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BEYOND THE VEIL

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Alyssa Malloy

May 2022

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BEYOND THE VEIL

English

Missouri State University, May 2022

Master of Arts

Alyssa Malloy

ABSTRACT

Three centuries after the Veil's destruction reunited the land of Mishnal, archaeologists make a discovery in the wild Veiled Lands that will shed light on the cataclysmic event that changed the world forever. Through their analysis of the unearthed memories in the Veiled Lands and remnants of manuscripts penned by key governmental figures, we learn about Mina, a woman with demonic heritage who knows the only way to free herself of her oppressors is by her own clawed hands and the sharpened teeth that she knows can rend flesh from her victims. The first book of the *Beyond the Veil* series follows Mina's journey from slavery to self-actualized freedom, from an animalistic heathen to understanding what it truly means for a demon to have humanity, and delves into the truths of two separate lands colliding in a torrent of deception that will leave the lands of Paros and Il'ma in shambles. This creative thesis includes a critical introduction analyzing my use of polyphony and dramatic irony in conversation with R.A. Salvatore's Legend of Drizz't novel, *Homeland*, followed by a selection of the first three Passus of my novel, *Beyond the Veil*.

KEYWORDS: dark fantasy, fiction, body horror, polyphony, dramatic irony, racism, autonomy

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Finally, I have to thank my brother, Will Rivera, for his tabletop game where I first created and played as the character who would eventually become Mina. Her twisted backstory and chaotic evil nature in your game gave me the inspiration to tear a whole new world to shreds.

I dedicate this thesis to my late uncle, Brian Roberts, who taught me at an early age that the imagination is a wild, untamable creature.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I have always loved fantasy: the characters embarking on daring adventures, gripping tales that sweep me off to new worlds, and most especially, the magic. When I was younger, magic was a mystical way for characters to gain more power than I could ever hope to have myself. As I got older and read a little more widely, I found that authors equated magic to science, that it was bound by a strict set of rules within the framework of a narrative world. Magic could give you the power to do anything, but *only* if you used the magic in this particular way, within *these* parameters set out by the one who created that magic. As Kenneth Burke states, “Magic is intrinsic to language” (qtd. in Covino 93). At first, I thought my attraction to these stories was caused by the content itself – for example, the ingenuity of mages working within the constraints of their power to perform spectacular feats – but I eventually came to realize that it was the language use to describe the magical properties that enraptured me. I was spellbound by the language of magic, of fantasy.

I have always loved horror: the spattering of viscera on a screen, the terror streaking through me in tandem with characters fighting to survive, and most especially, the villains. When I was younger, villains were the evil people who wanted the heroes dead, but they were compelling in how adamant they were in achieving their goals and how inventive their strategies for success. As I got older, I realized that not all villains are purely evil, that they have real reasons for their actions. The villain is only the villain in the hero’s version of the story; in the villain’s eyes, they may be fighting for their own survival, or as an act of revenge, or even as the result of a tragic psychological disorder. This does not excuse their heinous actions, but understanding the underlying reason for the villains’ actions reveals a sort of humanity that is

hard to ignore. The dichotomy of a story which pays attention to not only the hero's narrative but also the villain's has held me captive for years.

The combination of my love of fantasy and horror is how I began conceptualizing my novel in progress, *Beyond the Veil*. Originally, I only knew that I wanted the protagonist to be Mina, a half-demon woman who would be easily defined as a villain. There is no denying that she is a chaotic entity, an evil character when we see how little she cares for the human lives around her. But what makes her compelling is the reasoning behind her actions: after 300 years of psychological and physical torture at the hands of holy men, Mina searches for autonomy in a world where her oppressors only wish for her death. Throughout *Beyond the Veil*, we see through Mina's eyes "a world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity" (Cixous 876). The narration from Mina's perspective is based on a sensual experience, instead of more intellectual observations from characters like General Rin Vynus and the primal hauler Broch Garin. In many ways, Mina is a centuries-old character who is still emotionally infantilized as a result of her upbringing. Her journey throughout *Beyond the Veil* is just as much about her growing up as it is about her understanding her own identity.

What makes Mina's story even more intriguing is learning about her progression from an animalistic heathen to understanding what it truly means for a demon to have humanity. A key feature of the narrative is that it is given from perspectives outside just her own. To view the world from just Mina's perspective would leave the audience with a very limited view of the events that unfold in the narrative world. They would be unaware of the machinations of characters like Grand Councilor Bartol Ferin, or how the beliefs of the people around Mina affect the ways in which they perceive and interact with her. To give readers the most holistic,

immersive view of the lands of Paros and Il'ma, I realized that telling Mina's story from more than just her perspective was essential. Readers needed to see her as a monster and also as a woman fighting for the opportunity to discover herself; to deny the existence of her monstrous side would undercut her growth as a character.

The concept of writing a novel with multiple voices is nothing new but creating a world in which each of the presented characters has their own unique voice is certainly a challenge. Mikhael Bakhtin wrote in his influential text *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "polyphony presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work" (34). This is a separate style of narration from the omniscient narrator, or the overarching authorial voice in a text. Polyphony, in essence, is present in a text which allows the characters themselves to tell the story as though the author is not present at all. The characters wrest the authority of a single vision from the author, and present the narrative as their own.

In R.A. Salvatore's first novel in the Legend of Drizzt series, *Homeland*, we learn about the protagonist Drizzt Do'Urden discovering his place in the world of Menzoberranzan and ultimately that the drow society into which he was born, with deception and cunning at its core, is not where he truly belongs. It is possible to understand the way Drizzt sees the world through only his perspective, that drow society is matriarchal: women serve as priestesses to their deity, the Spider Queen Lolth, while men are indoctrinated to understand that their place is "inferior to the drow females" (Salvatore 62). However, it is through Matron Malice Do'Urden's voice that we learn what it truly means to serve the Spider Queen, and the repercussions for incurring her anger. Through Zaknefein Do'Urden, we discover that while Drizzt believes surviving in drow society means not being killed by assassination, true survival comes in the form of fighting against the indoctrination of the Academy, and valuing life instead of savoring in the taking of it

(Salvatore 306-7). To truly understand the depths to which drow society will descend in their ambitions, and how virtuous Drizzt's morals are in comparison, the audience must see the rationale of characters like Matron Malice, the matriarch of Drizzt's family, and Zaknefein, the weapons master who hides his parentage of Drizzt and his own ideals because he believes there is no alternative. In *Homeland* and my thesis, *Beyond the Veil*, polyphony is used to give each character their own voice. This approach moves the story along to its ultimate conclusion in a manner that could not be achieved without the reader experiencing these multiple perspectives. Both Salvatore and I use the polyphonic nature of the story's narration to mystify our respective readers as a means of increasing the effect of dramatic irony.

Unlike R.A. Salvatore's *Homeland*, in which the narrator changes multiple times within a single chapter to propel the narrative on a linear timeline, *Beyond the Veil*'s polyphony is presented with each chapter following a different character's perspective to build on the ever-expanding plot both forward and backward in time. These perspectives include unnamed scholars in each Passus, the Paros primal hauler Broch Garin, the anti-hero Mina, General Rin Vynus, and Grand Councilor Bartol Ferin. In *Beyond the Veil*, I take advantage of the different perspectives to build each character's voice and highlight different truths they each believe. What is most important in this text is the concept of truth, regardless of the character's distinct version of that truth, or whether the reader accepts this truth to be valid in the scheme of the narrative as a whole. As Bakhtin describes, "the unification of highly heterogenous and incompatible material – with the plurality of consciousness-centers not reduced to a single ideological common denominator" (17). How does each character experience their own truth and convey that truth to others? And if a character lies, and the reader is aware of this, what does that show us about the character? These plural consciousnesses with their own ideologies lie at the

center of this novel, both contradicting and supporting each other in turn through the few truths that they can agree on, and the many truths they refuse to change.

To truly show the plurality of voices in this novel, we can first look to the collective perspective presented in each Passus of the thesis. Passus One is presented in place of a prologue but introduces a nameless group of scholars in the year 302PV (POST VEIL), who analyze artifacts that have been discovered in the mysterious Veiled Lands in each subsequent Passus. Their input during each of the Passus gives the audience a perspective of the world more than 300 years after the events of Mina's story. This helps to build the audience's understanding of the entire narrative world, with the scholars offering information of the future that Mina's story leads to, and an occasional lack of understanding or information on the intricacies of Mina's time. The scholars present information in a decidedly objective way, as academics and historians who wish to disseminate their findings with an audience for the sole purpose of filling in the information that was lost during the Veil's destruction. Through this polyphonic structure, the reader can fully appreciate "what happens *between various consciousnesses*, that is, their interaction and interdependence" (Bakhtin 36). The voices in the Passus work in conjunction with the voices of each chapters' narrators to build the story, but from a perspective outside the protagonist, Mina. While it would be possible to understand Mina's journey through the story with just her voice, having this retrospective look from the scholars situates them in a separate time, and gives the reader a glimpse of the consequences of Mina's story that no one except the scholars could know.

In Chapter 2, Mina is transported from the national prison in the land of Paros to the Veil to be exiled from the country; it is made immediately clear that Mina is telepathic. This gives her a unique perspective in that she absorbs and, subsequently, reacts to the thoughts of those around

her. In some instances, she uses the knowledge she would otherwise lack to assist her, as can be seen in the opening flashback where she is locked in the cellar of Carnin monastery. When Brother Pradi enters the room, the reader is shown the type of character that Mina is:

‘She’s gone. The monster is...’

“Right behind you,” she rasped, breathing in the scent of fresh sweat slicking the back of his neck. Her fingers curved around his throat slowly, a sensual caress of her claws over his flesh. (33)

This scene is pivotal in subverting reader expectations, in showing that Mina is not a woman who cowers from her captors, and who will occasionally respond to what another character is thinking about. This also builds on, and even contradicts, the initial impression that the audience has of Mina from Broch’s perspective in Chapter 1, where Mina is shown fully restrained in her cell in Per’Doa prison. Mina’s actions and perceptions are more savage, even animalistic at times, heavily contrasting the civilized behavior of Rin later in the novel. Having two perspectives of Mina, an outsider in Chapter 1 and her own perspective in Chapter 2, helps the reader to begin parsing out the intricacies of this one character. We start to understand how a character’s perceptions can skew their observations.

