her parents. I am her mother still, as they would have wanted me to be, and yet she falls for you, outside of your own accord, and you will break her again.”

Her eyes were soaked, her lips quivered and her face turned red, “I will see you in pain, I will see you die and die again for a damned purpose outside your own, and you will do so with a smile, you will take it in and be what you think the world needs-” her voice cracked, beads of blue darted to him as her hands worked the paste she created, “and now you will tell me, what do you need, what do you want for me to help you be the Champion of Champions, to be a Caid I will follow and my child will love until we become dirt once more.”

Devon put his hand on her arm, and she slowed, “I need you to be you, as best as you can be.”

She suddenly laughed, sniffing as she looked at him, “and I see Kat has her grasp within you as well, that is good, and I will be Devon. But tell me, not what your, father or mothers say, not what Gwenavine put into you, not what you think I need, tell me, what can I do?”

Devon thought for a moment, thinking back to Borse and what his grandmother did to him, he fought the words, they came anyway, “Let them understand, I need time, I need to be human as long as I can.”

She reached for a small stone cup where the mortar and pestle were and poured the goop into it and gave it to him.

“You may have more time than us, but we have a war at our doorstep. A God begging to be human against a man who became a God. You have asked me to do the impossible, slow the fates beyond our eyes...”

He gulped down the bitter floral goop and shivered, she poured her own bit from the mortar and did the same, “But I will do what I can.”

CHAPTER 28:

DECIMATION OF A MOMENT

Valerie leaned against the wall, eyes drowsy as most Maidens were, her finger wrapped around his as Devon scanned the wide-open hall rubbing his free hand on his coat, really taking in what it was now that he had a moment to breathe.

His pants were a shade of black that reminded him of dirt, with the slightest shade of green thrown into the dye, its deep green embroidered cord on the side ran all the way down his leg and matched the coat he wore.

It was light despite its appearance, with a dozen pockets inside and three pockets on the outside. One hidden right at the hip.

He had a crescent moon embroidered on the left cuff and a vine of ivy on the right, The collar had a long vine of ivy wrap around it that matched the greenish black of his pants.

He loved it, he loved that it reminded him of Don and his father, he loved how comfortable it actually was and it felt like it was a part of him as it should have been many years ago, *can't wait to see them in this again.*

Ronal and his Maiden, Angel were speaking to Keagan and Gael, well, Ronal was talking at Keagan while Gael looked at him in wonderment and Angel smiled, encouraging him.

Keagan looked dead, and it made Devon want to laugh, all the times Keagan geeked out to Devon and the one time he gets geeked out on and he couldn't stand it.

Borse slowly strolled the area, his shoulders heavy and head lowered as he wrapped his arm around Maive, *he aged 20 years*, Devon thought as the forest green eyes looked at him, *and he still hides...*

Chance was close behind them, and behind him an entourage of Knights and Maidens that never seemed to leave them alone, Devon leaned into Valerie, "Are they going to do that to me too?"

"I will scare them away," she snickered.

All eyes floated between them and Kara, who stood at the edge of the stairs, touching people's hands and talking to them, Kevhin close by mouth tightly shut and hands folded high on his chest.

You can still run, he thought of what Kara told him then he looked at Valerie, *but you're robbing yourself of a possibility*.

Her eyes opened slightly, then she smiled, "What?"

And then the howls came...

The air was dense, the earth quivered, and his core twisted in knots as he saw Valeries face twist into horror.

The howls of a hundred creatures and the long crack of thunder broke his ears as all Knights drew their swords. Devons eyes darted to Keagan whose eyes were glued to Borse, and Borse arched his back as he let go of Maive who looked ready to burst into tears.

The High Priestess was next to Devon in a moment, gripping his hand and Valerie did the same, "Seems the moment has ended," Cassidhe whispered below the howls.

Devon shivered.

"Sergeants, take who you can and take the routes we planned," Borse roared, life returning to his body once again, "Maidens, follow your Knights to safety..."

He reached to his sword from his statue and with a growl he gripped tightly to the hilt, "May this be my last command, today I saw my last sunset, for now my soul will be torn from my flesh before sunrise."

Maive reached for her father and Chance pulled her away, then they were lost in the swarm of people around them, her screams for her father roared above the chaotic murmur of the crowd.

He looked to see Keagan gone, and Gael with him, his heart nearly left his throat, and he looked around for someone, anyone who would could help, his eyes locked to a hole in the wall, a tiny sliver that slid shut closest to where Keagan and Gael stood, "They're hiding in the walls?"

"There are plenty of escape routes planned out under ground," Cassidhe whispered under the roaring howls and chaos, "We must spread thin and scatter."

Like roaches...

Devon gripped their hands and hurried to Borse, "Teach me something." He commanded.

"Fool..." He grumbled, "Run now little boy, your time is getting slimmer by the second."

“I have to do something.”

“Run!”

Devon's eyes began to swell, “I have to do something!”

“Take him!” Borse commanded and Cassidhe tugged at him, “You will learn.” She promised.

Devon tugged back, eying Borse as he stood next to his statue as hard as it, “what about what could have been?”

The slightest smile slid across the Caid's face, “Go,” He said in a near whisper, “And do not remember me for who I was, or the creature I will become, remember me as I am now.”

“Don't...” a haggled cry broke their eyes from each other.

A roar erupted from the crowd as the doors opened to see the Village below them on fire, the gentle roar of gold and red etched into the cliff sides and the smell of burning cedar and something sickly and sweet rolled in.

“Go,” Borse spoke, “be the god I pity for one more night.”

Cassidhe pushed forward, through the mass of Knights and Maidens rushing downstairs, his eyes lingered to Borse who stood tall as the day they first met, as the statue next to him and as the Caid of Blood.

He looked to the crowd forming around him, panicked cries as they searched for resolute, “Go you fools, tonight I fight and tonight I will fight alone.”

The sea of people flowed, and Devon lost his grip, Valerie shouted, and he tugged back against the sea of bodies, “Cassidhe!” He shouted and it fell on deaf ears.

He reached for her, as his lungs gasped for air and she did for him, “Valerie!” Her eyes were red, cheeks soaked in tears, she shouted for him, and another hand raised up to grab hers.

“I got her!”

Ammore raised their hand, and his shoulders ease he choked on words that slipped as soon as he thought them, he wanted to thank her, push towards her further, tell Valerie she was safe, tell Ammore she was a Saint.

But before he could say anything they faded into the crowd, and he put every bit of focus into Cassidhe.

He gripped her arm close to his and pushed her forward, “Tell me where to go.”

“Where is Val?” Cassidhe's head swiveled in the crowd.

“I lost my grip, but Ammore's got her.”

“Thank the Motheir!”

Devon pushed on.

She is safe, he thought as they reached the second floor, *Focus of Cassidhe*.

As the crowd broke, he saw an open hole in the wall and none other than Trevor and a short haired tattooed man ushering in Knights and Maidens, *Of course*.

Trevor waived him over urgently and they both began to run to him.

“Where’s Valerie?”

“Ammore has her.” Devon responded.

“Hurry the fuck up then.” He pushed them both into the darkness, “Sorry Consanair.”

Devon wanted to laugh, but the two men walked into the darkness and closed them off.

He felt a dozen heaving breathes beside him, cramped in the humid blackness, “Sorry Consanair,” the other man spoke, “Trevor is a douche, but he means well.”

“Shut the fuck up Kyl,” Trevor scolded causing Kyl to laugh, without skipping a beat Trevor spoke, “I don’t know where to go from here, High Priestess.”

Cassidhe gripped tighter to Devon, “Everyone grab a hand, a foot, anything and follow me.”

And through the darkness they walked.

...

“Do you understand me Kevhin?” Kara whispered in the darkness as they squeezed their way through the tight fit between walls, “You have to stay close to Devon. You’ll be valuable to him in the future, do as he says, follow him and only him, not even yourself.”

Kevhin grunted for a response but that wasn’t good enough for Kara. *I’m trying to save your life! Give you a future outside of me!*

She wanted to scream, instead she only whispered, “Promise me.”

She could feel the glare from Keagan at her back as they shifted their way through the tight passage, shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand. There were at least a dozen Knights and Maidens making their way through the tight tunnels between the walls of the old mansion.

Since the howls of the hounds, not a single Maiden was able draw out any source of power, save a few spots here and there, only the stronger ones could maintain a ball of light for more than a few moments. Kara's head was swimming in darkness. As far as her foresight, it was a nightmare to maintain. One minute she was scanning the room, seeing the millions of possibilities and hundreds of certainties painted on each person's face, the next, everything. The lines blurred and singed her eyes.

She saw life and death of every living being.

Rebirth and salvation. It all rushed through her mind at once. Now, now it just came in waves. Her head felt as if it was filled with concrete and her feet deep in mud. But when the waves came, her body and mind went numb, and it was just the visions.

When the moon bleeds, the earth will tear to shreds. The Wicked will weep... They were no longer possibilities. This was all going to happen.

She knew every event that was going underway, why her brother needed to be at Devon's side, why Borse must die, and why none of them could maintain their powers. A dream that haunted her every chance it had sense she was twelve, was becoming a reality. Her death, her worry now lay in her brother's hands, and her Will rested on the shoulders of the Maidens.

Blood red stone in the palm of darkness, a man made of stone will crumble,

"Be still my little moonbeam." The song that will shape the new era, the song that will bond two souls. Those images burned into her mind now more than ever, no other possible outcome will ever happen. These events will destroy and rebuild, create and mold history's greatest generals. And it will build a new gods where others will perish.

A caress on her cheek reeking of saline... a tear in a man long thought dead as he becomes vengeance.

Each person moved silently as they possibly could, save for the few whispers and auras forming from the Maidens that only Kara could see.

"I promise," Kevhin whispered, "But promise me you will follow me. Wherever I go and whatever I do, follow." His hand gripped hers.

A click and the grind of wood grinding against wood echoed above the breathes and whispers, an old door just opened for the first time in ages. A light pitter patter of bare feet walking downstairs.

Kara blinked when a gold light flared up in front of her, silhouetting the features of Gael, the orb of light floated an inch above her.

“Hurry.” She whispered, urging them to move on. Gesturing with her free hand, people followed a few Maidens lighting their own orbs of light as they entered the passageway.

She’s powerful! Kara thought, staring into the orb. The passageway was only a few inches taller than what they were currently in, at least in there they had enough shoulder room, barely enough.

A man Kneels to the Shadow. An Ivory Throne left bare, one eye to the cosmos the other long gone.

Kara made her way into the passage, hand still tight with her brothers. He ducked under a beam and walked down the steps in front of him.

Gael sniffed the air and looked at Keagan, they both said nothing, but they spoke volumes at each other, “Hurry,” Keagan said as he pushed past them, “I don’t want to lose sight of you two.” He patted Kevhin’s shoulder, but he was focused on Kara.

“Promise me, Kara.” He said finally as they followed the tight knit group through the tight passageways. “Promise me or I won’t keep my promise.”

A fire in his eye, passion, love, Destruction, whispers of a new Pantheon in his words.

“I promise.” She lied, “Just remember, everything that will happen has to happen and that...”

Her words broke as she heard a scream come from behind them, then a gargle of blood as a body hit the floor. Panic erupted and Kara found herself being pushed by the crowd.

Keagan grabbed hold of her arm and began tugging at her. The Maidens from behind began to scream as silhouettes of men appeared from the darkness.

Stepping over the bodies that they killed, to reach the others. Gael shouted for them, but it was a mere whisper in the roars of death around them. They ran, the pain in Kara’s leg made her fall over, Kevhin shouted for her as the crowd pushed him too far just beyond the doorway.

“Run!” She shouted to them as she saw their faces fade in the darkness, lifting herself up to see blood leave her side, “Run to him!”

I’ll be waiting.

A pain at Kara’s side startled her in the darkness. She screamed but no one heard. She fell to the ground, meeting the eyes of some poor knight, dead. She gasped for breath, *Live Kevhin*. She thought coldness enveloped

her body. *Please live!* Her eyes closed and with it another vision, the end of all her nightmares.

A drill pressed against her skull, first the pain, then the darkness.

"I don't want to die." She whispers the last words she'll ever hear.

A soft caress on her cheek, He begins to sing.

"Be still my little moonbeam..."

CHAPTER 29: THE INNOCENT

The trees were painted in gold as the shadows shifted between them. men, and women laid dead scattered around the Village that felt like a home he never stepped foot in.

His sword was drawn but not a speck of blood on it and his eyes were blister from the fires. His head spun and he felt sick to his stomach and emptied it as soon as no one was looking.

But now Don somehow managed to be alone, strolling through a place that felt like a dream he always had but never remembered, body shivering even in the warmth of hell around him, his mind blank and heart pounding. Watching a group of Innocent storm a Mansion he remembered so vividly once he saw it, he thought now would be a good time to run, his parents were safe, he knew that.

Scouring though the report his parents were never mentioned, but they were put on alert status, and the words, “Noble, Ex- General, Edward McNeil.” Caused him to black out and wake up on the floor in his own piss.

He rubbed the scar on his arm, and with it a familiar headache *What can I do?*

A broken twig snapped behind him.

He spun and his blade stopped an inch from freckled cheek, her fire red hair sprang a memory in his mind, a name he dared only whispered as he stared into her deep green eyes lit by flames, “Maive...”

A tear fell and her lips quivered, “Donny... White does not suit you.”

A shadow loomed over her and the glint of a sword, a flame lit his face and with it another memory one that seared behind his eyes-

His hair was long then but his stoic face stayed the same, it was the eyes though, and in those eyes he could see why Maive was so drawn to him, they were filled with *passion*...

“Help me,” His voice broke as he looked at Chance Abrams.

She stepped towards him, her eyes rolled into a silver that brought back a comfort he desperately needed, “Poor Donny boy, this will be the last time I save you.”

Her hand met his forehead and the headache vanished, “Only a little bit, your brother drained us pretty well.”

His eyes closed and felt his body fall to the ground his body quivered and shook and his mouth filled with copper, a flash of a moment, in a time where he felt whole again-

He stood before the mirror, His fathers coat was still too big and it was heavy with all the Medals and Cords on it... His finger grazed the cross right where the heart was, it was made of bloodstone and silver and it was beautiful. His father got it after the Third War, and said he got it for saving lives, he tried to remember what it was called, “A...Al...”

His eyes shot open, and the words left his mouth, “...Ailm.”

The stars were dim, and the fires burned brighter, but he laid there in that moment, sick and afraid, blood dripping down his nose and a headache in the center of his brain.

“Ailm...”

He raised his head to see them leave, Chance carried her weak body in his arms as red curls draped over her face, her green eyes broke through the darkness of the woods around them and dug deep into Dons mind, plaguing it with beautiful memories of a time he never thought he had.

Devons here...

The horror sank in and he broke from the ground in dizzying state and heaved an empty stomach, *I will save Devon.*

He turned and slowly and cautiously made his way to the Mansion.

...

In the darkness, Devon began to pant. Sweat dripped from every pore of his body. His shirt was soaked, and his hands felt like slime.

They slowly shifted their way up, climbing thin stairs on the tips of their toes to the highest point of the mansion, a three-foot room just tall enough for Devon to nearly lift his head up.

It was just wide enough to where Devon could reach his arms but with six more people behind him and Cassidhe he kept himself close.

Cassidhe suddenly stopped at the end of the tiny room, looking down at some boxes then seeing the gentle glow of the Village burning

outside, she sighed, wiping sweat from her face, “We’re above the Hall,” She whispered.

Devon’s eyes lingered to the slats, unable to take the step closer to see the devastation before him, Trevor however peeked outside.

His fist clenched and he spun his head around to Devon, his eyes wide and glinted with the fires below, “Theres a group of them walking in.”

Everyone was silent, so silent that they could hear the clack of footsteps below them. Devons heart jumped as the Rune in his pouch warmed his thigh with a pulse.

Cassidhe glided past them, gentle and sure she quietly moved a plank of wood and light poured in, “Come,” She said in a whisper and Devon and Trevor followed, “Let us see what comes of this.”

Devons guts twisted as he saw what was below them, the main hall was empty now, save for Borse, pacing with his massive Claymore resting on his shoulders, his eyes were blood red again, and wide with a madness that only man ready to die could have.

“Borse!” A distant voice shouted from below them.

They all jumped, and the Priestess gasped as she reached for Devon’s arm. “Shall we make this peaceful?” His tone was methodical, spoken with such intent that every word was a nail being driven home with a sledgehammer.

Borse stopped his pace and smiled deeply, and it was then the man who spoke came into view.

His hair was halfway down his back and white as snow, he appeared to be slightly shorter than the Caid of War but just barely, he turned to look at the mansion he stood in, his face was sharp, and cheekbones high, and deep-set eyes focused on everything and distant at once.

He wore a long white cloak with it draped over one shoulder and the other shoulder wrapped thick in silver and white cords, everything on him was white, collar to toe with accents of silver around the cuffs and collar.

He raised his hand and ushered six other men to him in a gesture, they stopped their march around him, three on each side.

They all wore the same uniforms, White Coat and white slacks lined in silver and gold. Each man clean shaved and standing as tall as they could, hands clasped behind them all in unison and as one.

“I figured not, after all there would be no sport in what I have brought with me.” He stuck out his hand to reveal a stone glowing a dark red, it pulsed in his palm, “You felt it though, a long time ago as I ripped it from your veins.”

Borse readied his sword, his eyes shot back and forth between the men and the stone. “... And you feel it now, your mortality seeping into your bones. How old are you now?”

Borse stood in silence, the man continued as he carelessly tossed the stone in his palm. “That doesn’t matter, does it? We have been at each other’s throats since the first pyre, since your sister started this all, I’m tired. So are you. What do you say Bear Slayer, Master of Blood and Caid of War, one more show of your skills before I put you on a pike.”

A crease cut through Borse’s stone face, the white-haired man that could only be Dane Ashkoon, chuckled to himself and made his way to a chair. He carefully adjusted his collar, then the crease in his slacks, and nodded at the men that accompanied him.

“Let it begin.”

Each man drew their broad swords and began encircling Borse. He stood at the center never letting his eyes go of the man that held that stone carelessly.

The Innocent began.

Borse held his sword as a shield, dodging what steel he couldn’t fort.

He fell to one knee and with a great spin of his gargantuan blade an Innocent’s leg tore off from the knee and in the same spin he blocked another strike.

He was fluid, a river against mountains and he prevailed, jousting one man’s insides from his core just after his thigh ripped open from the man he slaughtered.

Guts spilled into his floor, blood dripped from him that wasn’t his own, his eyes even madder, his sword throbbed in his hands, and he bared his teeth to the four remaining.

One man lunged and found his arm ripped from the shoulder.

But Borse was too slow, he moaned in agony as a blade left his stomach.

He fell to his knees, Claymore still in a white knuckled grip and roared at the three remaining men.

“You cannot heal yourself no more?” Dane Ashkoon said bemused, “You can’t even clot your own blood- What a sight to see! Borse no longer a Caid, this creature is the closest to man he will ever become.”

The sword left his abdomen and blood flowed from it, “I will do you a favor, Borse.”

Borse panted, blood leaving his lips, he groaned and roared like a feral animal, “I need no favors from the neanderthal.”

Ashkoon laughed, a maddening hackle that echoed in the great hall and pierced its way into the walls where Devon trembled.

“This Neanderthal has a gift,” he waved his hand and a black-haired man appeared, and in his hands was a thin box, “the man who field dressed her didn’t do too well, you see, she was squirming around...”

Borse leaned on his sword and tried to rise, failing and catching himself before he hit the ground, “Bring the Maiden,” Ashkoon said in a quiet tone and a young woman appeared, sobbing and shivering as an Innocent pushed her forward.

Ashkoon opened the box and Borse roared, on all fours, tears rolling down his face as smoothly as the blood leaving his abdomen, “We managed to make a fine stole from her, however.”

He placed a blonde fur stole in one arm checking his posture as he looked to the Maiden, “come, lets heal him.”

Ashkoon grabbed the poor Maiden by her neck and pushed her forward towards Borse, “I can’t,” She begged beneath her tears.

“Don’t be silly, witch, I can see it in you, just a trickle flow through you and that’s enough. Now...”

He pushed her into Borse, and she slipped on his blood, She sobbed, raising her hands to Borse as he tried to console her.

“HEAL HIM!”

Borse crawled to her and took her hand, she wept, and he hushed her, whispering in her ear until she took a deep breath in and nodded. Her eyes turned silver and she held his cheek.

He fell into her lap with a groan, eyes closed as she began to hum, stroking his hair for a moment.

And just as the spasm in his thigh stopped and his breathing eased, her head fell from her shoulders as the black-haired Innocent sliced it off.

What was left of her leaned forward and blood flowed from her unto Borse’s face, he laid there for a moment, then rose, unmoved by the Maidens death.

He stood up with a groan, sword falling to the ground and the blood-soaked man leaned on his own knee, with a pant.

Ashkoon walked to him Stole in his hands with a smile of pure madness, “I bestow upon you, Borse, Caid of Chaos and Rot, your wife-”

Ashkoon wrapped the Stole across his shoulders, “May she keep you warm just a little longer.”

Borse went to reach for his sword, but the black-haired Innocent kicked it away, Borse groaned.

“Oh, how rude of me, this is one of the best Innocent I have at my disposal, he has trained half my army, orchestrated several attacks on your ‘Villages’ and just so happens to be the man who killed your wife.”

Ashkoon bowed waiving his hands to the dark-haired man, “Master Sergeant Laine Takashi.”

Devon covered his mouth, his eyes closed shut and his whole body felt as if it was thrown in the mud.