In Chapter 3, the reader is introduced to General Rin Vynus, leader of the Onamagi Knights. His manner of speaking is different than Mina’s, denoting not only the region he lives in, but also his position of power in the government. While Mina’s observations throughout the novel are based on the senses – such as when she is caught in a bloodlust that blinds her to her surroundings – Rin’s observations are more clinical, orderly just as a trained soldier should be.

She growled low in her throat and the sound vibrated through his armor, right down into his soul. It left him vulnerable, unable to move for the briefest of moments.

That was all she needed to lunge upward and let her teeth sink into the right side of his face. Tendons tore and his flesh screamed in agony well before his voice could mirror it. The pain was excruciating, but he bit back his natural reaction to scramble away from her and held on tighter. (61)

Even while in excruciating pain, Rin keeps his goal in mind: subduing the feral demon, Mina, who has just appeared in Il'ma and murdered a Councilor in cold blood.

As the story progresses, more voices are added to increase the polyphonic effect, and to further complicate the narrative. The scholars in Passus One present the history of Paros, as it is taught, and Broch and Mina both confirm this belief in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively; however, we learn in Chapter 3 with the narrator Rin that history is taught differently in Il'ma. The scholars in Passus Three reveal writing by Shaman Elder Pirda which introduces Grand Councilor Bartol's manipulation of the perceptions of Il'man citizens for 300 years, and Bartol confirms this in Chapter 5. Mina believes the history she has learned while living in the non-magical land of Paros, and Rin believes the contradicting history he has been taught in the magical academies of Il'ma. Through these multiple perspectives that occasionally overlap, the reader must wade through the information presented to try and learn the truth as each character perceives it, and to appreciate the truth presented in the novel as a whole. Where some readers may tend to believe the scholars in the Passus, viewing them as purveyors of the truth because they exist 300 years in the future, the scholars also make it clear that they do not have all the information available to them. Readers must also consider how time can skew perceptions of information.

Situated within the concept of polyphony, and possibly in direct correlation with the multitude of authoritative voices, the author is also able to bring about dramatic irony which “involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or audience knows

to be true” (Murfin 253). According to Wayne Booth, “There can be no dramatic irony, by definition, unless the author and audience can somehow share knowledge which the characters do not hold” (175). This is especially true in *Beyond the Veil* because each character holds their own truths and deceptions closely to their chests. Mina believes herself to have all the knowledge she needs, because of her telepathy, but learns through one mishap after another that she knows very little about the world in which she finds herself. Mina has been sequestered away from the world and has only experienced it thus far via the monks from the monastery, the people who came to see primal executions at the Lake of Sin, and eventually the few interactions she has had outside of that since being taken from the monastery. While not included in this thesis, Mina’s reflections on her few interactions with people like Barrett and Rin later in *Beyond the Veil* help her realize that the only way to create real change in her circumstances is “to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (Cixous 887). Mina’s discovery of her own real power, after being made to feel powerless even with her demonic heritage, comes from gaining an understanding of the current power structure in Il’ma, and then how best to deconstruct it. For Mina to truly have power of her own, she learns, she must carve it out for herself, in her own way.

One moment of dramatic irony in *Beyond the Veil* arises when we consider the two male perspectives observing Mina for the first time. In Chapter 1, Broch learns about the lone primal mage – who murdered the monks at Carnin monastery – from his partner, Grianan. The story that Grianan weaves leads Broch to view Mina as a monster when he sees her for the first time. Surely, in Broch’s eyes, Mina holds a certain level of power over him when she speaks. Even though Broch sees her as a monster to shy away from, her “voice has powers of its own” and

“the power of an utterance resides in the social designation of the speaking symbol” (Lingis 75; Covino 23). This is only confirmed for him in Chapter 2, when Mina proceeds to murder the prisoners shackled to her and several primal haulers before she is pushed into the Veil. Her final words to Broch are a curse, “I hope your daughter dies before she’s born!” (48). While not included in this thesis excerpt, the reader will come to understand that Mina’s voice did have power, even while she herself was powerless. Broch’s intrinsic understanding of Mina’s designation as a being with power higher than his own is what inevitably leads to her words coming to fruition.

General Rin Vynus, on the other hand, waits for the arriving primal mages from the Veil with his mind set toward finding fighters to add to his military ranks. What he finds, instead, is Mina with twenty dead mages shackled to her and blood on her lips. “She was a fighter, just the kind he’d been hoping would arrive” (60). Although both men view Mina as a monster, and Rin does see her as a strong fighter, the beginning of the novel presented in this thesis shows Mina still at the mercy of her captors. It is not until later in the novel that Mina realizes these men’s perceptions of her monstrous nature is what will inevitably lead to her discovering how to bring about her own autonomy, and the Veil’s inevitable destruction.

One of my goals with *Beyond the Veil* is to twist the inherent mystification that comes with the use of dramatic irony into something unexpected for the reader. According to Booth, “We stand on a secure promontory and watch the character stumble [. . .] we do not discover until the end – and very often not even then – what the true meaning of the events has been” (Booth 287). Because we are given glimpses of the future that Mina’s story will create, and we know from the scholars that the Veil – which is a prominent feature of the world in which Mina lives – is eventually destroyed, the reader ends up building the conclusion from two separate

vantage points along with the scholars. Information even from the scholars in the Passus sections is obscured because the scholars write in a way that presumes a level of historical knowledge in the audience that is equal to an audience in the narrative world, rather than the piecemeal information gleaned through reading the text. Readers outside the narrative world, not privy to this information, must use both the scholars' writings and the stories told within the chapters to determine what may come to fruition as the novel progresses.

In *Beyond the Veil*, there are several moments of dramatic irony, in which the characters are unaware of the larger implications of their actions, and the machinations of those who oppose them; however, my use of polyphony and, by proxy dramatic irony, still leads to an intentional mystification for the reader even while offering clarity through the guise of scholars in the Passus who give more information about the narrative world. In choosing which character acts as the narrator at a specific time – in choosing to allow Mina to be the voice in a single chapter instead of following Bartol's work in the capitol – the reader is allowed to see only a narrowed view of the world which they must situate within the larger narrative. The chapters presented in this thesis lay the groundwork for Chapter 6, not present in this excerpt, in which Mina narrates the Beast Resistance breaking her out of prison. Her lack of knowledge concerning who they are and what they want with her leads to an obfuscation on her part of key details that readers will later learn are more important than Mina had been aware of at the time. Furthermore, this intentional obfuscation of truth means that “a very different effect ensues when the narrator's bewilderment is used not simply to mystify about minor facts of the story but to break down the reader's convictions about truth itself, so that he may be ready to receive *the* truth when it is offered to him” (Booth 285). In this way, even though the reader can see parts of the overall schemes in play throughout *Beyond the Veil*, they are still subject to the limited knowledge of

each character. Readers must rely on the narrators to be truthful in their own thoughts, must parse out what the reader believes to be the ultimate truth in the novel, only to learn that there is still more knowledge to be gleaned from characters they have yet to meet. Still, these characters keep their voices separate from mine in that their own beliefs are occasionally problematic in my own perspective; it is my job as the author to simply write them as they are, speaking their own truth regardless of my disagreement with what they believe. Readers will only accept the polyphonic nature of the novel if they understand that, while the characters have authority over their voices being presented, the author still shapes that narration in a way that empowers readers to glean the knowledge they seek from the novel.

In *Beyond the Veil*, polyphony is used to project the depths of meaning in the text through a multitude of voices. In both novels, Salvatore and myself dissect the characters' search for truth in their own identities. Without the use of individualized voices in this polyphonic narration, the reader would be unable to appreciate the depth of humanity presented in these characters – Salvatore's Drizzt who contends with the svirfneblin's wariness of his dark elf heritage, while being one of the only compassionate drow in existence; and my Mina who eventually learns that the word *humanity* is not a weakness, but an abstract concept of trusting another person with her safety and reciprocating through her actions – and would instead be left unfulfilled by the shallowness of the story. In creating polyphonic stories which rely on multiple voices, I allow readers an opportunity to become more entrenched in the events unfolding within the characters and in the worlds around them. In essence, I use my own form of magic to weave the tale of a demon who refuses to admit that what she truly desires is to feel human.

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PASSUS ONE

The manuscript contained herein is a collection of memories unearthed in the Veiled Lands in 302PV and under analysis in Bareth University's Magical History Department. Through this transcription, we hope to understand the world of antiquity – the countries of Paros and Il'ma – and how the land of Mishnal was returned to its former, complete state via the Veil's destruction.

Below is a compilation of the tattered remnants of four manuscripts dated in the year 780v. We believe this was presented to students as a brief overview of history in the country known as Paros (formerly Mishnal). Whether this was a textbook for students to study from, a pamphlet to guide instructors in the proper etiquette for presenting history, or a storybook posing as history, we are unsure. Further inquiry is required to determine inconsistencies between the presented historical narrative and the memories under analysis in the transcription ward of Bareth University's Magical History Department.

Ω

In the 435th year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

There were two brothers, born only minutes apart, who were given the Kingdom of Mishnal to rule. Young Gideon was next in line to be king by birthright, but he promised his younger brother, whose name is lost to time, a place of high standing in the court as his advisor. As the boys grew, they discovered that the younger brother was gifted in the primal art of magic. When King Gideon married, his wife grew uneasy around the Advisor due to his use of primal magic. What King Gideon eventually came to realize was that the Queen was wise beyond her years and had been correct all along not to trust the Advisor.

Ω

In the 460th year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

King Gideon bolstered the defenses on his castle and prepared to wage war on the demons crawling in from the outer planes. Primal mages were ordered to the frontlines, to fight beside the country's bravest warriors. Those with divine magical abilities within the Church of Tharsis were kept in monasteries to bolster the men and women on the frontlines using their prayers.

Ω

In the 471st year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

The clerics of Tharsis banished demons from Mishnal entirely. Demon corpses were piled high at Carnin, forty miles south of the capital, and set aflame as a sacrifice to Tharsis. A great pit was created in the earth as demon blood seeped into the soil, and a lake appeared overnight where the foul beasts had been destroyed. King Gideon dubbed this the Lake of Sin and ordered monks to erect the Carnin monastery to keep Tharsis's divine power close to such a sacred place.