“He will be your chauffeur to your funeral.”

Borse said nothing instead he grabbed the fur around his neck and gripped it to his chest tightly, Nori stood a foot behind him, and they began the march, their dead and dying were left as the survivors tossed glass balls on the walls that lit up flames that spread quickly.

“We need to get out of here,” Kyl said as he quickly made his way to a dresser pressed against the wall. Trevor followed, giving the Priestess a long look before he followed Kyl behind the old dresser. Devon stood up, his throat knotted, and his head swam, he stuck out a shaky hand covered in cold sweat to her.

The High Priestess didn’t move, her mouth wide and body quivering as tears flowed.

“Common, let’s go get Valerie.”

She looked out the hole once more and nodded, raising her hand up and he quickly took it, and they left the dank attic immediately.

The group moved in silence down the tight passageways until they came across a slit of silver along one of the halls.

Kyl was the first to speak, a tiny whisper quieter than a mouse, “thank the moon,” tearing down a panel and poking his head outside, Cassidhe tight to Devons arm.

Kyl poked his head out and waived them forward into a thick wall of ivy, then when the cold dew of the morning and the smell of copper and

burned wood lingered in the air Devon whispered, “Why did they do this now?”

Trevor jumped and sighed, then shook his head, “No idea, sir.”

They stood outside the western end of the mansion, no more than 20 feet in front of them was the thick tree line. They made their way south towards the village, with Trevor at the lead. “Can’t we call the police?” Devon asked but again he was met with a cold stare.

“They are the police, now please keep quiet, Consanair,” Kyl said.

Trevor stuck out his fist and the party halted, the Priestess wrapped herself around Devon’s arm and held on tight.

What can I do to protect you? All of you?

Trevor unsheathed his sword and began walking into the tree line.

Not a blink later he walked out, eyes shifting around him with Kevhin close beside him.

He quickly moved to Devon.

“We need to get her, Devon!”

“Get who?” He tried to whisper. But panic was setting in.

He grabbed Devons shoulders eyes bugged and sunken in, “Kara! They have Kara!”

Devons heart dropped into his gut, he let out a gasp, he stammered over his words, his thoughts lost in a battery of noise. Kevhin’s raven hair dripped with sweat, his grip grew tighter.

“She said I needed you and you need me, we have to save her!”

Devon looked at the group, tired and worn, the only Knights were Trevor and Kyl. The rest were Maidens and a little boy covered in soot and gripping his mother’s pants.

I can do something...

He looked to Trevor, dark eyes solemn and face drooped, *He can’t do anything, He has a duty to the rest.*

He looked at Kyl, he was worn, beaten and exhausted, dark circles under his eyes and hands shivering, his eyes were deep green nested in a sea of red.

“I won’t leave her,” he said as he looked at Cassidhe, “She’s, my friend.”

Cassidhe gripped him closer, hands still quivering, “I won’t lose you...” She said, “There are a lot of people that will never forgive me if I let you out of my sight.”

Devon wanted to laugh, she only knew him for a few hours, and she was afraid to let him go, “I know but I have to go to my friend, she needs me, and I owe it to her.”

Cassidhe looked beyond the brush and just beyond the hill, “Try your best to grab her and leave.

Devon nodded, gulping down the twisted feeling approaching the inside of his chest, “yeah,” His voice was hoarse.

“Consanair...” Kyl unbuckled his sword, “just in case.” He handed Devon the hilt. Lowering his eyes when he looked at Trevor, “just in case,” he said again.

Devon put it on, “Take care of them,” He said, putting the buckle on the last loop, “Get them away from here and safe.” He looked at the two Knights, Kyl nodded, Trevor’s lip twitched to what could have been considered a smile, “We will catch up.”

Cassidhe arched her back, giving little life back into her exhausted body, “I will see you soon, Devon McNeil.”

He watched them as they left, Kevhin close to him, Cassidhe giving Devon one final look as they disappeared in the thick brush.

What are you doing, D, run... just run. He pushed the thought down and followed Kevhin, both in silence and minds in chaos.

CHAPTER 30: AIDEN'S SONG

The earth was silent.

Companions lingered around the Village, pacing, and faded in the grey morning light. The Fae floated between the realms, flickering like a candle in a gentle breeze, and not a single one moved, they just watched as the world did.

And waited for something that hadn't come for over four hundred years.

A tree crackled to the final swing of an Innocents ax, and it hit the ground enough to shake the few remaining birds in the area to fly in the grey wet sky.

More Innocent chopped at other trees and others created their piles around the stakes buried deep into the ground.

They were almost ready.

The Maidens they captured stayed close to one another, they stayed strong in the beginning, and as the ax swings began to slow and more Innocent began to put back on their coats, one by one they began to cry.

Borse stood before his mansion, Nori close behind as they watched the flames engulf it. Ashkoon kept his distance at first, but he came closer as he saw the age in Borse take hold again.

His once raven black hair was turning thin and white, his skin began to droop and fade, and the weight of his sins began to bare on his neck.

They spoke in a whisper, and even Nori dared to take a step closer, both letting him with a glance.

Devon watched, a feeling the pain of the swords hilt in his grip, doing his best to think of a way up that hill without the dozen Innocent and Ashkoon and saving the Maidens and maybe giving Borse a moment of peace before he dies.

He deserves that...

His eyes wandered to the Maidens and there they stuck as more came from the woods, hands bound and dredged in mud and blood.

"We have to hurry," He whispered and looked at Kevhin.

"I don't see Kara..." Kevhin mumbled.

"She's there I think, she has to be."

And as if the world heard him, the Maidens broke free from their circle with Kara in the middle, side soaked in blood and eyes half closed, Kevhin went to move, and Devon stopped him after his first step. Making sure he stayed tucked behind the thick bush they hid behind.

"What are you doing?"

Devon only pointed towards the Village where a small group of Knights bound by the Innocent slowly walked forward.

The Honorable Maiden Parker was trailing behind, a gash across her forehead but she was unwaivered, her head was high, and the smallest smile stuck to her face.

They watched as they passed them, Devon holding his breath as they did.

Kevhin reached into his pocket and produced a white stone, "I'll mow them down and you can free the Knights, they will likely help."

Devon nodded, slowly drawing out his sword, *this is it Devon, time to be like one of them...*

Kevhin slowly rose, raising his hand to the sky as he walked out of the brush and Devon followed in a crouch.

His fingers began to spark, the sky rumbled and his long black hair began to rise.

A bright flash and an Innocent hit the ground, another one and the earth split open from the lightning's force causing two more to fall.

Devon ran in, he grabbed the first Knight he saw and cut the rope binding him, "Go free the others!" he commanded as another roll of thunder broke the sky and lightning followed.

"DEVON RUN!" Kara screamed.

Two more knights were free, *it's working!*

The Innocent ran in, a wall of lightening took down the wall and Devon raised his sword, his body was on fire, his heart beating from his

chest, five Knights stood beside him taking the swords their captors once had, he looked at Parker, then he looked to the hill.

He smiled at Borse's frown.

I will save them!

The Knights moved forward with him, their war cry echoed in the valley, a dozen Innocent stood between them and the Maidens and Kevhin was knocking them down.

"Get Kevhin and RUN!" Kara protested.

Its ok... He thought to her, I will protect you.

Kara let out a billowing cry, Devon dared glance back and Kevhin had steel poking out of his chest.

His eyes wide, he fell to his knees, sword unsheathing from his ribs. A bubble of blood left his chest as he gasped and heaved for air.

A long thick dagger pressed against Kevhin's throat. Nori stood behind him, dark eyes hollowed and a smile slid across his mouth, "Save her!" Kevhin gasped out.

Brilliant red spewed from his throat as the blade slid past it, staining his pale skin.

Kevhin fell in the grass, blood pouring from him as he tried his best to speak. His eyes faded and he sighed out a rattling sigh as he looked to the sky.

"Nori don't kill him!" a familiar voice screamed from the batch of Innocent; Devon looked.

Donavhin was soaked in sweat, he ran to Devon, his white uniform stained in mud and smears of blood.

"Bubby?" Devon whispered, voice cracked and his insides threatening to leave his throat.

"Don't hurt him-Don't-Don't-"

Don ran past Devon and stopped Nori from the wrist, the dagger an inch away from his shoulder. Nori looked to the cliff's edge, as did Don.

With a wave of his hand Ashkoon preserved Devons life.

"What are you doing Donny?" Devon exasperated.

A man cried out and all looked to the slaughter only feet away from them, Innocent surrounded the few Knights in a moment and dug their blades deep into them, blood spewed from them as they still fought one Knight ripping his blade across a mans chest just as he was falling, eyes to the hill where the Maidens watched in horror.

Don spoke but he heard none of it, he walked past Nori and Don and to Kevhin, "Get up..." He said as he sat next to Kevhin, "We have to

save your sister..." he looked at Nori, a sneer across his face and Dons bewildered expression, "Why did you do that, Nori?"

He shook Kevhin, eyes swelling, and he looked back up to the hill, Ashkoon laughed, a hackle that broke his soul and made Devon's bones feel cold as he gripped Kevhin's neck, for a moment, hoping there was something left to preserve.

"It doesn't have to be like this..."

There was nothing, a cold body dead, looking at him with blank eyes and mouth wide.

"It doesn't have to be like this..."

Devon began to sob.

...

Devon was bound and his mouth stuffed and covered, snot dripped down the rag that covered his mouth leaving it cold and wet. He was still shivering, his head low to the mud as Don stood behind him, gripping his shoulder tight.

Nori eagerly tied Borse to the front stake, draping the golden furred pelt across his shoulders. When he walked back to Ashkoon, he ruffled Devons hair, who didn't move or react, he made a point to, and if he could, he would turn the asshole to dust.

Honorable Maiden Parker walked past Devon, kissing his cheek she whispered, "Love all, my Little Knight, despite how evil they can be."

He looked at her and she smiled gently, pinching his cheek, *how can I after what they've done?* His mind wandered, for an instant, to the Crawlers the day before.

"Donavhin," Her voice was stern, "It's not your fault."

Don said nothing but the grip grew tighter.

A few Maidens touched Borse, but his blood red eyes stayed forward, some touched Devon and all but Maiden Parker cried.

He turned his head, *where is she?* Nori snapped his neck back straight with a gentle whack of the flat side of his sword, "gonna wanna watch D, going to be fireworks this morning," He laughed, and Devon wanted to puke.

The sky broke and began the slightest drizzle, and earth seemed to soak it in, and the wind laid still.

The first torch was lit, and each Innocent used it as a starter tilting their torch unto it and standing next to the stakes where the Maidens were tied up.

The Maidens still wept.

“My Innocent,” Ashkoon began, “this war began as the first Torch Bearer heeded my command, and now this War will end as you will heed this final command.”

“Here me, my Torch Bearers, you will ease the world of the sins of the witches for their crimes. Crimes of Malevolence, Manipulation of the Souls of Man, Wicked Dehumanization, and of course, Heretics. It is with heavy heart and the burden I bear; I must command thee...”

The world stood still, not a whisper was heard, and Dane Ashkoon spoke.

“Burn them.”

The Torch Bearers dropped their torches into the Pyre and from it sprang a flame...

A small dark cloud of smoke rolled in, and with it the sweet smell of burned flesh.

A tiny, gloved hand reached out from it, then the gentle glowing eyes now brilliant and bright against the grey world he came into, a jingle of his bell and Aiden looked to the pyres as the Maidens looked to him, tears stopping, eyes wide and love poured out of them as they saw the horned Imp.

His voice was ethereal, angelic and faultless, filled with sorrow and horror beyond imagination.

Aiden began to sing.

Be still my little moonbeams
Drown your sorrows away
Be free of this suffering
Be free
Be free

Their bodies lit up, yellow and gold in an otherwise miserable world, not a single Maiden cried, and Borse as he was lit in flames shifted in his bindings.

Come with me little moonbeams
Let us dance on your pain
Let I purify your soul

Dance with me
Dance with me

Their flesh burned and bubbled, bright red to black as they slowly died from the fires, not a single soul suffered on that hill.

Except for Aiden.

Thin threads of ash left each pyre and into the body of the little spirit. His skin cracked and torn, ember red seeping from him his he wept in his suffering.

Borse opened his mouth, perhaps to speak, but only flames left his mouth, Aiden seemed to understand.

Blood red eyes blistered and popped from their sockets, the pelt ash around his charred neck, and yet Borse broke free from his bindings and engulfed body fell to his knees.

He reached out for Aiden, whose tears singed the earth at his feet.

Shed no tears for me
Your suffering is mine alone
I breathe your death, I am your glory
Dance with me
Dance with me

Aiden reached out his hand to meet Borse's. The cinder that was Borse broke free at the thighs, he fell into the ground crumbling to ash.

Devon began to cry.

The horror stuck on his brother's face next to him.

Ashkoon looked away at the sunrise.

I sing for your glory
I sing for your tears

Ash fingers touched the gloved hand of Aiden. The man once named Borse, a legend, a Caid, an immortal warrior, fell to the wind.

Embrace me
Embrace me
Embrace me.

Devon began to sob as he looked at his friend, *Aiden, you could've told me!*

His friend, the pesky little demon, was the physical embodiment of every Knight and Maiden set on flames, he was their suffering, their painful death after their pain filled life.

Aiden was the Scythe of Death, and the means to end their suffering.

Their eyes locked for a moment, in them Devon saw a Hell burning inside. Aiden lowered his head and took a step backwards and disappeared in a plume of ash and smoke.

Don't go!

Come back!

I'm here for you buddy...

The sun cracked beyond the trees as the clouds broke away.

Dane Ashkoon took a deep sigh in, and Devon watched the fires in front of him, every last Maiden that once was and will never be again that became specks of ash falling to the wind.

Borse gone to the wind.

Mrs. Parker is a memory that will forever be a part of him because of her.

And Maidens dead for one man's pointless mission.

Aiden sang his song, and Devon felt its beauty resonate into the world.

AIDEN'S SONG

ACT 3
THE LITTLE FIRE

I am dying, I only have days where I lived for centuries, I am frail and tired, I have lost so much and all I can think of is him... I miss him, I yearn for him, my voice, my reminder, my friend, The Little Fire.

- FROM THE PERSONAL DIARY OF MAIDEN GWENAVINE IV

CHAPTER 31:

TASTE OF BLOOD

The room was dim, and silent. Keagan kept his back to the small fireplace in the center of the wall and his eyes were shut tightly, head buried in his knees and long blonde hair undone and draped over him.

His sword was under his boots, unpinned and just a motion away from being unsheathed.

He fought the cold in his bones and focused on the warmth of the room and of Gael, resting her head against his shoulder breathing as lightly as a feather. His mind raced however, and he let it, he needed answers and the best way to find one is to think things out.

What can I do if they come here?

The best solution is to remain on the lower floors, they could easily guard off all of the exits.

How many Knights do we have?

Not enough...

It will never be enough...

The murmur of his mind droned on but he could hear Trevor's boots as he strutted back into the room, "Still no sign of the Consanair or anyone else," He whispered to The Priestess.

"He will come." She responded, "Keep guarding the doors, your watch is nearly up, Knight. Thank you for your vigilance."

You killed him, and Kevhin and Kara...

I should have stayed back.

Yes, you should have.

Gael wrapped her fingers around his and a quick calming surge ran through his arm into the nape of his neck.

“Save your strength, kitty.”

Gael purred a little, “I think that was all I was able to muster,” She sighed, “I don’t think I can’t even Change right now we’re both so weak.”

“So, save your strength.”

He looked into her eyes, and she smiled the slightest exhausted smile, “I just want to remind you I’m right here next to you.”

He kissed her forehead and she chirped and rubbed her cheek to his, “I will always be right next to you,” he whispered sincerely.

“Stalker.” She giggled, closing her eyes again and resting on his shoulder.

He looked around.

The room was packed with over two dozen Maidens and twice as many Knights. All glued to their phones and texting and calling who they could in the smallest whisper. Ammore paced the room with one hand on her long ax, and the other texting, eyes shifting to the wooden door every so often.

Apparently, that was the only weapon she could grab when the Innocent came but Keagan expected that was the weapon she wanted to grab. The crescent head was over a foot long with a five-inch pointed tip. From what he remembered the handle was adjustable as well.

It was all her design and her crafting. she danced the line somewhere between a weapons smith and an artificer with years of training with dozens of other Artisanal Knights and she was the one who ended up on top of them all and by miles.

She stopped her pacing for a moment, looked at Keagan eyebrows arched in sadness that darkened her already dark eyes.

She made her way to him and Gael, Caitlyn, close behind. She squatted down, “Gael Deep Wells is gone, I can’t get ahold of anyone.”

Gaels eyes opened, Ammore lowered hers, the air around them changed and all eyes pointed to them.

Gael trained with Dr. Richards at the Deep Wells Reserve in the very beginning of her journey, that was sacred land for all Shamans across the globe to meet and learn and be free. And now...

“They wanted it that way,” She said as she lowered her head back down, “I hope they gave them a hell of a fight.” Her fingers dug into Keagan’s thigh, he didn’t flinch, and he never would.

“I’m so sorry,” Ammore reached her hand out but Caitlyn stopped her. “Let’s let them rest, Love.” Ammore nodded, eyes stuck on Keagan for a moment.

Kill the ones that can kill...

...So, they can’t fight back.

He leaned his head on Gaels, eyes stuck to nothing and everything. Valerie was resting on her mother’s shoulder, black curls draped over her chest like a shawl, eyes open, body slight quivering.

What part of the Treaty did Borse break?

...Does it matter? Not now anyways...

Kyl sat in a ball in the corner, watching everyone with eyes stained with red, when they locked eyes, he quickly recoiled.

All Knights stayed close to their Maidens and the Knightless held each other in their Circles some humming familiar tunes but most silently wept.

Trevor was glued to his phone, squatting down next to the High Priestess and arm’s length away from Valerie, Keagan could swear a slight smile brushed across his thin lips, at least Trevor might have some good news.

Keagan let in the air in his nose, closed his eyes and thought of the winter night as he stepped into the Three Hill Village, the Calm he relied on for a decade... and then the fire leached into it. The unbearable heat, the soul shattering screams that he had to ignore...

The door flung open, and Keagan was on his feet and sword drawn, every Knight either in a stance or Maidens tight behind them.

She was older, approaching her seventies but well masked with makeup and obvious work done. Her deep brown eyes furrowed as she looked around, a man in all black standing in front of her, hand on a taser on his belt, other hand raised.

Cassidhe only smiled gently, “Forgive our attentiveness, Mrs. Ameia, we have had a horrendous night behind us.”

“All is forgiven,” She lowered her guard’s hand, his eyes shifting faster, his grip tightening on the taser, “I have only come to update you on the rooms.”

She guided past the guard, and everyone lowered their weapons as she glared brown eyes and puckered silicone tight lips, “We have seven rooms available, and we are preparing the executive suites with more beds. We still have some time yet, so I have told the kitchen to prepare a

breakfast for you and your..." her eyes stuck to Keagan, "acquaintances. Please give us an hour."

Cassidhe reached her hand out with a smile, "Your hospitality is exceptional, Ma'am." Ameia smiled back and allowed her hand to be taken, "I am an ally for the Children, and I will do as I can." Cassidhe kissed her hand and Ameia's smile widened, "Rest, please. You have endured enough." She gently bowed to the room and glided her way out the door, her Guard closing it a little too harsh.

"Now that I am awake," Cassidhe spoke to the room, "Can someone fill me in on who is left alive?"

Keagan sheathed his sword, "The Airden's are still missing, as well as the Parkers, Lance is MIA and it doesn't look good for Honorable Maiden Parker, Ronal and Angel are meeting a group at Lake Georgetown," He turned to look at Gael, "We can't get ahold of Deep Wells-

"or Seven Leaf's." A knight spoke.

"Nothing from, Red River..."

"...Lavender Hills..."

"Nothing from the Isles..."

They spoke in near whispers, heads lowering from the weight of the words they spoke.

They won...

Cassidhe closed her eyes gripping her daughter closer listening to the Villages that were once bustling with life and deeply rooted all over the world become nothing but the words they were.

Keagan and Gael stared at one another, sadness in her eyes and the weight of helplessness in his chest. The Children of the Moon were now rare, and his Maiden may be the last of her kind.

Cassidhe kissed Valeries forehead and rose, mouth twisting as she tried to find the words to say, "They will be honored, and we will have a home again, and be safe again. We will wait and be vigilant, soon we will move but for now let us wait... let us wait just a bit longer."

Her eyes wandered across her people, tired and worn she sighed, tense shoulders easing just a little bit.

No one spoke, in fact the silence was deafening, they all knew now, there was nothing left. No council to guide them, no Caid to protect them and no home rest in.

This can't be the end... Keagan thought as he looked into the woman's eyes, *No...* A voice answered, *you won't let it be.*

...

The sun was rising, reflecting off the small lake in Georgetown. It was bright but Ronal didn't squint his eyes, instead he looked at the small ripples in the water. Thinking.

Angel, despite the tear in her long white gown she wore, looked absolutely beautiful, gazing over the lake in front of him. Her phone in her hand, the sadness seeped into her.

The exhaustion was taking hold of both of them.

Her short dark hair flew in the wind and her eyes filled with anger, even under the circumstances they held a tiny shred of hope beneath them. Her phone rang, and she answered.

"Hope! Please tell me you're safe." She said wearily, Hope was a part of a coven in New York, they only met a few times but in that time Angel and Hope became fast friends always keeping in touch.