Ω

In the 473rd year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

The Advisor plotted to overthrow King Gideon. The Advisor foolishly believed he was meant to be the true ruler of Mishnal, that his twin brother was weak and unworthy of the throne. Primal mages stormed the castle, killing hardy, battle-hardened knights with ease. It is said that the Advisor and King Gideon met in the throne room and clashed, sword against magic. Brother against brother.

During their confrontation, the ground shook and deep trenches ripped into the earth, tearing whole towns apart and sending their inhabitants falling into the center of the world, never to be heard from again. Across Mishnal, primal mages lost their power as an ominous grey mist swept in from the west and washed over the land, high above the ground. Torrential gusts picked up the men, women and children using primal magic. Whistling wind burst through the castle and plucked the Advisor from his place on the floor, pinned beneath King Gideon's sword. Hundreds of tornadoes from across Mishnal lifted and coalesced in the air, then shot to the west and burrowed into a vast chasm that had ripped through the country from the northern coast to the south, isolating the populated lands of the east from the forested, untamed lands of the west which were inhabited only by elves and other uncivilized creatures. This western half was covered by what came to be known as the Veil, billowing clouds of grey miasma that reached from the depths of the chasm and miles upward into the sky.

King Gideon and his people waited three days for the Veil to finally settle into place, wondering if others would be pulled through and swallowed by the grey mist. Nothing happened. The clergy learned through prayer that only the primal mages and beasts – those who used magic without prayer to almighty Tharsis – were punished by divine might. Slowly, the citizens rebuilt their towns and found peace again with magical beings no longer threatening them.

Ω

In the 475th year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

King Gideon renamed his country Paros. Over the next three hundred years, primal mages were rare occurrences in Paros. When primal mages were identified and reported by devout citizens of Paros, they were executed in Carnin and their bodies dumped into the Lake of

Sin. Monks used their divine gift from Tharsis to make the lake boil – to ensure the sinners were purged of their evil, primal blood.

Ω

In the 756th year of creation by almighty Tharsis...

King Gideon XI – a descendant of the great King Gideon who ended magic – decreed those primal executions would cease. Primal mages were to be imprisoned in Per'Doa, just north of the capital, then transported to a stone platform with a seven-pointed star etched into its surface next to the Veil. From there, the Veil reached out for the mages with cloying, misty fingers and pulled the mages away from Paros. This was the king's gift to Tharsis to keep their land free of magic.

CHAPTER ONE: BROCH GARIN

Horse whinnies and the ringing of their metal shoes on muddied cobblestone carried along the tunnel leading into Per'Doa prison's courtyard, cutting through the muted chanting of the clergy in the hallowed halls for their evening prayer. Broch peered out from beneath the nearby awning, pulling his cloak tighter over himself to ward off the chill in the air. A sudden downpour had started nearly an hour earlier, and with it came a drop in temperature he wasn't sure he'd ever grow accustomed to. So far north, it was the norm, but his southern blood refused to adjust.

The carriage finally appeared, and he waved a leather-clad hand to the driver, soaked to the bone and grimacing, and hollered a quick greeting. This was the final prisoner transport of the day, delayed by nearly two hours, and the last thing Broch wanted to do was deal with dragging primals through the rain. But there was nothing to be done about it. He and Grianan had to bring the captured primals into the prison for processing before they could be taken to the Veil.

"Took long enough," Grianan laughed, knocking a fist into Broch's arm with one hand and adjusting his belt with the other. How convenient, that Grianan would finally make his way from the warmth of the prison sentry station – and the newest sentry's embrace – only when it was time to move prisoners. Broch couldn't blame Grianan for wanting a little more time with his latest conquest, so he elbowed his partner instead.

Grianan was a solid man, built broadly in the chest and shoulders with a smile that, as Broch had seen firsthand, could make children cry. It was in the eyes, he knew. Grianan's eyes were black as night, shadowed by his heavy brow and unkempt black hair. No matter how

horrifying people thought he was, Grianan was a good man. He always made time for hosting mock training for the children in the capitol's orphanage – most often as a big, burly monster primal the children needed to defeat with their wooden swords that were nothing more than sticks pulled from nearby trees. Those poor children with parents who tried tainting them with magic – and were saved by the church – deserved the kindness Grianan offered them.

Broch nodded at his partner of fifteen years who'd been stuck on opposite transport details for the past few months. "S'get this over with then," he said. What he didn't say was how glad he was to see Grianan again after hearing about the massacre at the Carnin Monastery four months prior.

Grianan walked into the courtyard without a care as rain poured down on him, slicking his hair to his scalp. He paused beside the horse and laughed when it snorted and buried its snout against his shoulder. Broch sighed with a fond smile, pulled his hood up and followed suit to the back of the carriage as the driver stepped down. Animals had a keen sense about the quality of a man. Horses, especially. And he'd yet to see a horse who didn't react this way to Grianan's presence.

"Just the one today," the driver said. His grip on the reins tightened moments before a sudden clap of thunder rolled across the sky and startled the horses. "The knights had to keep his uncle from stopping us. The mother reported both of them."

"Uncle?" Grianan asked in the same clipped way that was common for capitol-born folk while pulling the latch on the back door. He opened it to reveal a boy, no more than twelve years old, lying in a heap on the carriage floor. Broch leaned forward just enough to grab the boy's ankle, then dragged him out and onto the ground. The boy didn't fight. He barely breathed as his body splashed in the mud.

“The uncle was teaching the boy magic, from what the mother says,” the driver said. He ran a hand up through his greying hair to push it back from his face. “He tried to stop the knights so the boy could run, and got a sword to the chest.”

“N’the boy?” Broch asked. He closed the carriage door while Grianan knelt down to inspect their newest prisoner. “D’he run’r cast?”

“Huh?” the driver asked, frowning. “Slow down when you talk, Broch. You know I can’t understand you south-folks.”

Broch’s jaw clenched for a moment. He tended to let Grianan do the talking for the both of them for this very reason. His wife always said that it was easier to add the words Grianan left out, than try to hear the ones tying themselves in knots on Broch’s tongue. “*And* the boy?” he asked. “*Did* he run *or* cast a spell?”

The driver shrugged. “He ran, and I chased him down.”

Grianan shook his head and lifted the heavy shackles on the boy’s wrists as he stood. “Better get him into his cell.” Broch and Grianan nodded to the driver as they walked toward the heavy oak door that would lead them to the cells.

“S’okay, right?” Broch asked once they were inside. He chanced a quick glance back at the boy to find his eyes closed and his head lolling back as Grianan dragged him along. His breeches were tattered, poorly mended from the obvious patches on the knees. One of his shoes was missing.

“Kid’s fine. Knocked out,” Grianan said, then his lips twisted up into that terrible smile of his. After all this time, Broch knew that it was meant to be comforting. It was always in his eyes, how he could tell. “Ignore the old man, Broch. I understand you just fine.”

They paused for Broch to grab a torch from one of the braziers on the wall, then made their way down the wide stone corridor. They walked in a comfortable silence borne from the long years they'd worked together as mage haulers, transporting prisoners from carriage to cell, cell to transport, and finally out to the Veil when it was time. It wasn't until they stopped at the first checkpoint, with a stalwart guard sitting at the ready to allow them passage through the heavy iron-barred door, that Grianan spoke again. "Slim pick this time."

The guard chuckled as he peered down at the boy. "Slim is generous."

"Cells still open?" Grianan asked before Broch could.

"Packed until next transport tomorrow," said the guard. "Should be three carriages getting Veiled, so the pay will be good for you two."

"This one going?" Grianan asked, shaking the boy's shackles. Broch bit back his reaction to hearing the chains rattling. He hated that sound. It crept into his dreams at night and startled him awake in a sweat every few months.

"Got too many others need transporting first," said the guard. He turned to the locking mechanism and fiddled with his key ring. "Back cell, lower level only has one in it. Put him there."

Broch reached down and took the boy's shackled hands from Grianan once the door was open. His friend really was a good man, gentle with kids even, but he was being a bit too rough with the boy. "These primals're gettin' younger ev'ry day," he said while stepping into the adjoining hall. After taking a few steps, he turned back when he didn't hear Grianan following. Broch rolled his eyes when he saw the way the guard smiled at Grianan, or how their gloved hands brushed against one another for the briefest of moments while the guard handed Grianan a set of keys. By the time Grianan's attention was back on the task at hand, Broch had already set

his gaze elsewhere. “S’his name again?” he muttered once they were far enough that the sentry couldn’t hear them.

“Never came up,” Grianan chuckled.

They continued down one hall and another, past cells filled with crying men, whimpering women, and children who begged for their freedom. These people were still primals, and there was nothing to be done about their fate. If they’d only chosen to direct their magical study to Tharsis’s will instead of this sinful path, they wouldn’t be here.

“About time it calmed down, huh?” Grianan asked. He took the torch Broch offered as they walked in front of a barred door, from which emerged a dirty, frail hand. Grianan kicked the hand, his heavy boot snapping the bone. Broch pretended not to care about the agonized shriek from the prisoner who crawled further into the darkness of their cell. Instead, he continued dragging the boy down the stone hall. “Pay’s great and all, but these transports every week are murder on my back.”

Broch chuckled at that, sending his companion a sidelong glance. “*Yer* back? I can hear m’bones creak when I so much’s breathe.”

“Transports will be back up to two months soon,” Grianan said.

Broch was sure his wife would be happy to hear that. They both loved the added income from how often he’d been transporting prisoners to the Veil the last year alone, especially now that they were expecting their first child. Still, he wanted to be there for the birth. And after their child was born, he knew he’d need to take time off to care for them. He’d throw himself into the Abyss to be flayed by fiends before he allowed his mother to stay with Kathrin and the baby. That shrew would drive his wife to murder if given the opportunity to offer her heavy-handed version of help.

They both carried the boy while taking a flight of stairs down to the lower level of the prison. Grianan dropped the boy's feet as soon as they passed the last step.

"Hear about the big one?" Grianan asked as they drew nearer to the cell that would be the boy's home until he was Veiled.

"What big one?"

Grianan chuckled, the sound low and grating. "Massacre at the Lake of Sin, right?" he asked. "Monks all torn to pieces?"

Word of the massacre had hit Barrow's Den first – the small town where he and Kathrin had settled down – being only ten miles north of the Carnin Monastery where it had happened. How could he not have heard about it? "Yeah," he finally said. "Four months later'n Kathrin's still thinkin' a primal gang's comin' fer us next."

"Was a woman," Grianan said, slowing his steps when Broch did. He turned, his dark eyes almost haunted as he continued. "Primal. Some monster monks kept in the basement, I hear."

There was no denying something had killed the monks in the monastery, but every time Broch heard the story of what had caused their deaths, the truth seemed to stretch and twist. Some said it was a pack of wolves who killed the monks on the orders of a rogue primal attuned to nature. Others said that the monks and townspeople who had gathered for the only legal mage execution outside of the Veil transport had been slaughtered by a group of bandits in search of gold from the monastery's coffers. Kathrin was positive that it was a gang of primals who'd crawled out of their hiding place to attack Paros's most sacred monastery. Broch hadn't heard anyone mention a single person committing such a heinous act themselves. Broch didn't think it was possible for a lone primal to wreak so much devastation in a single afternoon.

“Was there,” Grianan said. Broch found his breath catching slightly when he heard the way Grianan’s voice trembled. In all the years they’d known each other, his companion had never sounded so small. “Saw for myself.”

“Y’saw what?”

“Tiny little thing, all covered in blood,” Grianan said. “Thought she was a survivor.”

“Please, sir, I need water,” a nearby prisoner rasped. “Please...”

“Forty dead all around her,” Grianan continued. “Thought she was a kid, Broch. So small and scared like she was. Traumatized, really. Stefen tried talking to her—”

“Stefen,” Broch said, frowning at the familiarity of the name. He vaguely recalled a boy just barely old enough to shave with eyes too close together. “That little shit who wan’ed t’be a cleric? I haven’t seen’m in months.”

Grianan chuckled at that, but the sound rooted itself in his throat and nearly choked him. “Got himself booted over to us,” he said, nodding. “Church said he was better suited to hauling than using Tharsis’s divine gifts.”

“Praise Tharsis’s justice,” Broch said, his eyes closing and head bowing to offer a quick prayer to their god.

“Their holy light shines,” Grianan finished.

Broch looked down at the prisoner again, finding the boy’s eyes were still closed. He focused on the cancelling collar around the boy’s throat, a simple steel band engraved with runes written by clerics to keep the boy’s primal spells from firing off. They’d spent years learning to craft items like this using Tharsis’s divine power to stop the primals from tainting the country. How lucky Paros was for their god to gift common men and women – who showed their eternal devotion through prayer – with the ability to contain the evil lying dormant in primals.

“So Stefen tries to talk to the girl,” Grianan said, drawing Broch’s attention back to his friend’s story. “One look at her, and I’m thinking I’m looking right into the Abyss. Never seen a primal like her, Broch.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. They’d faced plenty of primals in the fifteen years they’d been working together. Some were crazy enough to make claims of infinite power, but none had ever truly scared them. The primals all died in the end.

“Sin’s just swimming in her eyes,” Grianan said. “Mouth like a beast. Claws, Broch. Monsters from the old legends, all rolled into one. Surprised she didn’t have a tail and wings, too.”

“That can’t be right,” Broch said, his narrowed gaze drifting over toward Grianan. They turned a corner and made their way down a hall that Broch hadn’t been to in nearly a year. Had the prison really filled up this much without him realizing it? These cells were once used for the most heinous criminals before they started sending primals to the Veil, from what he’d been told. Most often, they were left empty since there were only enough primals caught every couple months to warrant a transport. “Yer listenin’ to those bardies’n the taverns too much, Grianan.”

Grianan nodded toward the cell at the end of the hall. “Been here for four months already,” he said. “Clerics are still working on something to contain her.”

Broch’s stomach soured as they finally stopped in front of the cell. Tension coiled around his throat and tightened the muscles in his shoulders while Grianan pulled out the keys he’d gotten from the sentry earlier. While he searched for the key, Broch peered inside, searching for this mysterious, monstrous woman who was supposed to be responsible for the deaths of an entire monastery’s worth of monks. The fire from Grianan’s torch flickered just enough for

Broch to make out a figure on the far wall, so he took the torch into his own hand and held it steady. The small figure shuffled slightly, but no sound escaped the cell.

Broch's brows lowered and he pushed the torch between the bars to get a better look at a head of matted auburn hair that slowly lifted. Burning orange eyes with feline-slitted pupils snapped open, locking onto him. The torch flickered again, and the flames dancing there in her eyes seared his soul with their intensity. The collar on her throat wouldn't be strong enough to hold her; he knew that in an instant. Neither were the chains keeping her clawed hands anchored to the stone wall above her head. Surely, the Church knew the normal restraints wouldn't be enough to hold her. When Grianan unlocked the door to the cell, Broch jolted at the way the tumblers echoed in the silent corridor.

"Y'can't seriously want to put this kid in with *that*," Broch breathed, his eyes widening in horror when Grianan pushed the door open.

"No room," Grianan said with a shrug. He nodded to the bound primal woman. "She can't move from the wall. Clerics made sure of it. Skirt around the bars, and put him in that corner there."

Broch glanced at the shackles nearest the bars, in the opposite corner from the woman. When he looked back at her, he found her thin, dirty lips stretching into a smile, revealing sharp teeth that belonged in the mouth of an animal. He knew he shouldn't be afraid of her. He'd captured primals who'd enhanced their bodies to be more animalistic, to be in tune with the beasts they controlled. But as he took a step closer, and the torchlight caught on the dark stripes on her pale skin, Broch froze. Those stripes, he'd learned as a child, belonged to demons from the oldest legends. No primal would tattoo themselves like that. To bear such a mark was a curse. Why would someone who looked hardly more than sixteen have done this?

Her lips parted and a crackling whisper of a breath escaped her. “Don’t be scared,” she rasped. Her voice skittered up the length of Broch’s spine and forced him to meet her burning gaze once more. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Ye—”

“Don’t talk to her,” Grianan spat, pulling the torch from his grasp. “Hurry and get him locked in.”

Broch shook his head to break free of her stare. He forced his feet to move, his grip to tighten on the boy’s shackles. He thought better of dragging the boy and instead hefted him onto one shoulder and stayed flush against the bars while carrying him to the vacant corner. Even without looking at her, Broch could feel the primal woman’s eyes on him, piercing through his leather armor and fur-lined cloak, peeling away at his courage with every short, shuffling step. He glanced at her again and found her eyes following him. Her legs were still pulled close, her knees touching, and her feet spread at an unnatural angle. She seemed so uncomfortable.

Surely, he could help her get more comfortable. She’d said she wouldn’t hurt him, after all.

Broch dropped the boy and winced at the heavy thud of his body on the stone, but it was enough to pull him away from her mesmerizing gaze. He couldn’t concern himself with whether his lost grip had hurt the boy. Not then. Not with her watching him, waiting for him to make some mistake. He removed the boy’s shackles and replaced them with the heavier ones bolted to the wall. The boy had more slack in his chains than the woman. It didn’t matter. It was just as likely this boy wouldn’t make it to the next transport. Once Broch had double-checked to make sure the boy was secure, he stepped away and pressed his back to the bars as he moved toward the open door.

The woman's tongue darted out, gliding along her sharp, glimmering teeth. A lewd hum slipped from between her lips and ended on a rumbling growl that curled in the back of her throat. Broch darted out of the cell and held his breath until Grianan had slammed and locked the door. They backed away, watching as the torchlight faded until she was bathed in darkness once more.

Broch could still feel her watching him.

"What the hell was that, Grianan?" he breathed. Broch grabbed Grianan's arm and turned away from the cell, taking heavy, hurried steps to put more distance between them and the monster they'd encountered.

"See what I mean?" Grianan asked. "Primal, Broch. Most evil I've ever seen."

"That's no normal primal," Broch spat. "That's a damn demon!"

Grianan dropped the torch to the ground and threw a hand over Broch's mouth to silence him, using the weight of his body to force Broch against the nearby wall. "Keep quiet," he whispered. Broch's nose crinkled in disgust at the smell of wet horse wafting from Grianan's glove. "Getting tossed on the next Veil transport once the Church can contain her better. Gotta lay low to get her on there, so we can be rid of her before the king finds out."

Broch's eyes narrowed in confusion. Why would they need to keep this information from the king? What possible reason could Grianan or any of the other haulers who'd apprehended that monstrous woman have for not telling their monarch the truth? He shook Grianan's hand away from his face with a sharp jolt that sent a twinge of pain down to his shoulder. "King Gideon knows about th'Veil transports," he said. "Why lie about her bein' more'n a primal?"

Grianan glanced down the hall, toward the exit they should have been walking toward already. "Demons are extinct, Broch," he said, turning his attention back to his partner. "Gotta

get rid of her before anyone pieces together that those aren't just primal tattoos." Who in their right mind would think a mage would curse themselves with tattoos like those? "Just one demon? We can handle it. She calls up her brothers and sisters? Paros gets obliterated."

"If they're extinct, there's no brother's 'n sisters t' call," Broch said.

"They're extinct, *she* shouldn't exist," Grianan said, taking a step back. His arms crossed over his broad chest and Broch listened to the creak of his gloved hands clenching into fists.

"She's here, though. Killed all those people, one fell swoop. Gotta kill her with the Veil."

"Why not just—"

"Clerics told us it's the only way," Grianan said. "Came down from the arch-priestess, Broch. No one knows she's here, what she is, but who needs to know."

Broch's hand drifted to the hilt of his sword, a weapon he trained with every day but rarely found cause to draw outside of training. "S'we kill her now," he said. He knew Grianan would disagree with him. That wasn't the protocol. They weren't authorized to take these primals' lives into their own hands, and they both knew it. The king had decreed that the Veil was the best way to handle them. The Church of Tharsis oversaw the prison, as they had overseen all primal executions since the great Primal War. He and Grianan were only supposed to haul them from one place to the next, nothing more. "Why not just finish it now'n be done with it all?"

Grianan shook his head and the sigh that drifted from him seemed to pull the last bits of his youth right along with it. In that moment, he seemed older to Broch, more worn than ever before. "Stefen tried," Grianan said. "Tried to tie her up when we saw the evil in her. Got too close."

Was that why Stefen hadn't been around then? Broch had thought he'd just been assigned to the same rotation as Grianan, missing one another in guard changes by mere minutes. Based on Grianan's expression, Broch knew he'd been wrong.

"Those claws you saw? Ripped right through his chest like cabbage." Broch found himself shuddering along with Grianan. "Sounded like it, too, if you ignored his screaming."