"I know. Yeah, I'll let the Priestess know." She began to choke in her words. "Borse is dead, Hope, tell them..." She sniffed as a tear rolled down her cheek, "Be safe. I'll see if I can get to you soon." She looked at the phone and turned to him, dark eyes never looking sadder, "Tristan is taking two Squires and Oz to a building the Innocent are in. He doesn't plan on returning, none of them do." She smiled suddenly.

"He locked Hope in a closet."

Ronal smiled. Tristan was adopted when he was very young and Marcus, the Coven master of Willows Pass, trained him from day one, he was young, but he was the trainer for all the Knights in the United States and if anyone can put a dent in the Innocent, it would be Tristan.

"Good," he said unaware of his own exhausted voice. It was a suicide mission, but it still gave him pride in knowing not everyone will fall gracefully to the sword of the Innocent.

"That's all that's left, Ronal. Four out of two hundred. That's it. How many more out there? How many...." She began to sob. Not from the sadness, she was beyond that. Those tears were from anger.

"I... will... kill..." She ran to him, arms open.

He gladly took her in. Holding her close he smelled her sweet lavender smell. "We will." He said gripping her dress, hating her tears and hating

the Innocent for doing this. Hating Borse for ever underestimating the Innocent and not listening to him.

It took her a few moments to calm down, but when she did they sat on the edge of Ronal's car still holding each other.

"Where are they?" she asked as she lifted her head from his shoulder.

Trevor told them to meet a small group of Maidens who made their way here by accident, he gave them this exact spot, but no one was there, "Let's wait a few minutes longer..." his words trailed as he saw a black van approaching on the paved road.

Angel made her way to the van, hand in the air and a broad smile on her face. Ronal heard a rustling next to him, before he could look, his face hit the hood of his car and his hands were behind his back.

Angel screamed and the earth rumbled. Their Companion stirred from the ground below them.

Ronal looked up in just enough time to see the van swerve to avoid a deep crack in the pavement. His nose stung and warm liquid metal began to cover his tongue. He fought the man behind him, twisting his legs to try and trip him, shifting his weight to see the white metal mask of an Agent.

"ANGEL, Run!"

An Innocent lept from the van and ran to Angel.

She ran, full sprint as the earth quivered and their companion roared from the depths below.

The Innocent drew a dagger and narrowly missed her.

Ronal screamed and the Agent punched his ribs but Ronal screamed louder through the pain. He knew it was a broken rib, he didn't care just as long as she ran and she was safe, nothing else mattered.

The Innocent began to match her pace stride for stride, "No," he pleaded as he saw the silver gilt of a sword drawn from the long white trench coat.

She turned, tears streaming from her eyes as she looked at him and then, a sword pierced Angel's side and she fell.

The earth shook, blood dripping into it as she tried to pull herself back up, the Innocent grabbed her hair and she roared as hard as her companion, eyes quickly sifting to silver then in a blink gone.

"Fuck you." She growled, "You piece of shit, how dare you, you fucking bitch."

Give them hell...

Ronal's face hit the hood again his vision turned to white, but he still screamed out.

“Angel!”

He was being dragged. He heard her moans and then silence. The earth stopped and Ronal begged for her as his vision faded to white again.

He felt no pain, he was beyond that. He only focused on the hand that weakly wrapped around his.

Angel...

CHAPTER 32:

INTO THE VOID

Devon stared at the white light before him, a thin thread no thicker than his thumb, with the occasional shadow denting its gleam.

He was shrouded in darkness, his body shivering from the cold sweat that dripped from him, the humid room carried a familiar smell, old books.

There was a time he would relish that smell, now, bound in the darkness, he detested it.

His arms were numb as they stretched above him, and his back hurt more than it ever has. He fought the lump in his throat and the knot in his gut as they battled to see which he would give into first, the death he just witnessed or the pain he was suffering in.

He refused to blink, just stared at the silver thread, waiting for something other than bustle of busy hall to break him from his torment.

And to his great sorrow, it finally arrived.

The plume of dark smoke appeared and from it, Aiden, his eyes a brilliant yellow and his flesh beating from the fire within him, smoke left his lips and as he slid

his mouth open to the smallest smile, the yellow inside him showed out like a jack-o-lantern.

He smelled of the fires, and his heat warmed Devons skin as Aiden's blistered, he reeked of a sweet sickly smell that Devon now knew was burned flesh.

His throat gave in, the pain took over and Devon felt the tears fall from his eyes, *You are so strong...* He tried to speak through the gag but barely a muffle broke out, *you don't need to cry, Little Poet.*

Yes I do...

"No," Aiden said, "Save your tears for better souls."

Devon muffled in his gag, drool and snot dripped from his mouth as he tried to speak around it, all in vain but he wanted nothing more than to tell Aiden, *I love you.*

"I love you too, Little Poet, please be quiet."

Devon's eyes widened, his body relaxed, and the tears kept coming, "I know, it's been like this since you were a child, I stayed as far away as I could, but I could hear you in my mind, in the furthest recesses when we took something from each other that horrid day..."

"My beautiful Gwen hid yours inside yourself, but now," Aiden smiled, hot tears hitting the ground and he reached out, "Now I guess, we can speak beyond words,"

I'm so sorry...

"No, my child, I am sorry, I have hidden myself from you, the pain of who I am, that my existence is to suffer."

He raised his head a little higher, bright eyes pouring themselves into Devon and the Imp spoke, "I am a Scythe of Death, the Suffering of the Flame, Cursed and Blessed, I do not know peace, only pain."

...and you are loved for it. You should have told me...

"My burden, Little Poet, was one I took only for myself."

Devon nodded; his neck stung as he did but that was all he had to do for Aiden to understand.

Aiden sat down and folded his legs, gloved fingers intertwined and elbows at his knees he whispered, "Now we wait for our Fighter, he comes and with purpose." Aiden smiled.

What about Dad and Mom and Momma?

"They are safe, try to rest Little Poet, your journey has just begun."

Devon felt a thread of energy stir his insides, it was like magma but it warmed his muscles and relaxed his nerves, with a spasm his back pain faded and his body seemed to breathe the energy in.

"You are a vast Well," Aiden smiled, "truly endless..."

The light behind Aiden ebbed and the door creaked open- a flood of light poured in and Devon's eyes closed outside his control.

"Devon, you really do cry a lot," Nori said behind a chuckle, "You're going to be ok, man."

Devon opened his eyes, Nori busied his hands with a pouch, unzipping the zipper carefully.

He still wore the white uniform, a splatter of blood on his cuff and a dribble on his thigh. His hair was wet to a shine and tied tightly back, his eyes were tired but he still smiled in a way that made Devon sick, “You have a meeting with none other than Dane Ashkoon. Your brother here has already met him.”

He tilted his head towards Don, Devon dared not look, he lowered his head to Aiden who stood between them, his eyes glancing at Don and then back at Devon, a menacing smile grew.

Nori pulled a syringe from the pouch and carefully zipped it back up, eyeing the orange tip, holding it between his fingers like a cigarette.

“This here will knock you out for a few hours, A nice sleep while we drive, a little road trip for the three of us.”

Don laughed, “We talked about going on a road trip last year, remember Devon?”

Devon said nothing.

“This way you’ll be safe, like when we were kids and you used to run off with Mr. Jingles.”

Devon shot his head up to meet his brother.

He looked up from Aiden and looked straight into Devons eyes, his dark blue eyes were bloodshot, his face gaunt and pale and it looked like he didn’t sleep for days, a dribble of blood was on his collar, slightly smeared and browning.

Is that why you’re with them?

“Easy Little Poet...”

Is it because I hurt you?

“Feel him, look at him... he’s...”

I am so sorry...

Nori popped the orange top and looked at the needle with a hiss, “You won’t feel a thing, buddy...” He said as he took a step closer, “It will only take two seconds too, you’ll be out in no time.”

Don smiled, “Can I do it?”

Nori twisted his thin lips and grumbled, “Fine...” He passed the needle to Don carefully.

“Don’t worry D,” Don said as he looked at the needle with a grin, “I always got your back.”

Aiden snickered as Don took a step forward, winked and in a blink the needle was in Nori’s jugular and Don pushed the plunger.

His eyes were wide, and he gasped for breath, he reached for Don but Don pushed him aside, “Always.”

Nori’s growl faded, “What the... fuck-”

His eyes closed and he fell, and Don was right on top of Devon quickly undoing the knots, “Fuck dude, fuck...”

Devon wanted to laugh, “I can’t believe I did that, How the hell are we supposed to get out now? Fucking idiot... fuck, I should have waited... fuck!”

He looked at the closed door behind him, “Mr. Jingles what can you do? Can we go ‘poof’?”

“Already did...” Aiden said as he rose, “Come now my Champions, let me show you the Void.”

Don untied the final tie and Devon fell to the ground in a groan that echoed, “I’m not going anywhere with this,” Devon raised his hand, “fucking asshole.”

Dons face drooped, “We don’t have time Devon.”

“Tell that to Kevhin! Tell that to Kara!”

“D...”

“He is trying to save you...”

“Don’t,” he glared at Aiden as he tried his best to stand, “my friends are dead because of these people, and you think its ok that you...” Devon stood up, his head spun and his whole body ached, Don reached for him.

Devon slapped his hand and leaned on the wall that he was bound to a moment ago, he glanced at the two beings before him.

Aiden fidgeted with the bell on his neck, eye shifting between the two, and Don kept his mouth shut, his eyes were bloodshot and his fists were knuckle white, “What are you doing, bubby?” Devon sighed out.

“I thought I was doing something right, I wanted to protect the world, I wanted to save people and become stronger.”

“Yeah,” Devon was shaking, from anger, from heartache, he didn’t know but he felt like he was about to shatter, “Well the Innocent just killed a lot of good people, *our* people. Do you realize that?”

Don shook his head mouth twisted, “I saw them skin a woman alive, but she wasn’t a woman at the time...” he wiped his cheek and breathed in waivered air, “And Mrs. Parker,” He reached in his pocket and laughed, “Maive and Chance, I don’t know them, but I do, and I don’t understand how or why.”

“Maive touched me, and I suddenly saw a memory of me trying on Dad’s uniform, not his service uniform but the same one the Knights wore.”

Devon smiled gently, *of course she would*, “The woman you saw skinned alive was their High Priestess and she did a lot for Vets and helped mom get her Masters.”

Don said nothing, his eyes were glued to the ground.

“We are Nobles Don,” Don snapped out of his trance, looking at Devon with wide eyes, with a slight sliver of the man he actually was hidden within the deep ocean blue, “We really are the Sons of the Champion, Knights and Protectors since their conception and our father was the General of the Children of the Moon,”

Don nodded, “I know that now, I know that...”

“Don, I’m sorry I called you an asshole.”

“I didn’t kill anyone, I won’t dream of doing that,” A heavy tear rolled down his cheek, “they lied to me man, *HE* lied to me,” he pointed at the lump on the ground, “But this,” He gripped his uniform, “This isn’t me, and it never was.”

“I am the Son of the Champion, I want to be a Knight,” his back was straight and that sliver became a little more, “I will do what I can to protect the ones I love.”

Devon pushed away from the wall and found his balance with the help of Dons shoulder, “let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The hallway was busy, Dozens of people, some dressed in white uniforms and others in suits stood perfectly still in an ambient ocean of sound.

Bodies frozen in time as the three quickly and carefully walked between the clots of Innocent, “They can’t see us?” Don asked as he looked a man directly in the face.

“Yes and no, time has no Will in the Spirit realm, but it persists to exist in all realms. The void is a Dam between the Fleshbound and the Spirit realms-”

“Terra and Spiritus,” Don whispered.

“Exactly right,” Aiden smiled as he leaped to the wall and hurried to the corner, “but as with all Dams, it only slows the flow, Terra is ruled by it, Spiritus is not, and they wage their war right here in the Void.”

He raised his hand and the brothers stopped, he poked his head around the corner and carefully turned, “Stay here,” He whispered as he set his focus to the hallway beyond.

Devon took the opportunity to look around, he was inches away from a older man with a well-groomed beard and nice suit, one that no one else had around them, his dark hair was slicked back and he had an air of superiority about him.

“That’s Nicolas Goode,” Don said, “He’s the General of the Innocent.”

Devon took a step back bumping into the person in front of them, it was like hitting a wall.

“I guess he’s coming to see you...”

Devon sighed, “So listen man-”

Aiden poked his head out from the corner, “Come, a Companion needs our help.”

Devon broke his glare from the General to Aiden, his eyes lingered back, he thought for a moment about the man in front of him, frozen in time, and surprised himself on the horrors he would inflict on the man, he whispered, “Let us hope I never see you again.”

Don hurried on, and Devon was a few steps behind, he fought the urge to tell him... everything, he worried about the seal inside him, and if he said too much he would ‘explode’, I’m *actually a Caid... What’s a Caid? It’s a god...basically... yeah I know crazy right... anyways...*

Don jumped and gasped his face lit up with a bright smile “and who might you be big guy?”

“Don’t be rude, Donavhin.” Aiden hissed, “You never ask a Spirits name.”

Don sucked in air between his teeth and squished his face as he took a step back.

“It’s quite alright, Little Fire, I can tell he means no ill will.” Its voice was a rumble of stones in a large throat. And when Devon finally turned the corner, he saw the creature.

It sat on the center of near vacant hallway, its paws as large as Devons hand and his short snout reached Devons navel, he was wide, almost as wide as Devons shoulders. His skin was hard and thick, with marbled waves of red, grey, and yellow. His teeth were long, nearly poking out of his thick gums and he had a main of short spikes that wrapped around his thigh thick neck and rolled down his spine to his tail.

“Consanair.” The beast rumbled as he noticed Devon gawking.

“Sup,” Devon waved, “this is Don,” Devon pointed, “he’s my brother, we had our memories wiped, as you probably know... so we may have forgotten a few things.”

“As fate has grabbed ahold of you, I will do my best to be patient and abide. I place my name upon you, Consanair, Little fire, and Don.”

He raised his head, brown marbled eyes shifting to meet each of them, “I am Ras, Hound of Earth, Companion to Ronal Ingam. It is my absolute pleasure to meet you three.”

“You know Ronal?” Devon asked.

Ras nodded, “He is being held captive here, Consanair.”

Devon looked at Don who shrugged, “Is he ok?”

“He is badly injured and his heart breaks, we lost our Maiden.” The hound lowered his head, “My sweet Angel.” He murmured.

He glanced to Aiden then sighed, “I am sorry, Ras.” Aiden walked to the beast arm raised, “May she find her Peace...” Aiden patted the beast’s shoulder, “As she was peace, she will be.” The creature spun around, flicking its thick barbed tail, “Come, Sons of the Champion, follow please.”

They were only a few steps away from the door that separated Ronal from the world, it loomed a darkness in the still Void that sent chills down to his very bones, but it was Devon who opened the door, and its weight was unbearable to Devon.

His body bound to a chair in the center of the room in the darkness. A slow stream of blood, frozen in the Void, flowed down his nose coating his beard and gaunt grey face.

Devon peered into Ronal’s eyes, heavy, slow forming tears mixed with sweat dripped from them. His eyes held a pain beyond anything Devon had ever seen.

He crouched down lingering for a moment, letting the weight bear down on him as well, as Ronal mourned in his stillness.

He *was* pain.

Devon raised his hand towards the tears, fighting the lump in his throat he spoke to Aiden, “We can heal him.”

Aiden agreed, “I am ready when you are Little Poet.”

Don took a step back and grabbed his arm, Devon frowned, “I ruined everything huh?”

He told Don, feeling the thread of Aiden inside him, the tiniest trace of magma slithering through his body and up into his hand, “Can you imagine how different things would be if I didn’t push you?” He said to Aiden, his eyes grew wider, *Focus...*

“If I never hurt you?”

He closed his eyes, and he saw for a moment a beautiful face smiling as it slowly turned to ash, it burned him too, just a blister under the skin that he gladly accepted as he felt the thread of healing reach his fingertips.

He focused and through Aiden's eyes he saw the process, first Aiden spread the threads like tentacles under Ronal's skin, touching every part of the man's face, correcting a fracture just under the eye socket with a pulse of heat that told the bone to mend. Then the nose, centimeter by centimeter telling it to mend as it once was telling the fragmented bone to move just slightly and the cartilage to fuse as a whole once more.

It was simple yet so complex, it was relying on the body to remember how it once was on a molecular level, and the body responded, taking energy from them and using it to heal.

Aiden was finished with the face so he scanned the body, a rib was broken, and that too was healed and left to only be a bruise.

To Aiden it was a second thought, like a snap of his fingers. But to Devon the thought process was complex, *Be present, be now, the Void is the home, where my body resides, and what I wish to be, here, as they are present and now, this body will be only for the Void until I command it otherwise.*

And Ronal Ingam gasped, the last drops of blood fell and sweat poured and his body quivered, fighting for air he looked up to see Devon, tears smearing his bloodied face.

"Ronal, it's me. Deep breathes you're safe now."

The purple forming under his eyes faded, his face took in color once again and his eyes darted to Ras, "We are safe now, Brother."

Ronal's eyes slid past them and to Don.

He screamed a rage filled scream, face contorting as he fought in his restraints, eyes bulging from their sockets as he twisted and kicked to the point where his chair fell back.

Don threw off his jacket, "It's ok..." He said weakly, fighting tears himself, "I'm not..."

"Ras?" Devon said.

The Hound was on top of his Companion in an instant, head resting on his chest, "Be easy, brother. He is a Champion, son of Nobles. Be easy, brother..."

Ronal wrapped his arms around the hound, eyes stuck to the ceiling he screamed a gut-wrenching cry, one that shook Devon's skin and caused Don to fold against the wall. And there the Knight sobbed, gripping tightly

to the hound that called him brother, they both mourned, and they both took their time.

Devon sniffled, eyes to Don, “None of this would have ever happened.”

CHAPTER 33:

BROKEN

“Forgive me, Consanair,” Ronal rose with Ras, his face still red but his eyes distant and cold.

“You don’t have to call me that.” Devon said rather empathetically, “But there’s nothing to forgive, I feel your pain.”

He was honest, the man’s sorrow seeped into him, and made it feel like his own, and in term it seemed as if Aiden felt it too. It was strange at first, he felt like he was violating Ronal somehow, as if he had no right to feel his suffering, but as the moments in the void ticked on and Ronal cried until he had no more tears left, Devon began to feel the beauty in it, the immense love someone could have and lose, and then he felt honored to feel it as well.

So, he let himself cry with him, keeping his distance close in case Ronal needed to reach out, but he never did and looking at Ronal now, it seemed like he never would.

“You’re allowed to mourn,” Devon said with a gentle smile, “I think it would be weird if you didn’t.”

Ronal sniffed, “Thank you, Consanair.” His eyes grew even more distant, his fists tight and his shoulders tighter.

“We must move on,” Aiden said quietly as he stood next to Don, “The longer we linger in the Void the longer we will draw attention, the Fleshbound stink is more potent here.”

Ras rose his hind legs and stretched, “I assume we will be met with hostility soon, the Consanair shines like wisp in the darkness. Have you come across any Malevolent recently.”

Devon let out a long sigh, “we better hurry.”

The march began in the void, they walked with purpose and Ronal and Ras hung in the back with Devon and Don in the middle as Aiden led the way.

They passed the long drone of conversations and statues of men and woman with ease, and when passing Goode again Devons eyes lingered before they passed the corner, as distant and hidden as he was in the crowd, Devon felt sick looking at the man, worse than being next to Ashkoon and Borse.

He betrays himself, Aidens thoughts lingered in the back of Devons mind, “I think its sad.” Devon said in response and Aiden nodded.

Ronal spoke, jaw still tight and eyes miles ahead, “I’ve debated that evil people know they’re evil, they choose the path that led them to do blatant wrong.”

Don slouched, saying nothing.

“They prey on good intentions and trap people in with forced loyalty, it’s a basic strategy, they will shape themselves around your thoughts and make you feel like you belong and then in time they slowly strip it away.”

Don nodded, “I sat back and watched Nori do it to at lease a dozen people the past few months and I see that now, I thought he was just hazing for a stupid club...”

“I wonder if one of those dozens stabbed the woman I fucking loved.”

Don lowered his head even further, eyes on the ground, “I don’t know,” Don sniffed, “most of these guys appeared out of nowhere and weren’t part of any group I was in.”

Ronal clicked his tongue, “you really fucked up, huh?”

Devon snapped his head back to Ronal and Ronal flinched ever so slightly, Don nodded in response.

“Yeah man, started out with my lifelong friend showing me how to fight and I suddenly got invited to watch a woman get skinned alive.”

He stopped and looked back at Ronal, eyes glinting in anger, “None of this is me, its not in my blood, I’m not one of them and the more I think about it the more I realize they used me as a prop.”

“I don’t know what exactly happened, but I know my brother is very different, my father...” He put his hand to his forehead and hissed, “My father used to be the General and the only thing that makes sense is they used Nori to get me to join to get a Noble on their side to rub it in.”

Ronal's eyes were a breath away from lighting on fire, "Fuck them."

Don sighed, "I just want to do what's right, and they preyed on that, as you said."

They ventured the hallways in silence, the maze of humans and concrete was beginning to make Devon dizzy just as Aiden stopped before a staircase to two thick steel doors and four guards.

"Were almost out," Don whispered with a sigh, and he began to walk up the stairs, Devon and Ronal followed.

Don went to the door and stopped examining the door and turning back, "as soon as I open this it's going to trip an alarm."

"I think we will still have plenty of time to get away," Devon chuckled as he put his hand on the handle.

"Be weary that door will weight a ton,"

"I take it Newton will have a field day in the Void?" Ronal said as he too looked at the door.