"How did'ya get her'n here, then?" If that woman was so powerful, enough to be able to take a young, strong man like Stefen down with ease, then how could they possibly have done anything to stop her?

"Used him as a distraction," Grianan said. "One of the others knocked her out with a mace while she was playing with his guts." Torchlight from the ground flickered and highlighted the sickened pallor of his face. His hands lifted in the space between them, and he pretended to hold something, feel it, prod it with his fingers and roll it between his suddenly shaking hands. "At first, we thought she was still a primal, maybe just confused. Brought her here, and the clerics checked her out."

"N'why can't y'do it now'th her bound up like that?"

"Get too close with her awake, she tricks you," Grianan said. "Gets you talking. Knows things only you should know if you start talking."

"So, th'Church really knows," Broch breathed. "N'they said t'keep it quiet?"

Grianan nodded. "Two more months, and they'll have something to contain her on a transport. Arch-priestess said to keep her here until it's ready, and we make sure she's Veiled."

"Why wouldn't they tell th'king?" Broch asked again. "Th'king should know demons're comin'round again."

Grianan shrugged. “It’s the will of Tharsis,” he said. “King Gideon will make an example, make a name for himself in history, more than holding the throne. He finds a demon and executes her in the capitol? Arch-priestess says it’ll bring out her kin from their planes.”

Broch supposed that did make sense, but it didn’t sit well with him. Everyone in Paros knew that primals were taken to the Veil to be disposed of, and while it might cause a panic if people knew that there was a demon from the old legends living and breathing in Per’Doa, it was still important for their king to know the truth. Still, Grianan wasn’t a liar and he was as devout in following Tharsis’s teachings as every other citizen of Paros. If this was their god’s will, then he wouldn’t question it.

“We wait for them to finish the stronger bindings for her,” Grianan said again. “Transport her when it’s ready, toss her in, and we move on. No one needs to know the truth.”

Broch peered back down the darkened hallway toward where the prisoner sat chained in her cell. Now that he knew the truth of what she was, Broch would be one of the guards in that transport carrying the demon. More than likely, that would be the last transport he was on before taking time off to care for Kathrin and their newborn child. He wanted nothing to do with it, but there was no way to avoid his duty. Not unless his child was born earlier than expected. Still, he’d sworn to keep the citizens of Paros safe from the primals and their evil machinations. That demon was the worst sort of evil he’d ever met. He had to make sure she was taken care of.

“Keep it quiet,” Grianan said, picking up the torch again. “We’ll be rid of her in two months.”

CHAPTER TWO: MINA

“Abominations like you are why we call it the Lake of Sin,” Father Arux hissed while hovering over Mina’s crumpled body. “You still have your uses, though.” His fingers brushed over the newest slash on her wrist, cold and bony digits sending ice through her veins. Father Arux had just finished bleeding her for the third time in two weeks. He and the other monks used her demonic blood to make the Lake of Sin boil when they executed primal mages. To them, she was a means to an end, a cruel gift from their god Tharsis to punish the wicked. “Because of your blood, the monarchy can send those sinners right where they belong.”

Mina didn’t say a word. Instead, she stared at the cracked stone floor she’d been tossed onto. They believed she couldn’t speak, so it was for the best if she kept that ridiculous notion intact for as long as possible. She never spoke around the monks in this generation, and the last one who’d heard her voice had died nearly 20 years prior. She talked to herself though, when she was left dangling from the leather straps that held her to the wall in the cellar of the monastery. She’d been talking to herself for a few hundred years in this cellar, so the conversation was never dull.

“Father Arux,” came a low voice from the doorway, its owner shadowed and barely visible to the man standing above her. Mina saw him clearly; Brother Pradi, the youngest of the monks of this current generation with his pale grey eyes and light brown hair cut short against his scalp. “We’re ready to begin the last of the executions today.”

And then it happened. Father Arux was so ready to get to the execution that he forgot to reset her leather bindings through the strong iron loop on the wall. He did enjoy taunting her, and had for the past 40 years, but Father Arux was old. Forgetful. This was to be the last execution he

led, due to his old age. After today, he was meant to be sequestered away in another wing of the monastery, copying tomes of holy scripture for the postulants to distribute to the commoners as the monastery's newest Sacrist. Father Arux swept out of the room and shut the door, and a slow smile crept across Mina's chapped lips once his soft steps moved up the stairs into the monastery proper.

"Fool," she rasped into the silent cellar. She sat up and didn't take any time to look around her. This room was as familiar to her as the gleaming blue sky was to the people who lived above ground.

This was just the opportunity she'd been waiting for, and there was no way she would let it go to waste. Mina brought her hands to her lips, bared her pointed teeth that pierced her own lips while chewing if she wasn't careful, and ripped through the leather straps that had been rubbing her skin raw for months. The monks didn't want to waste resources in acquiring strong chains to hold her captive. Instead, she was supposed to be anchored to the wall with her arms stretched high above her head so she couldn't bite through the bindings. Bloodletting left her weak enough that she didn't have the strength to pull her full weight up to break free. She'd been able to break free only a handful of times, but never made it far. Mina stretched her hands and considered the deadly claws that she couldn't wait to sink into someone's flesh. These monks would pay for every drop of her blood they'd spilled in the last three centuries.

Mina carefully stood and padded across the cellar to the small table that held a block of salted meat. They always left this out for her to stare at, and now she was going to enjoy herself.

'He doesn't remember locking her up... Have to go check,' Brother Pradi's thoughts echoed in her mind.

“Damn,” Mina hissed. It was just her luck that Brother Pradi would be sent back down to make sure she was in place. After far too many years of being their little torture project, she wasn’t taking it any longer. She was tired of the voices trickling through her head and fighting to keep them at bay as the villagers gathered on the grounds just above her head to witness a dozen or so mages being executed for their “evil blood.” She had to end the hundreds of thoughts from people she only wanted dead.

She bent down and bit into the meat, just to get a little more nourishment than normal, as the door opened and Brother Pradi rushed into the cellar.

Past the bottles of sacramental wine, his eyes narrowed in the hopes of seeing just a little better. Mina held her breath, waiting for him to stop mere feet from where she was usually bound on the wall. *‘She’s gone. The monster is...’*

“Right behind you,” she rasped, breathing in the scent of fresh sweat slicking the back of his neck. Her fingers curved around his throat slowly, a sensual caress of her claws over his flesh.

“Tharsis, God of all,” Brother Pradi whispered. He shook in her grasp, even as Mina pressed herself against his cloak covered back. “Grant me—”

“Your god doesn’t hear you,” she whispered. “But I hear *everything*. Beg, Pradi. If you’re sincere, I’ll let you go.”

“Please, don’t do this,” he whimpered. “Please, I beg—” Ripping his throat out had Mina taking a shuddering gasp of delight. Bright flowers of crimson speared across the ground she’d been forced to sleep on since her birth.

The chanting had already begun upstairs as a line of innocent mages were led to their execution at the king’s order. No one heard Brother Pradi’s gasping pleas for mercy, his ragged

breaths as Mina pushed him to the ground and devoured his flesh until he was nothing more than a lifeless heap of sinew and bones.

Ω

A heavy jolt in the transport carriage ripped Mina from the memory of Brother Pradi's death six months ago just when she started replaying her slow trek up the stairs into the monastery proper for the first time.

Whimpers of other prisoners drifted through the air, barely audible over the unsteady crackling of wooden wheels and horse hooves in the barren canyon leading from Per'Doa prison. Mina kept her head down, not wanting to attract more attention to herself. She didn't need to look at the other prisoners to know they were staring at her striped skin, or the tips of her pointed ears peeking out from between the matted strands of her hair.

The guards had already given her a hard time when they'd pulled her from the cell and set thick iron bracers around her forearms, locking them to both her chest and the heavy metal cancelling-collar around her throat that was identical to the other prisoners, so her claws couldn't be used against them as a weapon. One prisoner thought about the long claws at the tips of her fingers where human nails should have been and how, if her arms weren't bound in bracers to the cancelling-collar, she might be capable of killing the guards and setting them all free.

Her gaze drifted down to her bare knees and the rough canvas dress the guards forced her to wear, to the deep burgundy stripes in her flesh that had been there since birth. She'd never been told much about the way she looked, and she had only been able to catch glimpses of herself in small, brackish puddles as she grew older, strapped to the walls of the ever winter-chilled wine cellar of Carnin's monastery.

The slim boy sitting to her right bumped into her as the carriage shook, and her eyes cut to the side to take in his profile. His familiar hollow cheeks and dazed brown eyes, the scraggly chestnut hair with its uneven cut. He'd been brought to Per'Doa prison two months ago. She'd spoken with him countless times through the darkness in their shared cell because he wouldn't shut up. He hadn't been able to see her, but she'd memorized his every feature.

"Sorry," he rasped.

Mina shook her head and looked away again. There wasn't anything to say to him. But maybe his presence would finally be useful today.

"I'm Barrett," he whispered, leaning a little closer to her. He cast a quick glance toward the guard sitting at the end of the carriage, whose bulbous nose crinkled in disgust at the stench coming from two dozen unwashed prisoners. Broch. She remembered him, too.

'Look at the claws.' The woman across from Mina had thoughts that scratched deep in her ears enough that Mina nearly recoiled from it. Disgusting. *'Is this really a demon?'*

"What's your name?" Barrett asked, still staring at Mina's profile. *'What did Uncle Tora teach me about stripes...'*

Mina ignored him. He wasn't going to find out any more than he needed to. There was no point in letting Barrett realize just who she was. She'd been able to see him so clearly in the prison while he'd squinted and struggled to see her outline, just another of her inherent "gifts" that had been passed down from her demon of a father. She'd made sure to keep the reason for her capture a secret during their hushed conversations.

'It looks scary,' Barrett thought. *'Maybe I can get it to help.'*

"So, what's—"

"Hey," Broch said. "Shut yer trap, boy!"

Mina bit back any outward reaction, but she couldn't help the instant flash of giddiness that swelled within her while imagining Broch's head rolling across the floor at her feet. Instead, she lifted her gaze to the small-barred window and tried to drown out the whispers of thoughts from the other prisoners. It was more of that incessant, *"I don't want to die... I didn't mean to use that spell... I have a family,"* nonsense that gave her a headache.

The scenery was all the same, what little of it she could actually see. Miles of muddied oranges and browns stretched skyward, twisting together in twin walls on either side of the road they travelled down.

Mina knew where they were headed.

The Veil.

She'd never seen it for herself, always having been held prisoner in the basement of the monastery, but she'd heard plenty of stories from the occasional bright-eyed monk who believed she could be converted to accepting her torture as a gift to Tharsis. No one knew where the Veil led, or what happened to the people pushed into it, but it had to be better than mass executions and dumping scores of bodies into the Lake of Sin that boiled once her blood had been added to it. All in the name of some King, who claimed that mages were power-hungry sinners, and most especially in the name of their almighty deity of all creation, Tharsis. She'd never used magic, and she hadn't committed any crimes. She was just a half-demon, and someone had found out about the monk's little secret project. A demon going on a rampage and slaughtering innocent villagers was much worse, in the monarchy's eyes, than primal mages. So, they captured Mina and imprisoned her in Per'Doa.

She probably would have gotten away if she hadn't stopped to eat the other monks and a few of the villagers. That was just poor planning on her part.

“Is that really the Veil?” a woman sitting across the narrow carriage whimpered. Her real voice was just as grating as her thoughts. Several prisoners craned their necks to catch a glimpse through the single window, pulling on the length of chain that bound their shackled wrists to one another and dragging uninterested prisoners closer to the window. Rounds of gasps, broken by staccatoed breaths and strangled sobs, filled the too-humid air.

Mina could nearly taste the rising panic of the other prisoners. Barrett went rigid at her side, and the chains linking his wrists together, then to her and the ten-year-old girl on his other side, rattled as he started to tremble.

“We’re gonna die,” Barrett said, his voice barely audible even to Mina’s more sensitive hearing with how the other prisoners’ voices grew louder, more worried than before.

She turned back toward the window and felt her chest seize at the sprawling expanse of grey and silver clouds stretching from the ground into the sky above, rolling lazily over one another. There was no end in either direction as they left the canyon and found the worn, muddy path on the open plains before the waypoint.

She felt the carriage’s wheels dip into little trenches of previous treks down the path, and her stomach dropped right along with them. Still, she couldn’t get out of this transport. There was nothing she could do just yet.

‘Why are they doing this to us?’

‘I’m innocent! I never hurt anyone!’

‘I just used a spell to make my crops grow faster.’

Mina didn’t care for all their incessant complaining, but that day she understood why they were all so scared. Why the man several feet from her started struggling and elbowed a

woman in the face before Broch stood and bashed a curved club into the side of his head. Why the few children present clung to each other in desperation.

The billowing miasma they still hurtled toward was going to be the end of them. And their only crime was their magic: something these people were simply born with. She'd heard the monks talking about the primal mages being born with their magic, that their power was inherently different from the divine magic clerics received from praying to Tharsis. Primals were wild, untamable, unteachable. No amount of prayer would change the magic coursing through a primal's veins. They didn't need conduits or beads or talismans to cast their spells.

Their natural affinity for magic was what made them dangerous to Tharsis's followers.

'I'm not gonna let them kill me.' Mina's eyes cut to the side at the sudden thought from Barrett. Instead of the scared little boy she'd shared a cell with for two months, he was acutely aware of everything around them. As it turned out, she wasn't the only one trying to figure out the best way to break free.

Mina nearly shivered at the prospect of using him as bait. With the guards' attention focused on the escape attempt, she could kill them and get out of these shackles.

'I've got that spell Uncle Tora taught me. I'll use that...'

The carriage came to a stop and Broch groaned while hoisting himself up from his seat. The rubbing leather of his armor grated on Mina's fraying nerves as he left the prisoners to speak with the driver. As soon as he was gone, the cramped space was alight with murmurs and trembling pleas for mercy from Tharsis. As if the monarchy's god was going to help a bunch of lawless primals. The monks ensured that Mina learned how little Tharsis cared for primals. That was a god for the magicless, the mundane humans of this world; humans who possessed natural magic could never hope to sway Tharsis's mercy for themselves.

Still, she kept her attention on the men outside. The guards who would unknowingly be her ticket to freedom.

“Got a monster n’t there, Baix,” Broch said, clapping his hand around another soldier’s forearm in greeting. “S’bound, but than’t hold a demon fer long.”

“And you left her in there, Broch?” Baix asked. “To kill the others?”

All eyes in the back of the carriage shifted to Mina. She didn’t care about getting these people their freedom. They could all rot in the Veil. Mina was going to get herself out of there and find a place where no one would ever bother her again.

‘I knew there was something wrong with that girl,’ a middle-aged woman with short greying hair thought from near the door. ‘Hasn’t said a word. Staring at nothing the whole time. Is she going to kill us?’

Mina set her attention outside once more in favor of focusing on the swelling tension in the air around her. Just beyond them, she could see the waypoint that led to the Veil. A large seven-pointed star etched into the stone circle set on the ground. She didn’t know what the land had looked like before the Veil appeared, but now there was a sheer cliff that touched the edge of the pale grey mist. Guards stood in wait for the prisoners’ departure, each of them armed and ready for anyone to attempt to break out.

If she listened closely enough, she could hear one guard going through the steps of their execution.

‘... prisoners on the stone... chain them down and run... watch the Veil take them over the edge... Again! Put the prisoners...’

“Orders,” came another voice from what Mina assumed had been the driver’s seat. She remembered that clipped way he spoke. Grianan. “King heard about it. Said to Veil it.” That was

a lie. She'd heard Grianan telling Broch that the king had no idea there was a demon in the prison. That the arch-priestess had been the one pulling the strings to keep her true identity a secret from the king.

"They're dead either way. No'ne gets outta there," Broch chuckled. *'It's much easier to drag corpses than listen to them crying, that's for sure.'*

Mina's breath rushed out in a great huff, and she turned toward Barrett when she felt him fidgeting. His shackles clanked so loudly, overtaking everything else, she was sure someone would be by any moment to find out what the noise was. But then she saw it, the tightening of his jaw as he wrestled a thin bit of metal into the keyhole and started wildly wriggling it in place. He was a clever little thing. She had to give him credit for that. If he hurried, maybe he could pick the lock on her own shackles as well. It would be so much easier to slaughter the guards if she could use her hands.

"S'get 'em now. Get it done. I need t'clean their filthy magic smell off me," Broch said. Only Mina could hear that he just wanted to get back home to his wife before she gave birth to their first child.

"Almost," Barrett whispered just when the door opened and Grianan yanked on the thick iron chain linking the prisoners together. A girl no older than ten tumbled into the dirt with a sharp cry of pain, dragging Barrett out immediately after her. Mina planted her feet to avoid falling, and clumsily stumbled out, coming face to face with the hulking soldier, Grianan, once she'd tilted her head back to look up into his gleaming onyx eyes. There was no time to really look at him though. Not when the tension on Barrett's shackles gave way and the thin boy started to run.

Prisoners cheered in a chorus of encouragement, but Mina knew it wouldn't last. She watched as Grianan gripped the crossbow at his hip and lifted it with only one hand, the other still holding tightly to the lead on her restraints.

“Stop right there, boy!” Broch bellowed.

‘I’ll cut the muscles on his arm so it’s useless!’ Barrett thought. “Farrah nost—”

He wasn't going to make it in time. He should've started the spell before running. Mina felt some strange compulsion to call out to him before it was too late. “Barrett!” she screeched, drawing his attention and accidentally cutting off the concentration for his spell. She didn't know what had possessed her to yell out to him. It was stupid. She should have been trying to wriggle free and get away, to use him as a distraction like she'd planned.

The bolt shuddered from Grianan's weapon and sliced through the air. Barrett's head turned just in time for their eyes to meet, and only a moment later there was a thin shaft of wood spearing through his heart.

‘Mina...?’ The soft, hopeful voice he'd heard in his dark cell had been a demon. The voice that had given him a welcome distraction in the pitch blackness of Per'Doa prison had been sitting right next to him in the carriage, and he hadn't realized it. He'd listened to her and had imagined his mother comforting him in her own special way by telling him not to cry because it was annoying.

“Little freak,” Grianan spat. He turned to the remaining prisoners as the bolt sent Barrett tumbling lifelessly to the ground. “Let that be a lesson, you lot!”

Instead of feeling Grianan pulling on the chain, Mina could only see Barrett. She listened as closely as possible for any sign he was alive, but there was nothing. No thoughts, no rise and fall of his breath, no fluttering beat of his heart. He was gone.

And then it hit her all at once, that familiar coppery scent carried on the wind filling her next breath. Barrett's blood.

"Get a move on," Grianan said. He pulled on the chain again, but Mina didn't move. Her bare feet stayed planted in the earth, the soles soaking up the chill of the dry soil. Heat poured through her, wriggling deep down into the pit of her stomach, and igniting a hunger she hadn't felt in months.

"You really killed him," Mina said. The hand around Grianan's weapon tightened, the leather on his bracer grinding in the sudden silence. Streaks of foreign, fear-filled thoughts from the other prisoners and skyrocketing heartbeats had her pulling in a ragged, wanting breath. "That's all it took to—"

A bright flash of pain across the side of her head from Grianan's crossbow grip cut off the words, but the blood pooling in her mouth sent her mind spinning even further. It was a sudden shot of energy, thrumming under her tingling skin. That was just the push Mina needed, even as she fell to the ground and her claws scraped her chin. She'd planned to escape quietly, but this way seemed like too much fun to pass up.

Grianan took a step back as she started laughing. The sound was soft at first, just a small, stifled giggle that grew until her striped shoulders quaked with the force of her glee. The metal looped around her throat and holding her arms to her chest groaned while she sat up on her knees. Her burnished orange eyes locked onto his face; the feline slitted pupils narrowed to thin hairs of black. Moments later, the short chain connecting her bound arms to her throat shattered.

Mina moved before she knew just what she was doing. Her hands were still trapped together, but with the added mobility she was able to rip her claws through the leather armor covering Grianan's chest while vaulting from the ground. Another slash at him had her fingers

piercing his flesh and one claw digging between his ribs. The blood he coughed in her face was delectable. The other prisoners screamed in terror, unable to use their magic to defend themselves while still bound with cancelling-collars. She rounded on the little girl who had been chained to Barrett's other side.