Aiden's eyes lit up and Devon groaned, "No"

"It'll only be a second."

The three looked at him curiously, "he wants to go out of the void and jump back into it."

"Good idea," Ronal said, "better than trying to follow laws that don't exist."

"I'll go and you two can stay," Don said looking at the guards.

"But then it will take forever for us to wait for you to open the door." Ronal thought out loud.

"How does time pass here anyway," Devon asked.

"Can we be almost in the Void but not really?" Don pondered.

Devon looked at Aiden's broad smile across his face, "Oh no."

The clamor of the halls snapped like a rubber band back into reality, a man gasped, and Devon was suddenly face to face with a shouting guard.

"Damnit Jingles." Don drew out his sword.

"Not funny!" Devon growled as he nearly tripped avoiding the rabid man.

Ronal lunged for the door and a high-pitched mechanical scream came from it, an inch, and then five and then a foot and Devon fell to the ground.

Don's sword was an inch inside the man's back as he began to fall over Devon, frozen and face contorted in shock and pain.

The mechanical scream echoed to a deafening tone, even when Devon pressed his hands to his ears and hurried out the door, glaring at Aiden as he hacked.

Don was close behind, cleaning the tip of his blade just before sheathing it, "Ok you convinced me," Ronal said noticing as he hurried out into a dark hallway and pushed the thin door with a heave, then suddenly they were in a familiar place.

The great open hall had a line of people out the door, mostly confused statues looking in their direction, towards the mechanical scream and long drawn-out yelp. Of the man Don stabbed.

"This is the fucking Capitol." Devon spoke somewhere between a question and disbelief.

"Yeah," Don grumbled as he hurried past, "bastards have a tight grip on a lot more than you think."

"Can't wait to pick that brain of yours," Ronal.

"Oh, I was low rank, but I will sing, man."

Ronal let out the shortest laugh and all three of them were surprised, "Lets go," He said as he squeezed his way between a tourist and the door, Ras close behind, then Aiden.

Devon breathed in the fresh air that felt so much lighter than he ever felt before, and once they stepped on the lawn, he took a second to touch the grass, hard and sharp in the Void but still he felt a stillness in the earth he didn't realize he craved.

Ras said nothing but noticed, and seemed happy that Devon took the time. "If we had more time, I would show you how to ground with the earth," Aiden said, fidgeting with his gloves, "It seems as though you're on the cusp of knowing."

Devon stood back up from his crouch, "It's like a gear is missing, but once it's there everything will make sense," he began to walk Aiden close to his side, "It's like an instinct that was stripped from me."

Aiden said nothing, as they caught up though Devon began his thoughts, following Ronal and Don who seemed to be eavesdropping, "I'm not mad at her, I don't think, I get why," He waived his hand at the Capitol Building behind them, "But really, how could she just take that away from me."

"Please mind your words Poet, she had her reasons." Devon glared, "I know this hurts you, but I will say knowing her for over one hundred years, she always did something for a reason."

Devon grumbled, Aiden continued, “You have seen the end of a Caid, and the evils they can do-”

“That’s not me!” Devon snapped. Causing everyone to pause and look his way.

“That’s not what I was getting at, D.” Aiden said with a tone that caused Devon to close his mouth tight, “She knew they would eat you alive, use you, and abuse you for their gain and toss you away once they were done with you. At least, this is the best guess I could come up with. Maybe she reacted out of fear, or anger, or wanted to give you a chance to be human, we will never know now.”

“She wanted me to look after you...” Devon said, looking at the sky between the skyscrapers, “that was the last thing she said to me.”

Aiden smiled, “She would be proud of you... proud of you both,” Aiden looked at the sky as well, his ear twitched and he sniffed the still stale air.

They were walking between heavy traffic on Congress Avenue and about to pass 10th Street and Ronal stopped and looked around and turned.

“Do you know where were going?” Don said.

“Yup, Austin’s Refuge, only the Knight Sergeants know where all the Refuges are and only the Council and the Stewards know where to go after that.”

“Agents?” Don mumbled and Ronal nodded.

“We know they’re there, and they always will be, sometimes they fade away and sometimes they join us, Ashkoon could pry all he wants, but so far we have yet had an Agent reach higher than a Squire.”

“Good to know,” Don said, “How do you find out who an Agent is?”

Ronal huffed, “Secret.”

Don rolled his eyes, “I’ll find out eventually.”

“Hope you do.”

Devon caught himself smiling, Don and Ronal seemed to be getting along, at least as best each one can be getting along.

A slight humming began to rise above the still note of the Void.

Devon turned his head down an ally way, at the far end of the alley way he saw a creature raise its head from a mound of trash.

Long snout lined with black beads and short black matted fur, its eyes were sunken deep with black slits around white bulbs, its body was long and thin, its ribs protruded tight dried flesh and its fingers long and twisted bones webbed with thick leather.

The hum began to get louder, and Devons chin suddenly felt a sting where the Beauty once cut it, *don't want to deal with that again...*

"We should hurry." Devon said as he pushed the two in front of them, Aiden looked back into the alley and hackled, "Ah, just a Nightmare," Devon could hear its bones scrape the concrete as it slowly made its way closer, "A Nightmare is nothing to be afraid of Consanair," Ras said, "They only look frightening, but in actuality they are just weak Fae hidden behind discardments."

Aiden looked to the sky and his ears twitched, and Don followed suit, Devon avoided the empty gray canvas. Focusing on pushing the two forward.

"let's just hurry," Devon said between his teeth.

"I am just surprised we have only seen one spirit," Ras said eyeing the buildings, "there are usually hundreds in this area alone."

They turned on Brazos Street and Ronal cursed, and Don let out a gasp.

Devons chin felt on fire and nausea seeped into his core.

Her eyes were the deepest purple, and her skin was pale and gaunt, teeth sharp and protruding from her thin lips. Veins of purple pulsed through her white featureless body, and its poison dripped from her long talons for fingers. Her legs were black and leathery with three sharp claws at the end of them. And her wings that were once angelic and white were now the color of her poison and nearly featherless.

Behind her stood hundreds of Malevolent, Wicked Fae buzzed the sky like wasps, faceless demons, tall thin creatures with bulbs for a head, malformed hounds and serpents with wings, dripping acid from their mouths and twisted rotten corpses lumped together and screaming in agony.

"Fuck," Devon screamed. His heart began to beat out of control, his head began to swim with incoherent thoughts as he did his best to breathe through the sudden quivering of his body.

"Ready Ras?" Ronal said as he pulled out his pouch, Ras leapt in joy, spinning around, "Oh, am I."

Don drew out his sword, "I got your back," he said voice cracking.

Aiden and Devon locked eyes, his quivering slowed as he continued to breathe through it, *I got this...* he thought and Aiden nodded, sliding a thread of his power and pain into Devon, *We got this.*

Devon raised his hand into the air and smiled, "Lets fuck this bitch up."

CHAPTER 34:

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND hell

In the Void, hundreds of people stood as statues of a reality just within grasp, some wore suites, most wore expensive clothes, all had their Buds in their ears or cellphone at hand and the millisecond that froze created a tone of a hundred voices, and engines idling, shop bells in mid ring.

Everything that was life, existence and man-paused.

Don found the sensation of it all annoying, the type of annoying that coated your skin and sank a million needles into it, his shoulders were tight, and toes curled in his shoes and he was ready to be done with it. And he hoped, after breaking through this hoard of horrors before him, that they can finally go back to a reality that time existed.

Every creature snarled and dug their hooves, claws and monstrosities into the pavement, slithering between the cars and people, slowly tightening up behind the dark winged Siren before them.

“I told you we kicked her ass, had to call all her friends,” Aiden said as he perched himself to the wall next to them, Devon sneered and as he did his hand lit on fire.

Don gasped, resisting the urge to grip his scar. He wasn’t afraid of Devon, but the fire reminded him of his own screw up.

He saw them the first time they practiced, and the second time, he had to ask... and that is what changed everything...*I should have kept my mouth shut...*

He smiled at Devon when he noticed wisps of gold dance in the whites of his eyes, “you look so badass right now.”

Devon smiled brightly, “Let’s get through them...”

“I think you have to have a Rune to attack them,” Devon added.

“Not needed in the Void,” Ras spoke with gusto, “The Void is the Rune here.”

“But do I still need a Rune to call an element?” Ronal asked, sorting five stones in his hand.

“It will be wise,” Ras added, “I am eager to see what power you can produce, Consanair.”

“Let’s find out-”

Devon took a large step forward, he took a deep breath in, and a steady breath out. Don saw Aiden’s smile brighten as plumes of smoke left his mouth.

And then there was gold and bright blues with threads of white.

There wasn’t just a flame that left his brother’s hand, the entire street seemed to light up in a sudden inferno, the heat nearly unbearable, Don had to take a step further behind.

The Malevolent screamed as they burst into flames, some immediately turned to ash and the few that could hide or fly did, leaving smoke trails in the sky.

Don saw the world light on fire, and as soon as it was there, it was gone. Not a single car singed, the frozen statues of humanity in pristine condition and only black spots and ash remained where most of the army stood.

Devon began to laugh, tear rolling down his eye, “Poor things...” He mumbled, he then looked at Don and Aiden behind him, “You, ok?” He asked both and both nodded, “You took a lot,” Aiden said, “but I still have plenty of fight in me.”

The creature began to regroup, the winged Siren screeching in the sky above them, circling them like vultures.

Devon groaned.

Ronal readied his sword and he and the hound bolted towards the hoard.

They were swift, the hound disappearing in the concrete and a dozen pillars shot from the ground each as thick as it was. It tore from one pillar and in one swift motion it took out a malevolent that resembled a Daddy Long Legs with a human face as a torso. The hound boarded itself back into another pillar.

Ronal dug his sword into the ground and lifted it back out, it was armored with concrete spikes heavy enough he had to use two hands. He swung it at the creatures, tearing one in half, spraying green ooze on to the concrete.

As they charged him, he roared, raising his fisted hand and a hundred spikes of stone and rebar broke through the surface and into a more than half of them. The rest still charged, and he swung with a barbaric grace that made Don forget that he too was just another man.

“Holy fuck...” Don said without thought.

“No time to venerate,” Devon said breaking Dons focus, and his head suddenly snapped back to the sky, “Those nightmares are with her.”

Don gripped his sword, at a glance it looked like half a dozen brown vultures were surrounding the Siren but soon their bones became more apparent in the grey sky, their rotten-dry skin they used as wings flapped in the still wind, and their dead eyes looked nowhere and everywhere.

And she smiled shark teeth ready to bite down at any moment between them.

Don began to sweat, looking back at his little brother he tried his best to gently smile, to be the strong one for him, for everyone, to hold his promise to always protect and be the protector.

...

Devon felt the fires surge through his body, acid seared his mouth, pockets of burned flesh covered his body, he could feel them forming, he could feel them in Aiden. Releasing the fire from his hands was ice on a burn, he was blissfully numb but he felt an ick just under his skin he couldn't quite place, it wasn't Aiden, that he knew, something within himself felt *wrong*.

Ronal shouted as a crawler pounced on him, three concrete spikes shot from the concrete slab and into the beast before Ronal could hit the ground.

Before Ronal could stand two more were behind it and before they could reach him over a hundred black tar spikes filled their bodies. The man was an army all to his own.

Don stayed close to Devon, his sword drawn and watching the Beauty as she hovered overhead, waiting for something...

Don let out a grunt and he was suddenly on the ground, the Nightmare from the alleyway stood on top of Don swinging his rotten arms and hissing at Don.

Don swung his sword and the creature fell into a lump on top of him, jolting himself back up just as another came and swooped at him.

Aiden hissed and suddenly the connection between the two was severed, Devon looked behind him to see a Crawler snuck up behind him and Aiden's hands were very full with the creature that was six times his size.

Among the chaos, Devon fell silent, his muscles stuck as his eyes shifted to the Beauty, her grin as wide as it could be and purple eyes filled with hunger.

You know what to do...

Just raise your hand... soot stained and quivered fingers lifted to the grey sky.

Take a deep breath in, He did his best but his chest shook as she watched him.

I am Eternal, He thought of his dream and the Voice that haunted him.

I am... "That you are."

His fingers lit in the familiar flame, this time there was no pain, only the warmth that it gave off. And with it the world opened, he knew his brothers fear, Aiden's pain, Ronal's heartache and her...

Even with her maddening smile he felt something inside her deep and powerful.

"It doesn't have to be like this." He whispered, and her rage engulfed him everything that she was billowed into the world and he couldn't help but feel every thread of it.

And she came to him, and his flame unleashed on her.

He found his eyes were closed, soaked in tears as he opened them again, expecting to see her body fall to ash but he found her just past the flame.

Her wings seared off, her pale flesh now bubbled and black, one eye turned to mush and her outreached arm nothing but burned bone and that arm slammed his head to the wall forcing the air out of him.

"Please," He gasped.

"You beg?" She mocked gripping her long hot fingers around his skull, "not too much I hope, I don't want you bitter."

"No," Devon muffled and Don's sword tip left her chest, purple blood dripping on to Devon.

She roared and she kicked Don into the ground, talons twisted around his ribs, his head cracked as it hit the pavement and his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

“Please stop!” Devon screamed and the Beauty laughed.

Aiden cried out and the world wobbled, he was losing focus and growing weaker by the second.

Ronal roared as more of the Malevolent came, he was tired but he fought on, with Ras by his side.

And Don, his poor brother, was fighting for consciousness and still trying to fight the Beauty.

“Take me and leave them alone.”

His voice was steady, as his eyes locked on to her, her head rolled up and she groaned and hackled to the sky in pure glee,

“Graahhh hahaha, orrrh hahaha-”

“Deal.”

She let go of Don, and lifted her fingers brushing the long, thin razors around Devons eyes. He heard Aiden cry, Dons groans as he tried to stand but Devon looked at her, into her good eye and smiled, “I see you in there-”

Before he could finish her finger crammed through his eye, there was no pain or blood but his body felt ready to burst at the seams.

She was elbow deep, clawing her way in further into his eye socket, she climbed on his chest and buried her head in leaving her talons to do the rest of the work, until the Beauty purged herself inside him.

The last thing he heard was a demonic cry.

CHAPTER 35:

REQUIEM OF SALVATION

“It’s ok,” Don whispered, his head throbbing as he wrapped his arms around Devon, “It’s gonna be ok.”

He closed his eyes and between the stars fluttering he saw his grandmothers sliver eyes, *“You seem to like to get hurt.”* She said to him as his arm snapped back into place, he laughed but her face was stern, *“I won’t always be here to fix what you broke...”*

“We need to get you to a Maiden,” He did his best to stand them both up and Devon turned his head.

Both eyes oozed purple, drool left his mouth and he groaned with the voice of the Siren that was now inside him, he fought back the tears, “Don’t fucking give up!” he yelled.

He held the lump of the man between both arms, he looked at Aiden who just tore into the guts of the hairless bear with teeth jutting from all over its nuzzle, “Jingles!”

“I’m coming, Fighter,” He quickly leapt down from the building and jumped back up to Devons chest gripping his face with gloved hands.

Hot tears fell from his cheek, burning Devons shirt, “I have failed you both,” His face twisted and he looked at Don then back at Devon, “But you will never fail me.”

His frown was deep, and he sniffled, “Do you understand me, Donavhin.”

“What do I do Jingles, what do I do?”

“Go to the Maidens and protect him with everything you have. Sage!”

Ronal turned his head, and he quickly ran to them, "We lost?" He gasped as he looked at Devon.

Aiden jumped down, "Never give up so easily Sage, you fought an army so he can win the war."

Ronal looked confused.

"Our Consanair fights still. Take him to the Maidens, please Sage."

Ras appeared from the earth and with him another hound that rolled out of the shadows, "Little fire," it spoke with a grumble, it then looked at Don and bowed, "it seems as if I missed one battle,"

"Theres more?" Don whispered as Ronal grabbed one side of Devon, who hissed and cackled.

"Oh yes," Ras smiled, "I smell them in the Other, shall I fight them, brother?"

Ronal nodded, and both hounds seemed elated by the response.

"Look, we gotta fucking go." Don roared and the hounds both looked at Devon like it was the first time seeing him.

"My apologies," The shadow hound said, he took a step to Devon sniffed his hand and backed away when it twitched in his direction, seemingly afraid to be touched, "He will be safe with the Maidens, as he is safe with you, now we will go and keep more Cursed away."

Wisps of shadow wrapped around the creature, and it became nothing. Then Ras bowed his head "It has been an honor Son of the Champion," and quietly fell to the ground.

Don began to walk, Ronal a step behind and Devon sandwiched between them, "Where are they?" Don said, pushing forward.

"Right up the street, at the Driskoll."

"Of course..."

Don turned to look at Jingles, "Common."

The little imp picked up his pace and jumped ahead of them, he turned, face a bit distraught and eyes shifting.

"I need to go fight-"

"No, you don't! We need you."

"Donavhin, I feel something in Spirtius that I haven't felt in a long time, and I need to stop it."

"I can't lose you again-"

"You never did, Fighter."

Don choked, he looked at Ronal and Devons twisting, moaning face.

"Remember your blood," Jingles said, "Remember the Legends I told you as a child."

Don closed his eyes, voiding out Devons cries for a moment and he remembered, “It won’t matter if Devon isn’t with the Maidens if I can’t stop what’s coming,” Jingles eyes lit in a brilliant flickering red, “Remember, *Buaidh no bas.*”

Dons back arched, he dug deep to find life again amongst the pain that throbbed through his spine, “Victory or Death,” He recited and Jingles nodded.

“I must leave you in his care, my Fighter,” Jingles said as he took a step back.

“you’re not a monster...” Don found himself saying, words he wanted to say for so long but didn’t know existed.

“And neither are you.” Jingles smiled brightly, he turned and began to run, and he suddenly vanished in a plume of smoke, and with it the world quivered back to reality.

With a snap the world came to life and then the earth rumbled, the air quaked and tires squealed, and a car slammed into one of the pillars.

“Shit...” Ronal gasped out, looking at the carnage he and his companion caused as they broke away from the Void.

A crowd began to form around the charred concrete and sudden pillars, which luckily let them sneak past.

The Driskoll was only half a block away when Ronal raised his hand, “Abrams!”

Dons gut dropped and his head suddenly stuck to only a few feet in front of him, he held Devon closer and Devon leaned his head on his shoulder, purple drool dripping from his mouth and incoherent moans causing chills across his neck, “Almost there, D.” he whispered over and over again, with a lump in his throat forming and his insides ready to evaporate.

“I got him.” Chance said gently and he brushed Don aside and lifted Devon effortlessly.

Don looked at the man, his deep eyes looked worn and his face creased from the night before, they locked eyes and Don felt his soul leave his body, “Take care of him.” He jittered and Chance smiled lightly and turned away. Maive a breath behind him, now wearing a clean green dress with white flowered dotting her wrists and skirt, her hair was a mess in high bun on top of her head but her tired eyes brought his soul right back into him.

“Still in white,” her face twisted in displeasure, “We will get you changed soon.”

Don took a step forward and she took a step back, “Just after we make sure,” her eyes shifted to Ronal.

“Just make sure he’s safe, something might happen soon,” She looked back at Chance as he hurried to the Hotel entrance, “What more can happen?” Her voice was shaken, sadness filled the air between them and Don found his eyes back down on the sidewalk.

“Where’s Angel?” She said suddenly and Ronal sniffed and grabbed Dons arm.

“She’s gone.”

“Ronal-”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m fine for now.”

“Take him to a room and report to the High Priestess,” She was defeated, wiping her cheek on the edge of her sleeve, “Hurry.”

Don was pushed forward by Ronal, and they didn’t speak, he didn’t want to speak, his gut a mess and his mind worn and broken he found a small sense of calm when he entered the Driskoll and saw Devon suddenly be swarmed by a dozen Maidens, and a sadness when he saw her, the Maiden that escaped the Innocent and watched Richards get skinned alive.

She nodded to a blond man twice her height and pointed to Don, he was there in an instant, only taking a fleeting, worrisome glance at the group they left behind.

“Keagan?” Don said and he nodded.

“Don?” Don lowered his head.

“Why the fuck are you wearing *that*?”

“I wish I fuckin’ knew man.”

Keagan side eyed him, and Ronal spoke up, “He’s ok, I’ll vouch for him, Maive wanted to keep him separate for now just to be sure.”

They looked him up and down, “A change of clothes will be wise,” Keagan said.

Keagan and Ronal didn’t say much, as he was sandwiched between them the air felt strange in an already strange bubble, they went on the elevator and Keagan reached into his coat and fished out a handful of key cards picked one and pushed the 3rd floor button.

“Should we put a bag over his head or something?” Ronal thought out loud, Don huffed but lowered his head.

“Nah,” Keagan said as the doors opened and they walked down the long hall, “I think we should tie him up though,” he added as he put the key in the door lock.

“Sorry...”

Don sighed, “Can I change though?”

The door opened and the two walked in after him.

He took off his belt and tossed his sword across the room, sat down on the bed and groaned. The two whispered to each other, occasionally eyeing him.

After a few moments Ronal left the room and Keagan sat down across from him, he pulled about a foot of rope out of his coat and looked at him expectantly.

“How many pockets does that thing have?” Don put his wrists together behind him.

“Seven on the inside four on the out,” Keagan tied the rope tightly, causing Dons hands to tingle.

“Handy,” Don did his best to smile.

“I have to start asking questions now,” Keagan tied off the rope.

“Whatever I have to do.”

...

His paws dug into the hard ground below the mist as he ran. Plumes of smoke billowed from him making the Valley of the Pyres deep grey around him. Before him where the battle was raged, a bright white beacon of light illuminated the sky.