'It's a monster!' With the length of chain attached to her collar still connecting her to the little girl and other prisoners, Mina was dragged in different directions when they scattered to get away. The girl shrieked as Mina pounced on her, unable to move fast enough, to stop Mina from tearing her throat out with one quick swipe of her claws.

Two guards came rushing forward from their posts, swords drawn and ready to tear through her. Mina lifted the girl's limp body and threw it at Grianan, laughing again as her lifeless, gangly limbs tangled with his and knocked him down.

There was no time to watch Grianan struggle to get the girl off of him. The other prisoners started to scramble one way and another, searching for freedom from the monster that had been let loose. Yet their chains bound them to her. She had to stop them from holding her back. How could she get to the guards if these worthless mages kept pulling her away? Splashes of crimson dotted the ground as Mina pounced from one person to the next. She had no time to savor each succulent piece of flesh she bit into. There were too many to choose from, but she wanted everything. The man who'd stared at her claws. She wouldn't be freeing any of these prisoners. The woman who'd wondered if Mina would kill them; she'd been right to be afraid.

Mina roared as a sword slashed across her thigh, but it didn't slow her down. The scents in the air mingled, sweaty prisoners and their pungent musk, flying dirt, skin and muscle and bone, until Mina was left in a mindless frenzy. On a desperate quest to feel the life leaving each

of her victims. Heaving groans left her, unchecked, and she shuddered against the sudden swell of sheer *want* that nearly doubled her over.

A second attack, an arrow from an unknown guard in the distance, pierced her shoulder. Still, she didn't want to stop. She couldn't. The pain was non-existent. Why would she give up this sudden rush of desire propelling her forward? The weight of the lifeless prisoners lining the ground, still connected to her, had Mina struggling to get to the next guard as he stood with his sword readied.

"Come on," she growled. Mina licked her lips, a quick flash of pink swiping over bright red, and groaned in delight. "Take me. That's your job, right?"

'I knew this'd happen...'

She took a small step forward, her eyes flashing with excitement as his sword-grip tightened. Soft grey wriggled in the edges of her vision, distorting the man she belatedly realized was Broch. Brackish mud splashed onto her calves with each step, clawing its way up the length of her thin legs. Wind whipped at her hair and the rough canvas dress she'd been given to wear in the prison. "What are you waiting for? Reinforcements?"

Mina smiled while glancing off to the right where she could hear the archer notching another arrow. She wouldn't let him catch her by surprise again. The slow throbbing in her shoulder was proof enough that she'd let her guard down.

They weren't going to stand in her way. It was something she couldn't afford. If they caught her, allowed the Veil to pull her into its icy embrace from the stone platform like they'd been planning, there was no telling what would happen to her. She might die, and while that was ideal compared to being used as a pincushion for the monks or sitting and rotting in a cell, she wanted more.

The wind changed direction just as Broch rushed forward, his sword held high and his lips parted in a furious scream. Mina hadn't expected him to move so quickly, or for her footing to falter over a length of chain on the ground behind her as she stepped back to ready herself. Tendrils of agony soared from her ankle, ripping another sharp cry from her. As quickly as it came, the pain faded into nothingness, overwhelmed by the deep need within that ached for the trail of blood dripping down Broch's cheek. It wasn't his blood. There wasn't a single scratch on him, but Mina knew that could change just as soon as he was in range.

She ducked to the right when he slashed at her. The blade sailed through the air, splitting the torrential wind sweeping up from the Veil.

'The wind's too strong,' Broch thought. 'This isn't normal!'

"Broch, it's coming!" shouted another guard from a fair distance away, closer to the carriage that had been pulled back down the path. "Get out of there!"

Mina turned and brought her bound hands up to block the next attack. Her teeth ground together while fighting the weight of his blade against the metal bracers she'd been shackled with. He had a lot going for him in a grapple, and she knew that there was only a short amount of time before fatigue would set in for her.

"Jus' go through th'Veil," Broch said while glaring down at her. "S'where yer kind belongs."

"My kind?" Mina hissed. "None of these humans are *my* kind!"

"Yer all monsters. Primals, demons. Yer all th'same with that filthy primal magic in yer blood. Y'don't belong'n Paros."

"Says who? Your king? He's just some sad lump of fat sitting on a throne, claiming that he's doing this for the sake of his people. He says Tharsis ordered the death of primals." She

could only assume that was the case. It's what she'd heard the monks saying for hundreds of years, after all.

“And our Lord's wisdom b'yond our years,” Broch said. *‘Just a little more... Push them over already! There!’*

Mina gasped as Broch kicked her back toward the stone platform and scurried away. His sword clattered to the ground and chains rattled and skittered against one another as she was wrenched further back, closer to the edge of the cliff. She dropped to her knees and dug her claws into the softened earth, fighting with every last ounce of her strength to keep the dead prisoners who had been launched over the edge and into the Veil from dragging her down with them.

“You bastards!” she roared. Metal links pushed into her flesh, pulled at her throat. Mina knew it wasn't worth fighting, but she couldn't stop herself from trying to get to Broch. Fingers of mist coiled around her arms as her stomach scraped over the stone platform. Grey wisps slipped around her waist, her throat. Fiery heat soared up over her scalp as her rage swelled when her legs were wrenched into the air just after her feet touched the cliff edge. She wouldn't forget the way Broch simply watched her struggle to stay alive, even after her fingers finally lost their purchase on a ridge in the seven-pointed star etched into the platform and she was sucked into the Veil.

The guards rushed away from the stone circle as Mina disappeared with the rest of the dead prisoners. The wind from the Veil's billowing clouds kicked up clumps of blood-soaked soil. Torn, battered bodies of their comrades rolled, thudding as their limbs tumbled across the ground and into the mist.

Broch listened, breathless and trembling in relief, to the roaring wind consume the eerie rattle of the prisoners' chains. The mist coiled back into itself once the stone was clear, and the remaining guards continued waiting for some sign that the demon they had managed to dispatch was going to break free of fate's clutches.

"Grianan?"

Broch turned to find a hauler he didn't know holding tightly to his dearest friend, kneeling beside him with a bloody hand pressed tightly to his bared chest. Grianan looked at Broch and offered that same smile that made children weep. "We did it," he rasped. "Kiss your baby for me, Broch..."

He stopped breathing, though his smile stayed in place. His sightless black eyes stayed open, glassy and speckled with blood and dirt. Now wasn't the time to mourn. Not yet.

"Time t'head back," Broch called to the others when it seemed the Veil had accepted the demon and the dead prisoners, when the roiling mist calmed to its usual slow, miasmic pattern. "I'll report in with th'warden'n have replacements sent to..."

The earth rumbled and nearly shook Broch and the remaining guards off their feet. Shouts sounded from his allies while they tried to rally for the demon's wrath, but Broch kept his hardened gaze trained on where she had disappeared. A heavy explosion sounded from somewhere in the Veil. The lazy drifting of its grey clouds churned moments before an unholy shriek split the air. Bodies stained with blood and dirt tumbled skyward from the cliff edge, their faces shrouded in the clouds. And in the center, still struggling with her eyes burning in a furious rage, was the screeching demon. It didn't seem to matter that her body was thrown one way and another, or that the corpses shackled to her bashed into her from every angle.

Every time she faced the guards, her eyes found Broch. Unintelligible shrieks spilled past her bloody lips. But he and the other guards were safe now. The Veil would pull her further into its embrace, and the people of Paros would be free of her evil. With another furious roar, Mina broke the metal bracers keeping her arms bound together and started clawing at the collar around her throat. It was useless, Broch knew. Those bracers had been an afterthought to contain her strength, while the collar itself had been forged for primals. Clerics of Tharsis had imbued their divine gift of nullifying magic onto each of the collars used for transporting primals to the Veil. It would block her magic, no matter how strong she believed herself to be.

She disappeared from sight as the clouds swallowed her again, but he didn't look away. The Veil never acted like this. It was supposed to gently claim the mages placed on the platform, pulling them off the edge of the cliff, never to be seen again. Was this what happened if a demon was fed to the Veil? Deep down, he wondered if the Veil would spit her back out. If, maybe, there was a chance that he and the others weren't finished with their fight.

The Veil erupted and Mina reappeared, suspended high above the guards with clouds coiling brazenly around her body. The vicious sneer curling her lip and her booming roar were strengthened by the mist and raging winds. Searing heat rippled up the length of Broch's spine, settling in the back of his head as a feminine growl forced itself into his head.

"I hope your daughter dies before she's born!"

It was immensely satisfying for Mina to see the shock streak across Broch's strong features when he heard her threat.

Then all she saw was an endless cloud of grey.

PASSUS TWO

It is the firm belief of those involved in the compilation of this historical amalgamation of memories via transcription that a lack of inclusion concerning what we have come to see as the beliefs of people of the year 783v would be imprudent. Therefore, we offer our sincerest thanks to the historians at the University of Per'Doa for providing further explanation on the existence of an Abyss.

Abyss: an outer plane of existence, home to demons from the first through fifth levels in demonic hierarchy. Members of the Church of Tharsis believed this to be a plane of torture, where souls of the sinful descended upon their death. The Book of Tharsis describes it as follows:

“Blackened earth stretches and warps the senses. Sight becomes sound becomes taste becomes soul. Fiery rivers wind along paths only those with demonic sight can follow, as the sight of humans who enter this hellish land is stripped of meaning. Torture lies in wait for the sinners who denounce the will of Tharsis, the bringer of justice and keeper of divine truth.”

Through further research, we have discovered that the concept of the Abyss originated in Mishnal, before the appearance of the Veil, and was believed to be a plane of existence outside the reaches of our own plane.

For more information on planar travel, refer to the work of M. Fellefend (593PV) which offers an extensive analysis of the nuances of planar travel, including the ritualistic practices of demonic *séance* to open portals between planes. This knowledge was not available to the divine and primal mages before the Veil's destruction.

CHAPTER THREE: GENERAL RIN VYNUS

Rin scanned the crowd as more members of the Magic Council filed into the large oval chamber. Men and women – faces familiar to Rin from having spent the last ten years working his way up the ranks of the Council to finally become the highest-ranking member of the Magi Knights – moved past him to take their respective seats along the opalescent glass walls that curved into a high dome above. He ignored their small nods of deference upon noticing his presence just inside the chamber.

The clear sky sent pale, gleaming streams of sunlight through the glass, highlighting the wrinkles of several Councilors' faces and the pale blue stitching that adorned all their navy robes.