He grunted as it flickered, only for a moment, but he felt in the back reaches of his mind his little poet’s own battle being waged. *Don’t stop, I’ll be there soon, I’ll find a way to save you.* He thought to it.

He climbed the tallest of the crystal trees, flecks of white reverberated with his every move.

When he reached the top, he saw the pure chaos of the battle before him.

Giants and Fae threw all their might to the Earth Kneelers who stood their ground in the front lines. Nightmares and Sirens took to the sky where one Dragon stood alone against their torrent.

The Last Dragon took them all on with ease, and she displayed her glorious Will with grace becoming of a Daughter of Xanos.

The Hounds fought effortlessly against the massive hoard of Crawlers to the east, mounds of puss and flesh marking the hounds advance. And to the west a thousand Pooka, led by a row of Trolls began tearing through the thick line Brahgs.

Aiden let a smile slide across his wide mouth as he heard the call of a single Nightmare coming in his direction. He looked to it, its wide leather wings glided in the air as its makeshift body, twitched and shook as it bellowed in the sky.

He knew now how to get his way to the fight.

He billowed out fire from his core and with it his skin became the flame that made him whole.

The creature cried out and made his way to him. Aiden adjusted his gloves and readied himself.

With a leap he latched on to one of its hooves, its body shook as he aimed for its boney tail, digging into it. He crawled his way up the spine and finally to its neck.

It roared as Aiden twisted its leather wings to swing its way back to the battleground. It spun trying to get him off its back.

He held firm as he wrapped his arms around its neck. The skull lashed out and waned as Aiden began to set it on flames. It cried as it died gliding down to the ground where Aiden saw his next target.

He jumped from the Nightmare on to the back of the giant, digging deep in its thick hide. It cried out, lashing into its own back with gargantuan hands, barely missing him by a hair as he made his way past the thick long neck of the beast and lit the matted locks of hair on its head on flames.

It screamed, shaking the world around them, Aiden dug his paws into its eye, tearing away at it, spewing fire from his mouth.

The beast whined and moaned, arms finally falling from its own weight as the Giant buckled to his knees.

It was done and the Imp had his fun with it.

Aiden climbed on top of its scorching head and quickly surveyed the chaos around him.

A Master Crawler somehow made its way past the ranks of the Hounds and quickly ran to the pillar of light, and on the opposite end a small group of Pooka charged.

Aiden huffed letting out a thick bellow of smoke as he did. He jumped from the dying beast and quickly made his way to the faceless Crawler.

Its knarred hand an inch away from the light just before Aiden tore into the Tainted ones chest. It snarled and tried to grab him, but Aiden dug his claws into its jawbone and tossed the creature into the oncoming Pooka.

Half of the little bucktooth goblins fell under the Crawler, who snarled and cried out.

The Master Crawler didn't give though, lifted itself pus spewing from its broken mouth.

He looked to the west and his chest felt the pull he feared for thousands of years, *Not him...*

The Crawler screamed, begging for his attention, and Aiden gave it to him, matching his roar with an inferno that scorched a quarter of the battlefield.

Ras leapt from the mist laughing from the slaughter, tearing down a crawler just a few feet away.

The Blood hound ripped into a hoard of ghouls.

The Dragon roared in her victory in the sky.

"YOU WILL NOT HAVE HIM!" he screamed to his maker.

A flame billowed from his lips that lit the sky on a brilliant gold. He heard the war cries as the second wave of Malevolent approached.

And in the distance, he could feel the loom of the Prince of Roses, behind that, he refused to adhere to his commands, his madness fully consumed him.

Another flame lit the skies as he called out to the Companions of war.

One more stand, one more fight for the future, he called out the Champions call. And with it the howls and shouts of the Companions.

"Buaidh no bas!"

CHAPTER 36:

THE TRUE EVILS

She was a phantasm of her true self, as was he. They danced in the darkness somewhere between reality dreams and all realms.

She was no longer the Beauty and He was no longer Devon, they were two entities grasping control of life as they dreamed it to be, and Devon was losing.

Her brilliant shades of green and purple turned into thin tentacles that when touched, would snag that part of him away forever, a consciousness fading, everything that made him, being slowly consumed by a lust of power.

Why not just give it to her?

His form was weak, faded into the black with bits and pieces torn from him but he still lingered, still fought for a reason he didn't quite understand.

Why don't you? She mocked, reaching out and barely missing him.

He blinked and somewhere his eyes opened for a moment, "Its going to be ok." A handsome darkhaired man said, someone he loved.

She squelched out and Devon shifted, he lost his hand, *Why not just give you the other?* He looked at the nub, slightly clear skin, *Do you need it?*

His world shifted, "Jingles..." the handsome man sounded sad, *who is he?*

And something floated in between them, vivid and clear, a treasure hidden away for a short time now ready for both of them-

Her final words to him, in her senile daze, echoed in his head above all other memories. "Remember to watch Mr. Jingles for me, Devon."

Devon smiled, that one he loved, but he also hated, he was crying, causing the Beauty to take just a little bit more, two eyes seemed unnecessary anyways, he will do just fine with one in this dark world where the Beauty seemed to reign.

His eye opened, out of his control, as if someone commanded it open, another presence right in front of him and one he loved very much.

Ember eyes locked into him, a warmth soothed his body and he felt more whole, around him the sky was bright and brilliant making the deep charred skin unrecognizable, just the eyes in shaped blackness.

Aiden!

"I have failed you both," His face twisted, and he looked away then back at him, "But you will never fail me."

He didn't fail, He thought, and the Beauty let out an ethereal cry, which he ignored.

Another moment passed, A beautiful form at a lake, reaching her hand out to a young man scared and alone, *So very alone...*

And she was not beautiful, and she too was scared, and tired and hurt, something called to him, entrancing him and her, *the world hurt her...*

A tendril slithered its way into the blackness, and he watched as it came to him. And his eyes opened once again to the realm outside his own.

The comfort of the man holding him up, caused him to lean a little further into him, *Donavhin!*

The world snapped, the Beauty recoiled and he felt her become weaker by a hair, *Do you not like this realm?*

Hate boiled in her shapeless body, greens shifted to purples and Devon suddenly felt nauseous, the black shifted to a grey and his eyes opened once more.

The world was white and silver, his body relaxed and his eyes focused and the sliver took shape- *Maidens?* The Beauty hissed, one came into focus, her silver was fissured with a beautiful shifting blue, and she spoke, "Just go ahead and get yourself possessed, D. Asshat."

He laughed in the darkness, *"Didn't have much of a choice Gael!"*

Gael! His mind suddenly snapped, he felt the smallest thread of life sew into his body and a pain in the back of his head was gone.

His eyes opened again, darting around to find her, “Val...” He managed to speak, and a woman coated in silver smiled above him, “I’m here...” She sniffed, “Finish what you started, Handsome.”

Silver flooded his eyes, the Siren cried out and so did he, he felt the sickness pour out of him and his body locked with her trying to gain control.

His arm flailed up only to be stopped by his own will, Valerie didn’t flinch, she smiled gently and began to hum.

He closed his eyes again, feeling his chest heave and his body quiver, he looked deep within himself and looked upon her.

She roared but he felt no fear, or anger. Only sadness.

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” He told her once more, and she cried out in response.

He wrapped his will around him like armor, he forced himself whole again and she did the same- the formless miasma created his form, of a body that was never truly her, she roared.

And he charged.

CHAPTER 37:

A Well-placed DAGGER

His knuckles were sore but only slightly scratched so he kept it in his pocket, gripping on tightly to a Rune. *Stupid*, Ronal thought as he saw the dent on the elevator door slide away as it opened.

Angel would have been furious, he thought as he walked past the stairs and only giving a slight nod to the reception who paid him little mind, *“Going to throw a temper tantrum over me?”*

Yeah... and she would have most likely punched the wall in response.

A smile slid across his face and he was suddenly holding back tears, *What would she have done if it was me who died?*

He tucked himself in the smallest corner, tightly closing his eyes and avoiding how in the years they’ve known each other they only got mad at each other for letting the world get to them, *and now the world has destroyed her...*

He took a deep quivered breath and opened his eyes again, breaking out of the corner and taking a step towards the now open door.

“Hey,” Trevor appeared from the threshold.

“Hey.”

“You doin’ ok, man?”

Ronal nodded, easing his way into the room and saw a swarm of Maidens around Devon at the other side of the room. The High Priestess was standing closely behind Valerie who rested his head in her lap with a pillow.

“Are you sure?”

Leave me the fuck alone, “Yeah.”

“If you need anything I’m here.”

“Thanks.”

Chance grabbed the attention of the High Priestess and pointed at Ronal, she stood, and Maive suddenly appeared behind Valerie, eyes shifting to silver.

The priestess eyes faded back to her blue and she gave a gentle smile, “Ronal I-”

He raised his hand, fighting another sudden lump, “I must report to you, High Priestess.”

“Ronal, you must-”

“Please.”

She let out a sigh, “Proceed then.”

He told her everything from when they left to the moment, they got back into the Driskoll, he saved her the strife of knowing about the dent he made to the elevator door.

“Steve sent me the message so I wonder if *they* got ahold of his phone and sent that to try and...” Trevor looked at both of them, his lips thinned tightly and he huffed, “I think we should be more careful on cellphone usage.”

The High Priestess nodded, glancing over at Devon who let out a hellish screech, “Do you think they followed you?”

Ronal shook his head, “If they did then they would have to know their way around the Void, but Priestess, they’re only blocks away, we have to leave as soon as possible.”

She nodded, eyes still stuck on Devon, “Go back to Keagan and Donavhin and start asking questions, I want to know as much as we can,” her eyes seemed troubled, and she busied her hands with her skirt, “we must get the Malevolent out of him before we can move.”

“How long will that take?” Trevor asked looking at the group.

“It’s hard to be sure, but possessions must be handled within an hour and it’s already been twenty. He is a Caid and surrounded by a Coven worth of Maidens, although weak should still suffice. But an hour is good, he will be healed in an hour...”

She shook her head and looked at the two, “We shall begin preparations to depart, Trevor-”

“Actually, I would like to help question the Innocent, no offense Ronal but you need to rest and having an outsider perspective can prove to be helpful... He did save your life.”

“Very well,” The Priestess said, “Ronal rest, that’s an order, mourn her the way she deserves to be mourned.”

Ronal stepped away and he found himself sitting next to the door, watching Devon fight for his life and the Maidens around him.

Some plan, Borse...

Ammore came to him and spoke, but he hardly heard her. But she suddenly grabbed him and it was as if he felt nothing, tears fell from his eyes but he didn’t cry, she gripped him tightly weeping openly with Caitlyn by her side, weeping too.

But Ronal felt nothing.

...

The room was the most elegant hotel Don ever stayed in, the carpet was patterned in gold rimmed deep red carpet, the walls were an eggshell white contrasting the black headboards of the two beds; each pillowcase had the letter D embroidered in gold.

It left a weird texture in his mouth, like eating toast coated in hard butter, everything was nice, and pretty, but entirely too much, especially now, with his hands tied tightly behind his back as he fought the headache and nicotine fit his whole body was having.

Don talked to Keagan still, and Keagan listened intently, “...they must have billions worth of tech right under our feet, and there’s no telling who they have in their pockets with Goode in control.”

Keagan hissed, “Makes sense that Ashkoon would be loaded too, Borse was.” His bloodshot eyes looked past the window, and he sighed, “I feel like Ronal and I were the only ones who took this whole thing seriously, even Borse was dismissive.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and pulled one out, noticing Don he pulled out another one, “I grabbed the smoking room.” He smiled brightly, and lit both the cigarettes, “You know your brother owes me a pack by now.”

They both laughed, and Keagan carefully put the butt in Dons mouth for him, “Yeah, I’m just glad he had you two, no telling what would have happened if they tried to get me to recruit him.”

“I’m sure it would have happened at one point.”

Don took a deep drag and blew out the side of his mouth, "Why did you do this?" Keagan asked.

Gotta get used to answering that.

"When they took me down there, I thought I was going to see some weird ritual with a bunch of old men and be done with it. I just wanted to do the charity help whoever I can out and be around like-minded people."

"What did you see exactly?"

A knock came to the door and Don puffed in, leaning back on a tendril of smoke that caught his eye. Keagan stood and looked back expectantly so Don spoke.

"I saw my best friend skin a woman alive."

Keagan stood there for a moment, he took a long heavy drag and his face twisted into a mask of rage.

The door knocked again.

He closed his eyes and smiled, "You saw Dr. Richard's die?"

Don nodded, "I saw the snow leopard run and hide," he sniffed, "the whole thing felt wrong... I kept my mouth shut." A heavy tear fell- Don blamed it on the smoke.

Keagan took a deep sigh, his rage subsided but his brow was still heavy, "I know you were in the Lions Den so to speak, thank you for not saying anything, you saved Gael."

The door knocked again.

They stood there for a moment, Don wanted to say so much more but he couldn't find the words, Keagan took his Cigarette from his lips and ashed it in the ashtray, "You can go ahead and put it out, please."

Keagan did, then went to the door.

"Thank you," he said, quietly just under a heavy rasp on the door.

He opened the door, and a man appeared next to him, his hair was dark and slicked back tightly, he was thin but fit and he had a one-sided smile as they both looked at him.

"Trevor, this is Donavhin McNeil, he's Devon's older brother and one of the long-lost Nobles."

Trevor reached out his hand, "Pleasure," he quickly balled his fist and laughed, "oops."

"How's Devon doing?"

Trevor shrugged, "I'm sure he's fine he has all the Maidens around him taking shifts."

Don sighed, closing his eyes and leaning back on the bed frame and propping his foot on the bed, *He's safe...*

Now for mom and dad.

“What about my parents?”

“What about them?” Trevor asked.

“His father was the last General,” Keagan said as he took a puff, “they’re safe, we have Companions keeping an eye on all of them.”

“Oh,” Trevor rolled his eyes, “Well did you learn anything fun while you were away at camp?”

Don opened his eyes and chuckled, “Not a lot, the guy that wanted me to join talked a lot but I don’t know all the secrets.”

Keagan put out his cigarette next to Don on the nightstand and squatted down looking up at both of them, “yeah, nothing too out of the ordinary, Agents, General Goode, Ashkoon, a big chunk of info is their base seems to be right under the capitol and brimming with the latest tech.”

Trevor’s smile dropped, “Oh no.” He looked at them both and sighed, “That’s big news.”

He took off his coat and tossed it on the bed at Don’s feet, “What’s your friend’s name? I take it ya’ll were close?”

Don nodded, looking at the coat, “Knew him since we were kids, our dads knew each other, but I don’t know how.”

“Name?” Trevor looked grim, “Sorry, playing bad cop.” he unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“No worries, man, I get it. I’m not going to do anything, I promise.”

“Good for you, Name?”

“Nori-”

Keagan stood up, “Trevor, I think you should leave for now,”

“Should I?” his brown eyes jolted between them.

“There’s a loser downstairs that everyone worships, for no fucking reason. And this *himbo* glides in here and everyone’s so ready to forgive the fact he watched their precious priestess get skinned alive just because he’s a fucking McNeil. Sorry!”

Don was stuck, staring at this man in front of him, his fist balled up and sweat beginning to form on his brow. Keagan’s mouth was agape.

“Close your mouth Keagan, No one fucking likes you.”

“Dude,” Don grunted.

“You,” he wagged his finger at Don, “Don’t you dare say a word, you and your brother ruined it!” He adjusted his shirt, on his neck a crescent moon.

The familiarity struck Don like a brick, *where did I see that?*

“I had this all planned out for years, and you two losers walk into that bar, and he grabs Valerie from me. Sorry, but I was so ready, so *damn* close to fucking some filthy witch pussy before I-”

He stopped; mouth shut his eyes scan the both of them.

Don blinked, “You’re an Agent.”

Keagan bolted towards the man, and slammed him against the wall, bringing the framed mirror crashing down.

Trevor began to laugh, punching Keagan’s ribs and Keagan kneeing the guy in the gut, they both grunted and fell to the ground, still exchanging blows.

Don scrunched his knees up as close as he could and bent his shoulders back and put his feet through his arms. He thanked Charlie, the yogi he dated last year for showing him how flexible he really was.

He stood on his feet just as Trevor did, A dagger in his hand raised high, “No!” he screamed, and Keagan kicked him to the ground.

Don did his best to try and break his knot, Keagan was struggling the dagger inches away from his rib, Trevor laughing with wide maddened eyes, “A little help, Don?”

“You’re the one that wanted to tie me up, man.”

The dagger slid into Keagan’s side, slowly.

Don ran to them, falling on top and pushing Trevor away.

His gut felt cold, and his leg twitched, he could do nothing but gasp as ice covered his body.

Trevor laughed, rolling him off of him and taking a long look at him, “we were all proud of Nori for nabbing a McNeil.”

“And Ashkoon wanted to see your reaction when he skinned that bitch alive.”

Don looked at the dagger in his belly, red began to stain the pearl white shirt he wore, *what a perfect color*, he thought, as he became unbearably thirsty.

“I can’t believe you were so, gullible, hahaha...”

He flicked the dagger at his gut and Don screamed as his world turned white and ears began to ring. The unbearable pain shocked his entire body, “Can’t wait to tell Nori I stabbed his little boy toy.”

He stood up, squatting down and whispered in Keagan’s ear, Keagan’s eyes were distant, he gasped as blood dribbled down his lip into the carpet.

A tired worn hand lifted, and Trevor flicked it out of the way, “Oh, and Don?”

He stood up and kicked Keagan, bubbles of blood left his mouth and he gasped, and those bright eyes switched like a light to sudden earth-shattering rage.

“We’re going to rip your brother to shreds the second we get our hands on him.”

He walked over Keagan, grabbed his coat, patted down and put it on, he looked at the two of them and tisked at their moaning, “Pathetic,” he mumbled as he walked to the door, he took one more glance, cleared his throat and adjusted his posture.

The door slammed shut behind him.

CHAPTER 38:

LADY BIRD'S BEAUTY

She was silent as she fought him, not a grunt or breath left her shape. She moved in their arena of his consciousness as a swan would fly.

He was in mud, heavy and weak, awkward and unsure, all he could do was defend, and every time he did the poison would leach into him a little more, and she would take a sliver.

He tried, feeling tiny threads of life drip into him, threads that Valerie gave him, and another familiar form just behind her, he was safe for the first time in his life.

The Beauty came, long thin fingers reaching out and he moved, she managed to grab his wrist and with a twist, his hand shattered.

He ran, looking at his nub he saw the poison leach from it.

What do I do?

Run?

Devon blinked, and he saw Valerie, for a moment, tears streaming down her face.

I always ran...

His pace slowed, the dark world around him hummed her tune.

Why?

He turned to the Beauty, and she slowed her pace, hunching over, shifting her head size to side and growling.

When he blinked, millions of faces appeared screaming in agony, distorted in pain and filled with suffering.

The flame in his palm grew tenfold...

He readied for his attack, they circled each other, cautious but aware.

Little Devon pushed it out and a ball of fire roared to his brother. It hit Donny's arm and he began to scream, flailing his arm around...

I took it all from him...

He held on to a bright red burn on his arm. Half of his shirt had been burned away by the flame.

The Beauty lunged but he dodged, he felt still and aware, alive as if he never needed to sleep again.

I took it all away from her...

She spun around. "I will kill you if you ever come near me or my family again," she spat...

... Mr. Jingles let out a cry just before he vanished in a plume of smoke...

Because of me, my family was torn apart.

Is that why I ran?

He lunged to her and she changed into the Miasma again, only to resolidify a step behind him. Tearing into his side with her teeth.

He didn't feel the pain, nor the poison, he smiled at her, gently as he found his balance once again.

"It's ok."

He looked to the little boy in his memories, "We don't have to run anymore."

He took a deep breath in, steady and calm, He felt his fingers graze soft skin and she leaned into it.

"I'm not going to run."

His shoulders eased, and the flood came, like his dreams it seared the form he took it and he became whole, white and gold coated his vision and he felt everything once more.

He became whole again, and the Beauty screamed out in pain.

"Leave my body," He commanded, and she squelched and hissed.

Recoiled and bare, face hidden behind long fingers she hunched down at the brilliant white around him.

"I am sorry," She whispered, "I cannot."

"Then I'm sorry..."

He reached out to her, and she took his hand, the poison dripping into him, he smiled gently and she wept her tainted tears.

"...but I must."

He closed his eyes and pushed what was him inside of her, the poison soon vanished, and her veins of purple turned gold.

Her form evaporated and the Miasma spread and dissipated, there in a world of white and gold a tiny pearl appeared that was once her the Beauty.

“Thank you.”

He wrapped his hands around the pearl and with his will it turned to crumbs.

The Beauty was dead, and with her death the white faded leaving behind shards of gold in his black world.

He folded his legs and looked at it, his soul, shattered and beautiful.

He tried his best to open his eyes again but they were glued shut, he couldn't move his hands or body, or make a sound, it was him in the darkness with his shattered soul.

Finally, alone.

And how he wished he wasn't.

...

“He did it,” Valerie whispered, breathing a sigh that the whole room could hear.

Ronal stood up and made his way to the little Coven around him, it was Caitlyn's turn to support her but Valerie was the center of power for the whole forty minutes Devon was possessed, and it showed.

The High Priestess stride past him and into her daughter's arms weeping openly and smiling brightly, it was Kyl that stood up and raised his fist, the first sign of happiness the guy showed since the night before, “Yeah!” he pointed, “That's my dude!”

Half the room jumped, and the other half cheered with them, but Valerie was still serene, keeping her eyes on Devon.

Ronal looked at her and then Caitlyn, he said the words they were thinking, “His soul is shattered?”

Caitlyn nodded, with a heavy sniff, “I don't think were strong enough to rebind it, and he can't do it either, not alone.”

“I can do it, I'm going to do it.” Valerie said wiping the sweat from Devons face.

“Valerie-” The High Priestess shut her mouth at her daughters glare, “If it takes me all my life I will do everything I can to hear his voice again.”

She dared look at the Maidens around her and they nodded, Mavie put her hand on her shoulder quietly.

“Can he be moved?” Chance said as gently as he could, the High Priestess nodded, “He is in a coma, we must be careful still, but it will be as if he was sleeping.

“We should not overstay our welcome then High Priestess,” He said, “we should go to the Haven.”

“What’s that?”

Trevor looked winded, his neat slicked back hair a mess and his eyes wide.

“Is that where everyone is supposed to meet up?”

He looked around, “Sorry...”

“No, just another word for it.” Chance looked curious.

“Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where the fuck are we going next?”

His posture was hunched, his eyes twitched, “Sorry, But I gotta KNOW, I gotta know.”

Ronal took a step closer, “Why?”

“Why? you fuckin’ nerd, you retard... Figure it out! There it is! Smart boy.”

Ronal’s white knuckle grip on his hilt gave it away, “what are you doing, Trevor?”

“I’m tired man, tired of playing this game alright, I’m so close to winning this thing, so just tell me where the-” he stuck his fingers in quotes, “Haven, is so I can kill the stragglers.”

Ronal glanced back to see Ammore holding back Gael, her body shifting, or rather trying to shift into the snow leopard, “Keagan...” Her distorted voice moaned as tears fell from her face.

Ammore had her grip tight, and Gael was going nowhere.

“Yeah,” Trevor said noticing, “him and the himbo are dying upstairs. Maybe already dead,” he shrugged.

Chance drew out his blade, and most of the Knights followed.

“All of you at once? How is that fair?”

Trevor laughed and as if that was their command, three dozen men in white marched in the already cramped room.

“Let’s have some fun!”

CHAPTER 39:

WRATH OF KNIGHTS

Gael was swift, as her body finally changed she was a wild force in the cramped small room, she bounced from the walls and dug into any bit of flesh she could find, and luckily none of the Innocent were armored.

They were a cluster of white, long white coats with white slacks and white shirts all embroidered in silver and the falcon crest embroidered in the back, they all wore white faceless masks and loose-fitting hoods.

They were not human, and Ronal wondered, as he drove his blade in one's gut, if they ever were.

Trevor hid in the back corner, sword in hand and he did nothing but look around and smile at the slaughter, twitching his wrist at his side and bouncing his feet, like he was going to do something given the opportunity.

Ammore swung her ax clearing an Innocents body of the burden of his head, Chance cleaved a man's leg clean off and Kyl stood tight and ready in front of the High Priestess along with four other knights.

Ronal drew inspiration from Gael, trying to be as swift as he could he ducked and weaved past the cult of Innocent, finding opportunities to stab where he could but his eyes were on Ronal.

He was the one that told them to go to the lake, he was the one who planned his capture and Angel's death and Ronal knew he would be the one to watch the life leave his eyes.

An Innocent flailed his sword, barely missing Ronal's face, and in term Ronal severed his arm from his shoulder and sliced his ribs. The man fell in anguish but Ronal persevered.

He was five steps away and Gael was ripping the face off an Innocent, while another was raising his sword behind her, Ronal sliced his throat coating them both in his blood.

The blood-soaked Huntress looked at him, "Thank you, Sage." She was gone like the wind, leaving him to lock eyes with the murderer Trevor.

"You wanna go?" Trevor mocked, tossing his sword between his hands.

Ronal smiled brightly, as much as he craved to watch him squirm, to watch him suffer with as many stabs as he could get in, Tristan Lioncrest rang in his ears, *Quick, precise, efficient.*

"You already lost."

Trevor lunged at him, and Ronal side stepped, slicing his wrists and his sword fell limp.

"Wait-" Trevor gasped as Ronal slid his blade just through his diaphragm, air and blood spewed from him as he fell to his knees.

He lifted his limp hands and Ronal knocked them out of the way, *I can enjoy this a little bit.* He thought in his rage.

He grabbed his thick black hair as hard as clay, bent his neck back and sliced his neck clean from him.

He lifted the head up in the air, mouth still moving and working out if it was dead or not and he roared like the monster he became.

He screamed for Angel as his rage engulfed him and the madness spread as the Knights roared with him, they were outnumbered, they will likely die, but the got the bastard that started it.

...

Keagan gasped *Not yet.*

Blood spilled out his mouth, his body shook, and he couldn't breathe.

His ears rang but he was still able to make out the noise of gasping next to him, "...Don..."

His voice was weak as he lifted himself to his knees.

"Yeah." Don said unmoved.

We should be dead...

He crawled his way to Don and looked at the blade that looked like it reached his spine "You with me?"

"I... I don't know." Don laughed suddenly, "Everything is white."

"Don't give in. Focus on the now." Keagan inched closer to Don.

"How about that fucker who did this." He held on to the hilt of the dagger in his gut. His breath getting heavy, "If I blackout wake me up."

"Wait-" Keagan grunted, but the blade was already leaving Dons stomach, it dropped to the floor as his body went limp.

Keagan put his hand on the wound, "Don. Don. DON!" He slapped the man in the face and his eyes shot open. "I think I died," his voice shook with quivering blue lips.

Keagan quickly grabbed his coat and tore off enough to wrap around Dons waist, "Don't die...don't die..." Don said repeatedly. Eyes focused as he watched Keagan and tried to help, "Man, what cool coat." He laughed, then groaned.

He took some fabric and laid on his side next to Don, with shaking hands he stuffed the hole in his ribs and groaned out, Don's bleeding stopped, and looking at him he looked like he would still live.

"We need to get to the Maidens."

To Gael, please be alive...

Don nodded as he slowly rolled up, dagger back in his hand. He took a few heavy breaths and stood up, then helped Keagan to his feet.

"You Knights are a lot tougher than it seems," Don said still a little shaken.

"Let's see how tough you McNeil really are," Looking at the quivering dagger in Don's hand.

Dons voice a bit stronger, "yeah... let's see how strong a Son of the Champion can be."

Keagan smiled, "Let's."

The hallway was empty, it wasn't until they reached the elevator they heard the screaming from downstairs, Keagan unsheathed his sword and both focused on the elevator door.

Keagan pressed against the side as it rolled open and Don was smart enough to do the same, he peeked.

"Clear"

They both went in, and pressed against wall closest to the door, the pristine and polished to a shine door was smooth except for a knuckle deep dent at eye level.

“You know how to check sides and cover?” Don said, voice firm, Keagan nodded.

“Wanna take point? My vision keeps getting blurry and my leg is killing me.”

Keagan nodded ignoring the copper taste on his lips, “On my lead.”

What’s keeping him alive?

The elevator door opened and he peeked, a man in white stood hand on sword, Don looked the opposite.

One they both signed.

Me, left, you right, he signed.

Don was swift, not a breath later and his dagger was in the neck of the Innocent and Keagan stabbed his sword through the one left standing before he could even glance.

Keagan stepped out, sword close to him and Don was close to his tail, hand on his shirt.

The lobby was a blood bath, the two receptionists had their throats slit behind their desks and three guests laid on the floor bleeding out.

Another Innocent happened to walk by but Don threw his dagger in the mans chest and he fell in a matter of seconds.

He ran up and picked up the mans sword, “Don?”

Don ripped the mask off and gasped, “Reggie?” He held the man’s hand as life left him.

An Innocent broke from the corner and Keagan sliced his throat open, blood spewing into the polished tile, “You ok, Don?” Keagan asked, trying not to be callused.

“He made his choice,” Don whispered as he pulled out Trevor’s Dagger, “Let’s go.”

Don leaned on Keagan’s shoulder, hilted his dagger in his belt look and holding a tight grip on his sword.

They reached the door, and there poor Ameia lied with her belly opened and eyes long gone. A few steps behind her the security guard lay with several stab wounds.

Poor woman...

He turned the nob and his stomach twisted.

My ears won’t stop ringing...

It was a slaughter, the carpet soaked in blood squished under his boot.

Gael...Where are you?

Twenty Innocent laid dead, ten more still alive and half as many Knights.

Chance swung his sword, battered and bruised with a slash across his chiseled face.

Ammore cleaved her ax as Caitlyn and two other Maidens stayed tight behind, holding a wound on her thigh.

Kyl was missing half his fingers on his left hand but that didn't stop him keeping off two Innocent away from Devon and the Maiden's around him.

Ronal, dredged in blood drove his sword deep into an Innocents skull.

A Knight had his skull bashed open with a blade, falling to the ground in spasms.

So many dead.

He finally saw her, leaping on the back of an Innocent and pushing him to smash his face onto the wall, he couldn't control himself as he screamed, "Gael!"

Two of the Innocent stopped and turned around. Keagan's blade was inside one faster than he could raise his sword, the other was already on the ground by Trevor's dagger, by Don's hand.

He was already charging, racing to the last few that stood between him and His Maiden. Don taking out one more with ease.

Keagan drove his blade into the chest of an Innocent, and his body gave, his arms felt weak and he fell to the ground as the man did.

"Gael." He smiled as he saw her silver eyes inside Kittys body, "My beautiful Kitty."

She came to him, as the last Innocent fell, he raised his hand and she accepted it, blood soaked cheek still warm and filled with life, "My beautiful Knight," She said as she changed, "Can we rest now?" her nude body fell into him and he wrapped himself around her, her eyes closed he felt the tingle of love pulse through him, and the gentle nudge of the healing of his lung.

"Save your strength, cupcake."

"No," she whispered as they collapsed in blood.

"Don!" he said but Maive was already at his side, him kneeling and she took his cheek to her fingertips.

"Maybe not the last time..." She said to Don as tears rolled down his cheek.

He gripped on to Gael tightly, and his eyes glided to Devon, and there they stuck as he watched his friend sleep on Valeries lap.

CHAPTER 40:

PRINCE OF ROSES

The wet red floor and smell of copper made Don queasy, but he kept his mouth shut, not 15 minutes ago he was moments away from dying until Maive touched him and healed his stomach wound, and now she busied herself with Chance across the room from him.

Chance kept eying him, but Don didn't know how to react, it looked like Chance will have a scar now, it will suit him, like a thorn to a rose.

His stomach hurt, but nothing compared to what it was and the pain in his leg was just a tingle now that she said she would fix when she feels a bit stronger.

He was rubbed raw, and everyone in this room was too. He was squatted down leaning against the wall looking at Devons chest slowly moving up and down.

I need to call Mom.

He didn't want to, maybe it could wait, maybe it was safe to keep them distant. He was safe, and Devon was safer, that's all that mattered and putting them in the middle of this when the Innocent deemed them not a threat

seemed like a worse idea than him putting on the white uniform.

The High Priestess wandered around giving orders to everyone, apparently, they were leaving soon and everyone was ready to leave.

Valerie turned her head to him, silver eyes glancing at him, but she said nothing, *please don't hate me*, he thought. She closed her eyes just enough to leave slivers of silver and went back to focusing on her task.

Maybe she didn't realize he was behind her, but he was glad she let him be as close as he was, because he didn't want to be any further away from Devon.

Keagan and Ronal looked in his direction and whispered, they were doing that for some time and that was another notch to make him feel uneasy.

Keagan left the room and Ronal began to walk towards him, "We decided to keep you," his smile was faint, "but we have about ten minutes to get out of here before someone starts getting suspicious."

Don sighed in relief, "We're going to go get the cars and we want you to stay here and keep an eye on things, mostly Devon and Valerie."

Don nodded, "Is that ok with you?" He said to Valerie, and she nodded, giving a very slow and stern "Absolutely."

Ronal was already barking his orders and Don with another Knight with dreadlocks and an ax stained in blood and Chance were the only ones left with the Maidens.

It was silent enough to hear the wetness of everyone's steps as they came to encircle Valerie and Devon. The Knight with the Ax squatted next to Don.

"Did you learn how to fight with the Innocent?"

Don looked at her, she held air of familiarity he was getting used to, "Yeah, but it kinda came naturally, I think I used to practice when I was younger and just don't remember."

She nodded, "what the mind forgets the body remembers," She pointed to the mass of bodies, "they didn't know what they were doing though."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they were trainees still," Don admitted, "I wish I knew more but according to the headless asshole over there, they knew who I was more than I do."

She stuck her hand out, "Ammore," He took it, "Don."

"I know," her smile was soft, "Don't over think it, we'll get it fixed soon."

He smiled back fighting the urge to rub his temple, "I think I remember you, you were--"

The air suddenly felt cold, a weight bared on his shoulders and putrid sweetness wafted into the room.

Valeries eyes shot open, her mother close beside her and every Maiden gasping, Ammore was on her feet, Chance was as well and taking his que, Don stood, holding the dagger that nearly killed him tightly.

Children of Madiline, be at ease...

The voice was haunting, a gust rustling a dry barren tree, *I come, and I am...*

The air distorted and grey leached from the corner of the room, and then he appeared.

His robes were long and black, lined with what was once a brilliant red, now stained with time, his feet were thin, peeking from his robe and he moved slow as an old man would, but his posture was absolute.

...I am... your salvation.

His face was dried and as thin as leather, eyes hidden in darkened sockets that were once a beautiful green now faded behind a milky white. His teeth were yellow and his lips gone, he was stuck in a constant smile as mist rolled out of it.

He wore a crown where his hair would be, draped dried roses lined his skull and rolled down his back and shoulders.

Don let out a gasp, but not at the monstrosity before him, he took a step, but Chance gripped him tightly and close, "Jingles!"

Mr. Jingles hung from his bony hands by the horn, and the other one severed, his eyes weakly blinking as he swatted at the creature coming closer to him.

The corpse raised Jingles to his face, "So you have a name now, Little Fire, how sweet."

"Leave..." Jingles tried to kick him, "Leave... Devon alone."

The Corpse looked at the group, looking at Dons dagger his head tilted, "Do you not recognize me, my Children of the Wild, it is I, Arwin, I come to claim Borse's throne, I come so we can exact revenge on..."

His head twitched, his shoulders twisted and he groaned, "Assshhkkoon..."

The High Priestess broke between the three of them, "Arwin, you have blessed us!"

"Maiden, you must be the Priestess, Beautiful...Beautifuuuul."

"I am," She bowed deeply, "please, may you tell us what your intentions are?"

"My apologies," Arwin bowed, "I come to take the new Caids soul and claim his body as my own."

The air wavered around Devon, a thin silver film wrapped closely around him, the High Priestess's eyes were silver.

"I am sorry, Prince of Roses, I cannot allow that. I beg of you though, for we are weak and tired, train him, heal us. So, the Children of the Moon can be whole again."

Arwin looked around the room, hollow eyes scanning and free hand reaching to his face, "No, No, this cannot be, this will not suffice!"

Jingles was thrown towards them, Don was immediately next to him, trying to lift himself up but failing.

"Take it easy," he said to Jingles.

"Don't even think about it," Jingles said weakly, but Don was already on his feet.

The grip on his dagger was steady as he pointed it at the sack of bones in front of him, "Do not FUCK with my family!"

"Is that a McNeil! Ah I see the Champions eyes so strong and pure, I see your soul as vibrant as the stars!" Don tried to take a step, but he couldn't move, his eyes shifted behind him and Valerie shook her head, slowly and with rage, he knew she was using her will to stop him somehow.

"Do not worry Maidens and Knights, I will not hurt you, I only wish for a second chance,"

"Do you want," He twitched and grimaced, "ASHkoon gone?" His spindly hands reached out begging, hollowed sockets peering at Devon, "I have waited, and now is my chance, it is..." He twitched, "FaTED, that I take the boy."

"I am deeply sorry, Master, but that will not happen." The Priestess voice was stern, she was a statue of absolution.

"You will see..."

The room became blistering cold, Don suddenly felt tired his body heavy he still stayed steady with his dagger up.

Everything turned grey, the room dimmed and Arwin, the Prince of Roses lifted his robed hands, freeing the bones he called arms and everyone dropped to the ground.

"I have spent too much time in this decrepit form, Wildlings. Eons I was free, watching the beautiful cycle fulfil itself over and over again. Vivacious and whole we can journey the cosmos once more, but not like this."

Everyone bowed hands glued to the ground, stuck like puppets on strings for him to control, and he raised himself, robes an inch off the ground, "This body, will no longer do."

Don's head was lowered but he still could make out a sword barely missing and a whine of a cat, Keagan screamed out, and so did the other Knights, but they too became glued to the ground.

"Get away from him." He croaked out and had to gasp for air, his dagger firm in his hand, he lifted and locked his elbows.

"Get the fuck away from him!" He raised his knee and twisted his head, The High Priestess's shield still held firm over Devon.

The Caid of Death gave Don a passing glance, Don flexed every muscle in his body, he felt a vessel pop in his eye, his ears popped, his veins bulged from his skin.

He lifted himself to his knees.

Raised his dagger.

Arwin slid his boney finger across the shield, and it dissipated in a mist.

"Please stop this!" Valerie's face was soaked in tears, her face pressed against Devon she cried out, "Please Arwin."

"My child," He said, "all for not, this pain will pass, as his will too, and I will guide us to salvation once more."

"Please..." She looked up, silver eyes sobbing.

"Don't weep, my Child."

Don drove the dagger into his back, he hissed and groaned and looked back at Don.

He was suddenly in the air, "You fool."

"Not again!" Don begged.

"We can work together!" The High Priestess cried out.

Another throw of a sword and Don and Ronal were on top of each other, The dagger at his back slid out and fell to the ground next to them.

"Be at ease! The twilight of suffering will come to an end and this act will usher in a new dawn, as it was told, as it will be promised," he now stood above Devon, mist dripping from his mouth and eyes, he raised his hand and in a blink, he was gone, the darkness loomed no more.

Valerie cried out, "Help!"

All Maidens stood and scurried to her, Gael limped past him in the nude and Ronal shuffled from under him and clumsily tripped over the bodies between him and everyone was there in an instant.

Jingles however stood and limped his way to Don, “Come Don, I need you to speak for me.”

“What?”

Jingles held his little arm, his horn was cracked and the other one gone entirely, his bone was exposed on his leg and his poor eyes screamed sorrow.

“They can’t see me or hear me like you and Devon can, I need you to speak for me ok.”

“Why...”

“I have a plan.”

Don stood up, his body weak yet again, and Aiden lead the way, “Repeat after me, ok.”

Don nodded.

“Mr. Jingles has an idea, and he needs me to talk to you guys,” Don fought the pain and all eyes stuck to him and Gaels moved to Jingles.

“I need you all to understand-”

All eyes shifted to the Little Fire.

“We are listening,” The High Priestess spoke softly.

Jingles froze, he looked at Don then at Gael who smiled beyond the tears, “we see you now.”

Jingles looked at the waivered breath of Devon, He was struggling and fighting again, but he was still him.

“Hi,” he said sniffing.

And he broke away from Don, taking slow and heavy steps closer to Devon, trying to move quickly as he could. They broke for him, wet eyes looking at him until he made his way to Devons chest, and he propped himself on top.

“Hi...” She said, face soaked and eyes heavy.

His eyes wandered the room, and then stuck to Devon, “I need to ask a favor, my Moonbeams,”

“Anything for you,” Gael said raising her hand to him, he recoiled but she gently pushed her finger on the tuft of his hair, he purred.

“We need to save my poet,” flame lit eyes locked on to Devon, “Let that be my peace.”

The room was quiet, his ever shifting red and yellow eyes met a sea of silver, then finally at Don.

A warmth washed over Don as they locked eyes, an unstoppable force that coated every bit down to his belly.

Not a drop of will went through him and he knew it.

It was pure, and beautiful.
It was Mr. Jingles.

...

Thin veins of purple leached into the thick gold that was shattered around Devon.

His soul was poisoned and shredded, and he was slowly, painlessly dying.

Valerie dripped as much Will as she could into Devons core, and slowly moving the shards and golden mists closer together, and Devon helped as much as he could understand.

He helped move them with just the thought of wanting to be whole again, but that did little to no good.

He was a broken vase, and he was beginning to lose hope.

He was, however, afraid to stop, as he did, a coldness and peace washed over him and he had to pull himself away from it, and each time was getting harder and the peace was becoming more enticing.

He was truly in between everything, and he was alone, and it was everything he never wanted to experience, he knew that now, as his mind body and soul floated between everything and a nihilistic peace. He wasn't meant to be alone, and all he wanted now was to be whole.

Through the thread that was Valerie he felt the panic that she tried very hard to repress, it was hard to avoid on a thinning rope that connected him to the outside world.

"I'm still here." He spoke to that thread, hoping the panic was her worry for him.

In a breath he felt it, an umbra just above him, cold and ancient, it seeped out an anguish that tainted the marrow of his bones.

And then he saw him, a figure of horror cloaked in faded robes, his face a mummified version of the image Devon saw the Night before and who Borse spoke about so prominently.

"Arwin?"

"Yes." Mist spewed from his mouth and dissipated just below his feet, his sunken eyes smiled in such a way his mouth could not, Arwin, the Caid of Death, looked just as hungry as the Siren.

Devon felt a sudden sadness, "Ashkoon did that to you?"

Arwin nodded with creaking bones, “But soon I will be whole again.”

“I can help.”

“You will be of great help.”

“What do I need to do?”

His bony hand broke free from his robe and lifted, “Give over your broken soul and allow me to host your body.”

His shattered soul shifted to the Caid of Death, illuminating his putrid leather face in a sea of darkness.

Devon, on instinct alone commanded his soul to stay.

“Strong already,” Arwin mused, “but you will never be strong enough for what is to come, as has been promised.”

“Then train me to be strong,” as Devon began to struggle, the thread from Valerie grew thicker, more Maidens wrapped their will around hers and fed it to him, and in term his grip tightened once more.

“This is the only way, as it has been seen, only I can carry the Chosen into the Cosmos.”

“We can change that, please...”

Arwin snapped his wrist and the Will of the Maidens was severed, Devon fought harder, tugging his soul away from Arwin.

Arwin laughed, “oh, how I wish for you to live, Child of Gold, but your Will and Throne must be mine.”

“You can have both! But its my soul and my body.”

With great effort Arwin’s still face began to grimace, his brows shifted and his head tilted body snapping as his shoulders shrugged, “That is NOT the way it must BE!”

“Why the fuck not!”

“Enough CHATTERRR.”

The Caid forced all his might to Devons soul and Devon felt the Peace come again.

“No...”

He put all of who he was, every once of being, every memory of his life and every breath he ever took into his soul.

The Caid of Death billowed and fought harder, mist shrouding the black as he twisted threads of red and green around his soul.

“Let go...”

A voice echoed in his mind, its warmth covered his chest and a gentle purr deep behind it, “Devon, Let go...”

Devon felt the blackness come closer, looming at the corner of his eyes as the red and green threads grew tighter around his soul.

A warm tear dripped down the back of his hand, "Let go..." Gael sniffed, and a pulse of heartache reverberated from it.

Keagan whispered in a cracked voice, "Let go, D."

"Let go..." Cassidhe was gentle and mournful.

"Let go." Maive cried.

Arwin cackled, "They see now! This world needs you...no more."

"No..." Devon spoke, throat tight to the oncoming darkness, his grip was fading, his will weakening, he slipped but still held as tight as he could.

"Let go, D." Don was sobbing, a pulse of heartache and a lingering of regret.

A memory flashed, Kara stood before him in the dead of night, dark eyes seeming sad now and she spoke pure and honest, "...Let go..."

Warm lips touched his forehead, a sliver of light and he managed to open his eyes one last time, her brown eyes were bloodshot red, her smile was weak and she wiped away his own tears, Valerie breathed in shaken air.

"Let go..."

This is it then... He was in the darkness once more, staring into his golden soul and Death with the Nothing Peace inches away.

He took the last bit of energy he had and spoke to them with a heavy and wavered breath, He gripped Gaels hand tight, opened his eyes to see them all one last time, and spoke.

"Goodbye."

Devon eased his grip.

His vision grew dark and his world grew distant, the immensity of his soul became a speck and everything slowly became nothing.

No goodbyes....

Heat filled his chest.

Your story isn't over yet.

Devon was pulled back and coldness became warm again and Aiden, the Little Fire, His Nightmare, his revelation, smiled as he was imbued in flames in Devons world.

"Aiden?"

Aiden reached out to him, and Devon took his flame lit hand, "My poet, my beautiful Little Poet..."

Threads of silver enveloped Aiden, and his shredded soul.

Arwin began to scream.

The flame that was his friend wrapped around his soul and him, his consciousness and everything that Devon ever was or ever will be.

“What are you doing?”

“Allowing you to be...”

His soul became whole. Glued together by fire and life.

“...The Champion you were meant to be.”

His body itched, his body became hot and he opened his eyes to fire spewing from his lips.

Be easy, Little Poet...

Memories flooded through him, memories not his own, Aiden looking up and seeing Golden eyes on a young Devon, as he felt his Will being drained, *It was always you who was in control...*

“You’re killing yourself...”

I’m keeping my promise.

“I can’t live in a world without you.”

I will always be here...

Now...

His eyes focused on Arwin, mouth agape and distant eyes illuminated in gold and red.

Let go.

Flames erupted from the darkness and Arwin was set ablaze, turning to ash before he could scream and then nothing.

Devon took a deep breath, looked at his soul now engulfed in flames and felt the pain that Aiden bore for thousands of years.

A moment passed and a million pyres surged through him, a million lives that died a peaceful painless death thanks to Aiden, and Devon took it into himself and accepted and loved every moment.

“Thank you,” He said as he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER 41:

THE BURDON OF DEVOR

Her fingers were tight around his hand as he stroked her cheek, she smiled, wiping tears from her eyes with her free hand, *Already...* He decided then, she will be with him for as long as she could stand him and he hoped that will be for a very long time.

“Thank you,” He said feeling the inferno under his skin, she nodded, unable to speak.

He lifted himself from her lap, and two dozen eyes were on him, “Thank you,” he said to all of them.

He tried his best to stand, and Gael was suddenly holding him up, he looked down on her and quickly looked up, she was wearing nothing more than a blood-stained jacket, “Ma’am!” he barked and she snickered with a purr behind her, “get over it, D.” her voice was still cracked.

Once he found his balance, he gave his hand to Valerie and she took it, standing slowly, “Now let’s...”

His words left him, Valerie gripped his arm as he gasped, dozens laid in front of him, Knights and Innocent blanketed the room in small piles, and as he scanned the

room, he found a familiar face now twisted and gaunt unbound to his body.

“Poor Trevor...” He thought out loud as he wiped his face, Valerie dug herself in his arm, “This was all because of him...”

Devon looked at Don, “We still got them though.” His brother said taking a weak step forward, shirt soaked in blood.

“No.”

He blinked and felt the beat of Borse’s rune against his thigh, “they’ll come back.”

He turned and looked at the ones around him, so little left from the hundreds he saw just hours ago, "Is this all that's left." His lip quivered.

"No," Cassidhe shook her head, "but not much more, Devon."

He stepped back shoe suddenly getting wet, he looked down to see he stepped in a puddle of blood, he thought of Borse and Ashkoon.

"I can stop this." He said, taking another step back.

I have to fix this.

"This won't happen again," he promised as he grabbed a sword from the ground, "I'll be right back."

Valerie took a step towards him but he took the air and thickened it between him and the Children of the Moon, "I have to make sure you are all safe, go, I'll find you."

A thought flashed, one that was not his own, a battlefield only a snap away, in Spiritus where he can bring Ashkoon to him and he can finally end this.

"Thank you." He said, hand gripping the sword, "I love you all."

Don was pounding on the barrier, Keagan and Ronal pulled out their summoning stones and their two hounds appeared next to him.

Ammore grabbed on to Valerie who weakly tried to summon the strength to stand, she nodded, *I leave you in her care yet again.*

"I will end this."

Devon and the Hounds walked into the Other Realm.

Mist rolled over his feet, and he suddenly felt unyielding power course through him, Aiden grew stronger as well and with it the pain of millions of Maidens and Knights.

Devon nearly fell to his knees, gasping as he leaned on a crystalline tree, he closed his eyes and faces poured through his vision.

The tree glimmered gold and white with his touch, and he felt it pulling from him. Just a little, like a mosquito to a vein.

"Are you well, Consanair?" Ras asked and Devon only nodded.

"Focus on the Will and not what the Will brings," Faol said, eyes wide and ears tucked back.

Devon looked at him and smiled through the pain, *Any advice?* Devon asked the ball of fire around his soul and a pulse of battery acid left him feeling drunk off Aiden's Will.

Rest...Devon thought to it, I will buy us more time.

He arched his back, focusing on his thoughts on what was in front of him, if he was truly in control as Aiden told him, then he just had to make himself aware of it, at least just long enough...

The world he was in was ripped from his dreams, the Crystalline trees around him made a thick forest of shimmering reds and white and above him a black sky canvased a thin disk of blues and silvers with threads of white, and at its center a light from both ends slowly pulsing like a heartbeat.

He knew what it was, it was everything surrounded by a true nihilism, the pulse of life.

"The Eternal Well..." He awed, and as if he summoned it he felt a warm breeze of energy pulse towards him, it coated him and he never felt more alive.

He smiled, feeling full for the first time in his life he stretched his hands to it and he breathed in its power.

And with help from the air he was lifted to the sky, the elements threaded themselves into his body, his blood felt pure and his soul as broken as it was, felt alive.

He looked before him, just outside the forest of crystal and mist and found his stage, hundreds of Malevolent clustered and knotted around the companions that fought their fight.

"Time to rest," he said to the companions, and with a thought fire spewed out into the battlefield, leaving a mass of crackling rotten souls to fall inside the mist.

The ones who survived looked to him in awe, "I have awoken!" he screamed at them, "Now leave me and never interfere with my life again."

A large horned Fawn looked up to him, darkened eyes wide and a slight smile across his face, it hunched on all fours and began to run, others close behind, some screaming the retreat for more to follow.

Devon laughed but stopped once he saw a figure in the crystal forest below him, hidden in the mist with the gentle red glow around him.

Are you ready?

He glided himself back down, the Sprit keeping his distance still, the stone in Devon's pocket pulsed with anticipation, for him to say it, to summon the Man behind the massacres and the Pyres that followed, Devon gripped his sword, looked to the two Hounds beside him, their eyes shifting between him and the mist.

"Ashkoon," He summoned, and the crystalline trees waned at the name.

“ASHKOON!” he commanded, Spritius feeding him and Aiden reminding him of the pain the being caused.

“I command you,” His voice reached all realms, “Come to me!”

Spiritus waivered, the mist billowed and waned, the Eternal Well pulsed high above him, “COME ON-”

The air distorted and from it, Dane Ashkoon appeared.

The sides of his silver hair was braided and what wasn't was left in a loose tie, he wore the same white and silver uniform he wore the night before, this time he had thick leather gloves and his hand rested on his hilt as he casually looked around with brilliant silver eyes.

Their eyes met, and Ashkoon smiled, “Gold is such a tacky color,” He walked with ease towards him, Devon drew his sword and Ashkoon stopped.

“-I will say its befitting of a child like you.”

Ras and Faol growled, but Ashkoon kept his eyes to Devon, “Such a mess of things,” He began, smile still stuck on his face, “I wish we had a better time to meet, perhaps in another reality I could have taught you so much. We could be allies, still,” his silver eyes shifted to Faol, but only for a moment, “Perhaps it's not too late.”

He took a step closer and stopped, smile broadening as he gauged Devons reaction, “Sources say that unlike your brother you're intelligent enough to see reason.”

Devon stood unmoved, he fought the nerves in his gut and his shoulders as they tightened, he said nothing.

He could feel the power omitting from the man, and Devon knew he was outmatched by eons, his grip on his sword was tightened but he didn't even know how to use it, he needed time, but he waited, keeping his eyes away from the looming red aura in the mist.

“There is nothing wrong with the Maidens, I only wish to eradicate them for they are a lesser form of being. They were never meant to be,” He changed his posture, waived his hand in the air nonchalant, “You see, Devon, I am the Keeper of Man and it is my duty to-

“Shut the fuck up, dude.”

Ashkoon laughed, “Such bravery to speak...”

“Shut the fuck up!” Devon readied a flame in his hand, but a force blew him and Ras into the thick wide trunk of a tree.

Ashkoon's smile was gone, “Maybe you are a fool.”

Devon fell to the ground, sword falling and disappearing behind the grey mists, Ras was a lump beside him, still alive but badly hurt, Devon brushed his hand against the hard fur, gasping for air as he did.

His back ached and his head spun, but he still stood, "You're not going to teach..." Devon coughed and tasted copper. "...anything to me. We will never be... allies."

"And yet you align yourself with them... how shallow."

Devon was stuck, his body hardly able to breathe, and Ashkoon barely looked troubled.

"I feel as if your perception is a bit warped, they have danced for you, shown you their bodies, shown you a thread of power, given a sad boy like you a glimmer of hope."

Ashkoon took a step closer, Faol cautiously inching his way between them, teeth showing and whisps of shadow furiously shifting around him.

"But they are the ones that have denied you your godhood, stripped you of everything you could have been and limited your life to what? Aspirations of journalism? Reading Fantasy? How... Mundane."

Devon laughed, realizing how he never wanted those moments back, how this was the world he was made for and now, standing before a god with a demon's fire binding his soul, he lavished in the path that led him here.

"Whatever, still pretty crazy ride if you ask me."

A tendril of shadow wrapped itself around Ashkoon and his grip on Devons body was released, Devon took a deep breath in and unleashed a ball of fire.

A silver light burst before Ashkoon before the flame touched him and he unhinged the whip as he jolted backwards.

Devon unleashed a barrage of fire bolts from his hands, each one deflected by the glints of silver but Devon persisted.

"Is this all you have to offer?"

A thick wall of light engulfed Devon, his head suddenly felt like it was going to burst, and his skin itched like a million ants bit down on him all at once.

Unable to see, he staggered in his bright white world.

"You see that was a simple trick, a mix of spirit and fire and a thread of earth, it creates a light brighter than anything known to man..."

Devon fell to the ground as he was tripped, losing the air in his lungs, he heard a whine not far from him.

Faol!

“Not only does it blind someone for a moment, it also sends a shock in the nervous system and leaves them disoriented and lowers thinking skills for some time.

“Devon McNeil,” Devon felt the tip of a blade pierce his stomach, only a little, but just enough for him to cry out, “in less than three minutes I have you in the palm of my hands.”

The white faded, his vision blurred to see Ashkoon’s maddening smile as he jabbed his thin blade in Devon again, just barely nicking him.

Behind him a body floated, struggling in Ashkoon’s unseen grip. One eye was gone and the other was white and blistered, his face a skull and matted fur and his body thin and rotting, guts gone and any trace of life gone with it

Save for the tiny threads of shadow that seemed to keep it sewn together.

Guilt rolled over Devon, he should have never allowed Ras and Faol to come, he should have done this alone and now the creature that protected him was exposed and dying.

“Oh, and him, he is a fascinating abomination as well,” Silver eyes glinted in joy.

Devon was suddenly lifted just high enough to be head taller to Ashkoon, “Let me get a good look at you as well.” He said, eyeing him.

Don’t call him That... His blurred eyes looked towards Faol, the shadow growing darker around him but only slightly.

Devons arms and legs spread wide and Ashkoon took a step back, “How ordinary, and such a late bloomer as well.”

“Shut UP!”

Devons shoulder popped out of socket as Ashkoon flicked his wrist, “You will learn to comply.”

Devon fought the pain; the numbness quickly came.

Faol was nearly himself again, and Devon knew what he had to do as the Rune drummed in his pocket, *not just yet*.

“Do you really think I’ll just bend over for you?” Devon asked, biding time.

“Everyone does.” Ashkoon said as a matter of fact, as Devon felt a tug at his wrist, “I am the Falcon, Devon. I Command respect, I only bow to the Eternal Well.”

“This Forest around us was crafted by Borse after our Treaty was finally signed, a way to commemorate his past failings, I suppose.”

He waived his hand and the mist danced around it, “Xenos wept as he kissed my hand, Fatheir gave me his arm to create the Spear of Light, and Borse...”

Faol broke free from his invisible grasp, his shadow wisps weak he still pounced towards Ashkoon, Tendrils flared and teeth inches away from the Caid's throat he was stopped.

“Clever?” A great force blew the hound away into the mist, a thud and a bark of pain and one of the Crystal trees cracked at the bottom of its trunk, sending an array of color into the sky.

“Faol!” Devon was exasperated and he bit his tongue immediately.

“I guess you are a fool. You McNeil are barely any vigor and filled to the brim with piss. Keeping the Nobles dumb and obedient is part of their game, you realize.”

Devon laughed and Ashkoon broke his wrist, *what have I done?*

The faces from the Pyre appeared behind his eyes, Borse's rune vibrated in his pocket, “I think you're right,” Devon chuckled in his binding.

“Of course I am.”

Red loomed deep within the mist, a heavy weight bared around it, causing the mist to thicken, *This has to end now, I waited too long...*

“I marched into a place I've never been, to meet one of the strongest beings on the planet and fight him.”

Ashkoon smiled, “Now you see it boy, I can see some sense yet,” Ashkoon tightened his grip around Devon's stomach, causing his ribs to pop, “I will be willing to teach you still.” His eyes grew with hunger.

Devon spat at him.

“And now I would love to spend the rest of eternity being your personal hell.” Ashkoon slid a sickening smile across his face as he wiped the spit from it.

Devon's arm twisted, slowly and with a quick snap he roared, tears rolling down his face. He tried at the flame, but it was stopped by Ashkoon's free hand.

Devon screamed and Ashkoon mocked him, “you called for me, you spit at me, a God, and you expected me to cower? You know nothing of this world, of who I am and of what I've done, and you think the trickle of Will you have will even phase me,” Ashkoon laughed, “Stupid Child.”

“Madilyn-” Devon groaned in a near whisper, and his other arm splintered at the bone, he roared in pain. “That name is no use to you!” Ashkoon growled.

“She was a whore, she was a liar, and so are her precious Daughter’s,” Ashkoon mumbled focusing his attention back to Devon.

Their eyes met for a moment as Devon closed his eyes pouring everything he had into the stone in his pocket. It felt hot against his thigh. It yearned for the name it was tied to, it begged to be uttered.

Devon squinted his eyes to the red pulse deep within the mist, he needed to make sure he did this right, he needed to know the soul was ready, that he was ready.

“You coward!” Devon mocked, and his leg popped at the hip, gasped as tried to block out the pain, “Fight!”

The magma coursing through his veins the burning hot oil under his skin, his eyes finally opened to his arms twisted unnaturally and his leg dangling by the skin and meat alone.

The maddening silver eyes of Ashkoon smiled at what he did to Devon, in the horror and pain that surged through him like a bolt to the chest he screamed a dead god’s name.

“BORSE!”

The land cracked with two blades crashing against each other, Borse pressed a claymore against Ashkoon’s rapier, his blood red eyes shown a satisfaction of thousands of years of misery finally leading to this moment after his death.

Borse was a different beast now. A young face still chiseled out of stone, hidden behind thick long curls of hair. His arms bulged underneath his black bear pelt resting on his shoulders, “I’ve waited too long for this.” The dead Caid said.

The grip loosened and Devon found himself on his knees again panting for air.

A tingle pulsed through his body as the mist enveloped him, his body shook and seized as he gasped for air.

He could make out the sound of blades crossing behind the ocean in his ears, he saw the Eternal Well nearly hidden in the mist and a set of golden eyes surrounded by shadows, “She heals you, Consanair.”

Devon lifted his once mangled hand to see it whole again, “How?”

“The Void does as she pleases,” Ras rumbled as he slowly made his way to them, “to gods she only gives.”

Ashkoon and Borse were locked inside their battle, two forces shaking the Void around them and becoming a torrent of force.

“So, they could be doing this forever?” Devon asked as he tried to stand, body still weak and bruised.

“I have no doubt they will,” Ras said, “If they stay in the Void.”

Devon was finally able to stand, his knees quivered and as he touched the cold earth that vibrated under him, he quietly thanked it.

“Everything has just been given to me.”

He looked at the two Hounds at his side, he gently touched Ras’s snout.

“It’s always been like that,” He looked up at the red and silver auras now above him, with the Eternal Well as their backdrop, “I don’t know what to do with it.”

“But it sure as fuck won’t be what they did.”

He turned his back on them, he knew one day he would have to end their destruction but now he must utilize the time he was given while at the same time doing what he can to honor Aiden’s faith in him.

“Let’s go home.”

They walked out of the Void.

CHAPTER 42:

CHILD OF GOLD

A gentle breeze rushed through the canopy, and the budding leaves held firm, ready for another season. The bright sky was nearly blinding in the midday spring, nearly forgetting the heavy rain the night before.

As they broke through the heavy forest, the sun became brighter, sparkling on the lake and the hundreds of sprites that teetered between Realms skirted on the waters crest.

Devon brushed his fingers across a grey barked tree, he had no idea what type it was, but it begged to be touched, it was thick enough to have two people stand shoulder to shoulder and still have a little room to spare.

It was spectacular, in fact this whole area was beautiful and no wonder Borse chose this as his sanctuary.

Even as the natural world still felt estranged to him and the world that was unveiled to him still felt slightly uncomfortable, Devon was at home in it.

“... With that said I do believe the introductory period would be a lot smoother if we gave everyone a few months to adjust and allow plenty of time for word to spread.”

Cassidhe looked over her shoulder, “You weren’t listening at all,” she said as a fact.

Devon nodded with a smile.

She rolled her eyes.

“I’m listening mother, I will remind him when he’s done musing,” Valerie took his hand, and he felt a surge pulse through him.

“Are you frustrated?” He asked.

She nodded and grimaced at him.

“I’m sorry,” Devon said scenery, “I just thought this was a pretty tree.”

“Are you high?” Cassidhe chuckled as she put some sort of flower in her pouch.

“I think so.” He laughed, “just on life? I guess?”

“Will most likely,” She continued, smiling at a piece of bark she picked up off the ground, that too ended up in her pouch.

“You’ll get used to it, especially the more you use it, so use it a lot, and use it plenty.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Devon loved the idea, in addition he liked the buzz. Aiden seemed to thrive in it as well, Devon could feel him more deeply and he would occasionally get images and moments that were Aiden’s alone. Even though Aiden was still silent, Devon could feel the life of the second soul inside of him as it bonded him together.

They slowly walked the shoreline of the lake, some tree’s rooted themselves right on the line, but they were few on the way to the Village, the thin trail was mostly dotted with tall untouched grasses and wildflowers on either side.

Valerie held his hand behind his back as he followed Cassidhe. He could tell they were both tired, their postures were different and their Aura was fainter than before, as they spent most of the morning training him in the basic elements.

“I could use a nap,” He lied, he never felt more alive than he did now. They both sighed in unison.

“You’re telling me,” Valerie slouched, “we covered a lot this morning, what... A month’s worth of work in a few hours.”

“Ey,” Cassidhe agreed, “Not sure how we managed to do that much, but at this rate by mid spring you’ll need much stronger intervention than a mere Maiden.”

Devon grumbled, “If there’s anyone left that won’t try and kill me or control me.”

Valerie leaned into his ear and whispered, “or eat you. Nom.”

Cassidhe glanced back but her head snapped forward, and she arched her back, “I will carry on ahead, be ready by noon.”

She lifted her skirt and hurried on, making a point to not look back, another pulse and Devon winced, “It is a little embarrassing,” he agreed to Valerie’s emotion.

“Good job picking that up.” Valerie said tiredly.

They continued on in silence mostly, her fingers brushed the center of his palm and as the little Village came into sight, so did the people and the Companions.

Stepping past the shoreline the first little hut appeared, made of mud and stone it could easily pass as a mound if it wasn’t for the thin tendril of smoke leaving its top, inside it Ronal was hunched over a book and beside him Ras rested, it seemed they found some peace, but Ronal loomed still, as he mourned, *As he should...*

Six children held their own parade as they ran across the beach, being chased by two hounds and the Bloodhound close behind, she was the only one who took the time to acknowledge the two of them and even then, it was only a blink.

The mounds grew more frequent in the wooded area, only twenty huts so far but it grew by the day and each one was housing three to four people.

Ammore and Caitlyn appeared beside them, “Beautiful day,” Ammore said, slapping Devons shoulder, Caitlyn pointed two bamboo swords at him and winked, spinning around to catch up to her Knight, she left no more time for simple pleasantries. They were both in a hurry to go somewhere and he left them to it.

Ammore didn’t go far without her Ax now strapped to her back and a half dozen daggers on each thigh, not many Knights went far without something sharp now.

Before Devon could say something, they faded back into the woods, “Busy bees,” Valerie said, bemused.

“I wanted to thank her.”

“For what?”

He turned to look at her and she looked back with pursed lips, “I don’t want to say now.”

She kissed his hand, “She’ll have to do more than hold me back, if you leave me behind again.”

Devon sighed, Valerie told him what Kara told her the night everything fell apart, and he felt guilty for leaving her behind. His mouth began to move when he saw another shadow appear from the woods.

“D!” Don said, eyes stuck behind them, “Have you seen Ammore?”

Devon pointed and Don quickly ran in the direction, wooden sword in hand, *Training?*

“That boy.” Devon spun behind him. Maive, with Chance as her shadow quietly walked towards them, “It’s been three weeks and he still can’t say a word to either one of us,” Chance grumbled.

“He’ll come around,” Devon said, “The headaches are pretty serious and I can’t imagine how he feels with everything that happened.”

Chance groaned again and Maive scratched his forearm with the slightest hint of hurt in her eyes, “still...” She bit her freckled lip and looked where Don ran off too, “I missed my friend.”

“He’s here, He’s with us, just be gentle, and don’t throw him in any fires,” Devon smiled, and Maive roared in laughter.

“I promise, no fires,” She straightened herself up and cleared her throat, “Anyways, I have come to snag your Maiden, just for a little while, I need help with crafting some Huts for some newcomers.

Valerie groaned and Maive arched her eyebrows, “Please, you’re the only one who can!” She put on a pout causing Valerie to groan, “I was hoping for a nap, our Consanair here learned a months’ worth of training in a single morning.”

“Oh fun, all the elements then,” She looked at Chance then back at Valerie, “I’ll show you Will Binding.”

Valerie lit up, “That could be useful!”

“How so?” Devon asked but Valerie was already kissing his cheek.

“I’ll show you once I learn it,” she said and the three of them were gone, waiving him goodbye.

Devon dug his hands in his pockets, feeling Borse’s rune with his fingertip, and looked at the rustling trees above him, feeling the tingle of pain under his skin, “I know you’re still tired,” He said to the little fire, “I can feel it.”

He began to walk, he wasn’t sure where he was going to go, he wasn’t far from his hut now, but he thought of going back to the beach, maybe bugging Ronal, but he wasn’t sure what of just yet, so he took his time.

“I think we did good... you did good, rather,” He was careful as he walked holding on to branches carefully and especially careful over roots.

“I can’t thank you enough for all you did, you gave up so much.... I just...”

He was near a clearing, foliage thick with grasses and ferns, even a few flowers dotted the lush green. He thought about risking it against ticks, *Fuck it*, He smiled as he took a step in.

“I’m not going to heal you if you get Lyme Disease,” Devon looked up to see Gael on the other end, Keagan next to her, “Yeah you are!” He took a step in, and she grimaced. Keagan smiled, “You can drink from the spring in the middle!” Keagan pointed, “Tested it this morning!”

Devon walked a little faster, he felt the unease in his gut as he saw them, he was waiting to tell them about what he did, yelling out Faol’s name, he knew he betrayed that trust.

Why not tell them now...

As he broke through the brush, Faol stood on the stoney edge, clear pristine water behind him, wisps low and close to him in the bright midday sun.

“No need to tell them yet,” Faol whispered.

Devon looked up and the two of them were faded back into the woods, Keagan giving one last glance, a faint smile as he tipped his head.

“They have a right to know,” Devon said gently.

“They will in time, I do not want them to worry more than they already do.”

Devon looked down to the crystal-clear water, it reached unfathomable depths that no light could reach, he shivered and changed his focus.

The clearing was as large as a football field, and half of it was the spring with a thin ring of rock around it, this land felt magical even without the magic.

He breathed it in for a moment, then he sat down on a chunk of rock, folding his legs under him, and Faol sat next to him.

“Whatever happens, I will do everything I can to right what I did wrong” he said, pinching his eyes shut.

“Devon,” Faol responded, heavy gold rimmed eyes digging into him, “you honored me by calling my name while I hurt, you are my brother.”

Devon let out a sigh and locked eyes with the Hound, the knot that formed in his throat faded as his breath ended, “Then as your brother, I promise you I will make sure your name never leaves Ashkoon’s lips.”

“You *still* worry too much, they both have what they wanted the most, their war in their own hands now, they will fight until next cycle, and again in the next.” Faol sneered at his joke.

“Besides, as of all things, this name will be forgotten, as will yours, we shall only be the Light and the Shadow, as we already are.”

Devon found a pebble and toyed with it between his fingers, eyes lingering on a grey cloud in the distance, "I'll still fight for you when the time comes, I will fight for all of them."

"And I will fight for you as well, young Caid, and I will fight for all the Children of the Moon as well."

Devon's shoulders eased, and his back straightened, "I will be the peace as well," Devon smiled at the thought.

"Then make it so, Find the balance, be the Warrior and the Peace Keeper." Faol laid down and a bit of him faded in Devons shadow, "If there is a God that can do it, it is you."

Devon reached down, the cold shadow enveloping his hand and he felt ice hard bone in his fingertips, he began to pet Faols forehead.

The birds chirped and sang, insects screamed to the world that they existed, the winds carried the sound of the trees with it, and the sun warmed Devon's skin as he sat with Faol.

He looked to the sky and saw a world just beginning, he saw a new chapter of mankind and in it was a dream that will soon become a reality, he saw answers to questions he and the world yearned for.

His mind moved in a meditative state, focusing on one thing at a time, event after event, moment after moment, it all seemed so small and yet so significant.

And the Shadow rested for the first time, and the Light found beauty in the world for the first time.

And they sat.

In silence.

In peace.

Be free my Little Poet, my Fighter, and my Flower. Change the world, destroy it, turn it to ash and make it anew, like the Phoenix of the Fables I used to tell you, and remember, I will always love you.

-The last journal entry of Maiden Gwenavine the IV

GLOSSARY

Note -

The story begins thirty years after a civil war took place in the United States, a lot of laws have changed, and the familiar landscape of the United States may feel a little foreign.

Most of the world has converted to more eco conscious energy sources with coal becoming extinct and Oil becoming too expensive for general consumption.

I wrote this story in this timeline to give a note of familiarity. Really, this story could take place anywhere after 1990 and up into the late 21st century. I wanted my focus to be on the characters and the magic and see how they adapt in a modern setting.

As we explore this world with Devon, I look forward to showing you what's to unravel before you. Remember the balance of all things, and a name is binding and always with meaning.

CHARACTERS

Devon McNeil- Devon McNeil is destined for greatness, but good luck trying to tell him that. The main character of Ember of Eternity can't seem to do anything right, but once he finally accepts the world is far different than he wants it to be, he learns that he is way more than just a victim of circumstances.

Kind and wise by nature, he has a streak of being stubborn and desires his solitude.

Donavhin McNeil- Donavhin is the older brother of Devon. Known to be a Casanova, and someone who spends too much time in bars. Donavhin will always stand up for the people he cares about and will do what he feels is right. That sense of pride and justice could prove to be his greatest flaw as he finds himself stuck in the middle of a war and on the wrong side.

A lover and a fighter, Donavhin is complex as much as he is simple.

Keagan- Keagan is Devon's roommate and friend. A man with one mission, protect his Maiden Gael Richards. He is known to be serious and lacks social skill but still manages to be loved and respected, if not for his efficiency as a Hunter in the Children of the Moon, then as someone whose loyalty knows no bounds. He is a man with many hidden secrets, even from himself, and the Shadow Hound that follows him seems to be the key to it all.

Keagan is in no hurry for the answers he knows will change the life he carved out for himself.

Ronal Ingam- Quickly rising to the top of the ranks, Ronal and his Maiden Angel Sanz are pushed to be close to Devon by Borse and Richards.

Angel Sanz- A serious and passionate woman, she spent much of her life under the care of the Children of the Moon, she has never been known as the kindest Maiden and that is a feat she takes with great pride

Gael Richards- Young and promising, Gael Richards is a rare Maiden called a Shaman. Her soul mended with a Spirit when she was just

discovering the Art and now, she hunts Malevolent with her Knight Keagan.

Gael and the spirit within her have great love for Devon and for reasons they will someday learn.

Doctor Harriet Richards- A renowned therapist, and known ties to the Children of the Moon, she resides in Austin Texas. She knows the McNeil family well and is the adoptive mother to Gael Richards. Devon is oblivious to this as he struggles to cope with the changing world around him.

Maive Richards- The daughter of the Caid Borse and the High Priestess Harriet Richards. Maive is strong but serene. She is the adoptive sister of Gael Richards and the two are usually inseparable when they are together. Her knight Chance Abrams and her have been together since childhood.

Tristan Lioncrest- A Noble of the Children of the Moon and an old friend of Devons, he resides in upstate New York in his Village where he trains Squires to Knights. He, just like Devon was promised from birth great things in his life.

Laine 'Nori' Takashi- Long time friend of Donavhin, Nori is a strong fighter and well-rounded man. He preferred being called Nori since his childhood for reasons only he knows.

Kara Airden- One of the many women in the world that was mistreated and misunderstood as she tried to cope with the Motheir's Kiss. Luckily her brother Kevhin reached out to the Children of the Moon and was rescued before it was too late.

She isn't strong in will, but she has the power of a Seer that is still in its infancy.

Kevhin Airden- A little brash and not very talkative, Kevhin cares for his sister deeply, they are often mistaken for identical twins even though he is five years older and nearly a foot taller.

Vallerie Dorrin- Reed- Raised to be one of the next generations greatest Maidens, Valerie is smart, cunning and sexy. And by the twist of

fate itself she stumbles into Devon at a bar where neither were the wiser. She too was bound by fate to Devon McNeil but she falls for him on her own accord.

Dane Ashkoon- Caid of Man and leader of the Innocent, he was once a dying prince who was given a chance of immortality and watch over mankind, but soon after, he along with Airden, Daryan and half of the earth's kingdoms waged war against the Caid and the Motheir and Fatheir. The War waged on for thousands of years in some shape or another until only Borse and Ashkoon was left, and they then created the Treaty of Blood which has been enacted for nearly three thousand years.

Borse- one of two Caid to be born without the Motheir's hand, he was born from the first Great War's battlefield where millions died, said to crawl of its blood-soaked bogs as a mere infant. At first called the Caid of Justice, after spending much of his existence in battle it shaped into the Caid of War. He now is the one and only Caid that watches over the Children of the Moon as their Consanair.

Madiline- The Second Caid to be born without the Motheirs aid, and at the same time as Borse, Madiline was said to be a fierce and powerful soul but always shown grace and kindness to those who were good.

Called the Caid of the Wild, or Princess of Will, she was loved by all and a true keeper of peace.

Every Maiden can be linked to her bloodline which spreads across the world where she lived hundreds of lives and created just as many families in her thousands of years of existence.

In a jealous rage Dane Ashkoon captured Madiline and burned her at the stake as the Caid Wars were drawing to a close.

Spi- The First Caid and was created by the left eye of the Fatheir Spi was born with the ability to see into multiple futures and was used as a guide for the Motheir as she shaped the cosmos in its infancy. Spi spent most of his life in luxury and was eager for what the future was to bring, although he never directly said why. In the beginning of the Caid Wars, he commanded Motheir to leave and only return when asked to and soon after he disappeared and is believed to be dead by Borse's account.

Xanos- The Second Caid, born from stardust Xanos was the Caid of Dreams and constantly explored all realms and the cosmos. They were the First Dragon who only took human form when they found humankind. Instantly falling in love with the species.

Xanos was a constant explorer, if not the world than within and tragically died after being lured into a trap by Dane Ashkoon kicking off the Caid Wars.

Arwin- Born from the first flower to ever bloom, Arwin was once a loving and gentle being, he was tied closely to the Eternal Well by birth and thus connected to the flow of life and Death. He was known to care for the sick or dying of all creatures and would always bring them flowers, when they were eventually returned to the earth he would plant wildflowers on their mounds, thus starting a tradition with the Maidens.

He coined the term, "May you find your Peace."

Pacifist by nature Arwin never participated in the Caid Wars but he was still tortured by Ashkoon towards the end of it, he is rumored to be horribly disfigured and now he hides in Spirtius.

Airden- Created from the first wind, Airden was a being of love and compassion. He was known to be calm and passionate as well as a relentless force when provoked. He helped with the advancement of Sciences in his lifetime.

He stood next to Ashkoon during the Caid Wars mostly out of spite from Spi, a decision he openly admitted to regretting to the Champion in their fight.

Daryan- Created from the Great seas, Daryan was known as the first Philosopher. Soft spoken and Positive outwardly, despite his stoic appearance, Daryan fought a darkness inside him till his dying day.

Pioneer of Education, the Caid of Water spent most of his life expanding his mind and others around him.

He agreed with Ashkoon on a philosophical sense that humanity can't thrive with Deities controlling them and was a valuable asset in the Battles to come.

He lost his battle with Geoiss and as they both laid dying Geoiss told a joke and that was said to be the only time Daryan smiled.

Geoiss- born of clay and wood, Geoiss was always exploring and creating art, including architecture and was the key component to building the largest metropolis, Babylon, that has yet to be matched in size and population.

Slow to speak and mostly indifferent to anything outside of his work, Geoiss was the Caid of Earth and considered the Master of the Arts.

Despite his advancements, he chose to live a nomadic lifestyle for the majority of his existence.

During the Caid Wars, he and Borse were the linchpins of the Caid forces, and when he died in his battle with Daryan the War began to sway in Ashkoon's favor. A death Borse has said to be intentional by both Caid.

Agnah- Born of the fires of the largest volcano, Agnah was bold and joyful. He dedicated his life to the hearth, and mastering everything about it, from food to weapons.

He created the concept of a family, celebration and holidays. For many generations during the caid war he was considered the Consanair of what will be known as the Children of the Moon, although he spent much of his time creating armaments and only occasionally fighting.

He was found dead by poison with a note written to Borse, urging to end the war and begin peace talks, as he and Ashkoon will split the world even further in their lost conquest. It is unsure if it was suicide or murder.

Motheir- The first being to born of the Cosmos, only a millisecond after the big bang, and just after the creation of the Eternal Well. As legend goes she is the only one to hear the voice of the Ember of Eternity, and it said to her, "take upon yourself life, and give it Soul. I give for you for the last time, for the first time."

And then the Fatheir was born from its remnants, and the two set to create the Caid and explore the cosmos together.

She was last seen taken back into the stars just before the Caid Wars and has yet to be seen again.

Fatheir- Born from the remnants of the Ember of Eternity, he and the Motheir formed a companionship that has stood the test of time. Giving her his left eye for Spi and spent eons as her silent second hand.

Fatheir actively fought in the Caid wars along side Borse, but soon disappeared as he was taking a journey for peace talks, and expected to have been killed by Ashkoon himself.

SPIRITS

Aiden- A fire spirit with horns, he is first seen by Devon at his parents house and follows Devon; pestering him. There are many hidden secrets behind those fire eyes and spunky attitude.

The Shadow Hound (Faol)- Companion to Keagan, the Shadow Hound is a force to be reckoned with. A Spirit known as a Shadow Kneeler, there is no known case of another one like it existing.

The Beauty- A Malevolent Siren who oversees Lady Bird Lake, she tempts people into her waters and drains them of their energy, desperate to purify her waters again. She now has become obsessed with Devon and wants his soul, doing whatever it takes to have it.

Ras- An Earth Kneeler and Companion to Ronal Ingam, he is wise as well as ready to fight at a moments notice. He shares a deep bond with Ronal and together the two are an unstoppable force of nature.

Fae- Spirits who only take from the Fleshbound Realm, they can be kind or tricky and are always observant.

Crawlers- Malevolent creatures made from putrid blood, Crawlers come in many shapes and sizes, as small as a grub worm or as large as a house. Some become Masters who command the others, while most will live as parasites wanting nothing but clean blood to drink.

Thunder Bird- The size of a small airplane with black feathers no other feature is discernable for it is always in the sky and hardly ever seen. Born from American legend the Thunderbird controls the sky and protects the land below it with strong gusts of wind and thunder and lightning.

Brugha- Creatures made from rock, roots and earth. The Brugha are passive creatures always tilling the earth and mending their gardens. Most only reach up to four feet tall but on very rare occasions a Brugha can be as large as trees.

Hounds- Coming in all shapes and sizes hounds were the first spirits to bond with humans, they are loyal and at times serve as guides for Knights. Most are Elementals that choose the shape of canine

WORLD

Children of the Moon- An organization where women with the Mother's Kiss can gather and train, they offer safe refuge for anyone seeking temporary homing and they have organizations around the world in what they call Villages. Established by the first children of Madiline they have helped humanity and the earth cohabitate.

Malevolent- Spirits who have fed off of tainted energy sources such as a polluted lake or a battlefield. Most often former Fae or raw energy accumulated enough to create a spirit.

Rune- A complex process that allows a person to use the energy around them. Through intense labor, meditation and flawless designing they can control the elements symbolized on stone made from various minerals. They must perform a ritual with a Companion and a Maiden asking the element to be used when called upon.

Companion- A Sprit that is bound to a Summoning Rune and a person's desire. A companion can be any Spirit that wishes to be bound and willing to disclose its name.

The Innocent- An organization lead by the Caid Dane Ashkoon, they are a multilayered, complex institution that on the surface level acts as a fraternity, but just under the surface they are witch hunters that have their fingers deep into politics and there is no way of knowing how deep their influence goes.

The Void- A place between Spiritus and Terra, a barrier of realities that act as its own reality, time is slowed there, and it seems to be governed by its own set of rules, which have yet to be discovered.

Terra- The Realm of the Fleshbound, it is ruled by time, gravity and all that you know as real. Due to contrary belief Terra is named after the first Maiden to Discover the Other Realm or Spiritus, not after planet earth.

Spiritus- The Other Realm or Realm of Spirits is a realm shrouded by mist, vast and endless. Not much is known or shared about the realm. All Spirits can enter the Realm with ease, but pure Spirits only reside there.

Here you can see Souls of Caid and other powerful beings and sometimes Maidens. In the far distance one can make out the shadow of the Eternal Well which governs all Realms.

Eternal Well- A force of power that is believed to purify souls, it resembles a massive black hole that both sucks in and expels great amounts of energy from all over the realms.

Only Caid to ever see it is Arwin, along with the Fatheir.

The Ember of Eternity- A mysterious entity that died, and in its death created the entire Multiverse. It created the Motheir and Fatheir and said, "Take upon yourself life, and give it Soul. I give for the last time, for the first time."

AIDEN'S SONG

Be still my little moonbeams
Drown your sorrows away
Be free of this suffering
Be free
Be free

Come with me little moonbeams
Let us dance on your pain
Let I purify your soul
Dance with me
Dance with me

Shed no tears for me
Your suffering is mine alone
I breathe your death, I am your glory
Dance with me
Dance with me

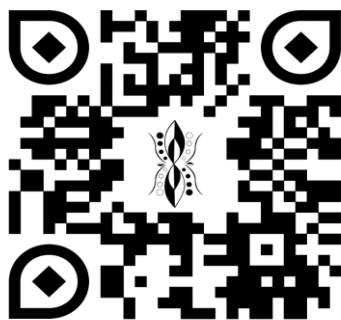
I sing for your glory
I sing for your tears
Embrace me
Embrace me

Embrace me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Humanist and Advocate- Truett McDaniel has spent most of his life in Austin, Tx, where he has hiked many of its trails. Chef by day and Author by night, he has dug deep into the dark and strange things in this world has to offer and nestled himself deep in its roots.

His goal as an Author has always been to dive deep into the human mind and discover the beauty of things in the darkest times.



Learn more at TruettMcDaniel.com

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