The time was coming, as it did every three months, for the Veil to send more mages into their land. They were always the same: scared, filthy, sobbing. Every age imaginable and always chained together in a line, clutching each other in desperation as they shimmered into being on the platform that lay at the very heart of Misco, Il'ma's capitol. Rin had never understood why they would be so fearful, when the Academies taught students that these mages were born in the Veil. The Parthena had confirmed that they were Veil-born after years of research, as well.

Upon his induction into the Council, Rin had finally learned that Misco had been built around this stone altar with its seven-pointed star etched into the surface. The mages from three centuries prior had arrived in this land from the Veil, free of civilization, on this very platform to create a utopia. They'd set out to create a society of acceptance that nurtured the knowledge and power within every living being.

“General Vynus.”

Rin's head tilted toward the low voice of his lieutenant, Bael Lixa, just off to his left while he continued watching the Councilors taking their seats. The heavy crimson metal of Bael's armor shifted only slightly. "Report," he said, his lips barely moving.

"The Onamagi have finished all security checks and are standing by, at your order."

"Good."

"If I may speak plainly, sir..."

Rin nodded just enough for Bael to notice, without drawing any attention to himself. He didn't need the other Councilors to know that something wasn't quite right. While each mage in the Magic Council should be able to protect themselves if something went wrong, there was no guarantee that they would have the wherewithal to act if their lives were put in danger. At the same time, the Magi Elder Rin was the leader of the nation's military. He had a duty to protect the Council, even if it meant keeping them in the dark to avoid a panic. Besides, it was only a bad feeling. Rin wasn't clairvoyant. It was just as likely that he was overreacting.

"Is there a reason we're doing all this?"

"Bael, you know why."

"Because you ordered it," Bael said. "But this isn't normal."

And neither was the feeling that Rin had experienced only days before. He'd awoken from a dead sleep, pouring sweat and trembling. That night he'd spent hours trying to figure out just what it was that forced his eyes to open and stare at the sheer silver canopy hanging over his bed. His skin had rippled with awareness of something sinister and wild sitting just on the horizon, but he'd brushed it off as soon as possible to finish resting and replenishing his magic for the next day.

And now, the feeling he'd been fighting against had intensified. There was something coming. Something dark and malevolent, wicked and sinful. Acid burned the back of his throat in a way that made him ready to retch.

"We have to be prepared for anything," Rin finally said. "Take your position. Grand Councilor Bartol will be at the podium in three minutes."

"Sir." Bael paused, then snickered quietly. "Nice robes, by the way."

Rin chuckled at that. What sort of military leader would he be if he left himself vulnerable, even at a welcoming ceremony like this? No, he refused to wear those flimsy robes. Just because he was an Elder who held the highest position for one pillar of the government didn't mean he would wear robes. If he couldn't feel the weight of heavy bands of animal hide layered over one another and wrapping around his torso, or his bracers, gloves, and epaulets all colored in a rich cordovan, then he was too exposed. And that was something he couldn't let happen.

He listened to the nearly silent steps of his lieutenant and moved to his usual position for these ceremonies just behind the Grand Councilor's podium, then focused on the hushed din of murmurs in the chamber. From here, just behind where their leader would make his same speech to welcome their newest additions to society, Rin could see everything. Everyone. Thankfully, thick lines of runes were etched into the glass dome to prevent anyone who wasn't in the Onamagi from using their magic.

The heated looks crackling across the chamber between these mages could kill, and he was just barely able to feel their attempts at using a spell or two to try and wriggle through a loophole in the runes. These people were petty and vicious, always secretly cutting each other to the quick with back-alley deals to try and elevate their own sectors of government. The holistic

Shamans had a bitter rivalry with the scientific Parthena, and both utterly despised the Magi Knights under Rin's command. All three pillars of the government were present with eight Councilors and an Elder to represent them.

The whispers and soft conversations died down as Grand Councilor Bartol Ferin stepped into the room. Rin had always hated the old man. His pockmarked cheeks and sunken eyes gave children nightmares, and the harsh grating of his ancient voice sounded almost as though he'd swallowed a volcano and enjoyed the feel of magma burning his throat.

Bartol's golden robes hung heavily with the fine navy stitching catching in the light to show his higher position as Il'ma's leader. His back was straight, his head held high in defiance of gravity that weighed down the pudgy jowls of what Rin was sure had once been sculpted cheeks. He took slow, careful steps to the marble podium that rose from the ground, not from frailty in his body, but as a show of his control. Each step was a reminder of his power over the lesser council members gathered to witness the newest arrivals to their land.

"Esteemed members of the Magic Council," Bartol began, "today is a day of great importance. Today we will welcome new foundlings into our home. They will be freed of their chains of oppression and given the life that all beings deserve. A life of respect for their abilities. A life of comfort and understanding. Most importantly, this will be the opportunity that so many were born with, to learn in our Academies and further their knowledge of this great land and the magic that runs through all our veins..."

The speech was the same every time. Rin had memorized every word after a year of being part of these ceremonies.

Once the newest arrivals came in, Shamans would come forward in a single line to tend to their wounds, ease their discomfort from malnutrition, and soothe their fears of death or

torture. And then they would be tested for proficiency to see which magical academy they would be sent to, and eventually which sector of government their vocation fell under.

These people had it much easier than Rin had growing up; they were born in the Veil with magical proficiencies and so instantly placed in an Academy. As a man who was born in Il'ma, Rin had needed to wait until his magical proficiency manifested before he could apply to Termath Academy to become a member of the Magi.

“... Shamans, our healers. The Magi, our protectors. And the Parthena, our intelligence,” Grand Councilor Bartol continued. “Each of you will search for the ones best suited for your work. Cultivate their thirst for knowledge, just as the farmers gently tend their crops...”

That was just ridiculous, in Rin's opinion. The farmers of the land didn't grow the crops through toiling soil. They waited the allotted two weeks after planting the seeds to avoid spoiling the integrity of the crops, then used a supplementation spell to make the plants grow for harvest. Then again, there were plenty of things the old man said that just didn't make sense to anyone but himself. Sometimes Grand Councilor Bartol spoke of days of great unrest, even though Il'ma had never seen war; they had the occasional fanatical group pop up in one town or another, but those were quickly dealt with. Other days, it was anecdotes of mages being forced into hard labor. Rin wasn't entirely sure what happened in the old man's head, but it was about time he was put to pasture and new leadership came in.

“The time has come!” Bartol announced. His words echoed around the chamber and sent shudders through the twenty-six other council members present. Not even Rin, who spent more time than he really preferred around the crass piece of wrinkled flesh, was immune to the timbre that nearly shook his bones from their joints.

His gaze swept across the room again to locate his elite Onamagi, stationed at the exits and visible only to ones who knew what to look for. They were the protectors of this land, but that didn't mean people needed to be aware of their presence in formal meetings unless it was absolutely necessary.

Bael's indigo eyes blinked twice as they locked with Rin's jade gaze. A sign that all was as it should be. Everyone was in place according to the lieutenant, but Rin was never one to leave things half-finished. He sent a single blink back, then glanced toward a small, out of place shadow lingering just outside of the darkness beneath Parthena Councilor Farna's robes.

Senka was going to get an earful later on for choosing the young blonde woman's robes as a hiding spot. His ability to bend shadows and slip into them was unrivalled, and the reason that he'd been able to ascend the ranks from a simple Magi knight to the Onamagi in only two years, but he wasn't going to survive if she found out. She was a little on the ruthless side and had already brought more battle-hardened men to tears with words alone. Add to that her specialty in transmogrification, and Senka was a goner for sure.

Rin moved on just as the stone circle in the center of the room started to glow. Pale green light shimmered from the ground onto the glass dome, lighting the Councilors' faces in a sickly pallor. He could feel their excitement swelling, and Rin had to admit that he was usually right there with them.

He was always curious to see if fighters and mages with stealth and cunning would be brought to his doorstep. Usually, the mages who arrived were undertrained, mere novices, but they were so malleable, so grateful for every bit of acceptance they received. They were perfect soldiers, even if all the regular Magi knights ever did was apprehend mages who had gone astray,

while the Onamagi had opportunities to go after the occasional lunatic who thought world domination was his calling in life.

The pale green light emanating from the stone sigil in the center of the room sputtered out, and Rin turned to stare at the altar in horror. Concerned murmurs rippled through the crowd, and he really didn't blame them. This had never happened before.

Then all he could think about was that odd sensation that had been wriggling down the back of his neck, the foreboding sense of horror he'd been trying to ignore. Quick flashes of some dream he couldn't remember having burned across his mind and behind his eyes, vivid and painful. Burning orange eyes with feline slits. Sharp teeth surrounded by lips covered in blood. Screams echoing in the air and the sounds of weapons clashing against metal. He'd never seen anything so gruesome before that moment, and it took several deep breaths to return his vision to normal.

Grand Councilor Bartol raised his hands toward the sky and closed his eyes. "Councilors!" he shouted over their rising panic. "This is a great power coming to us from the Veil!"

Rin couldn't hear the older man as he kept staring at the seven-pointed star etched into the stone altar. All he could hear were warbled cries and scathing hisses of rage. The stone shifted, in his eyes, melting into a smooth surface with wisps of grey clouds dancing along the top. Chains rattled in his ears and a heavy collar bore down on his shoulders, then knocked against his throat, bruising it in a violent grip.

His hands lifted and grasped desperately at his own smooth skin. Nothing was there, but he could still feel it weighing him down.

Cool invisible fingers slithered against Rin's flesh beneath his armor, and he collapsed back against the wall to make sure no one could see him lose his composure. For the first time in years, he felt fear. True, soul-crushing fear that seized the air in his lungs and sent his heartbeat spiraling out of control. Something was wrong. He couldn't deny it any longer.

"This is a gift," Bartol said. "We must nurture this new one."

"I'll kill them... Kill them... S-So cold..."

Rin gasped for air and slid down the wall just as a pair of familiar calloused hands wrapped around his armored shoulders. Gleaming indigo eyes filled with worry looked down at him. "General," Bael hissed. "General, what's happening?"

"Veil," he rasped. "Some... Can't..."

Bael shook his head in confusion and turned to call out to a healer nearby. His words died as a low hum rumbled through the room and the altar lit in a burning orange glow. "Orange," Bael mused. "What..."

Rin's head lolled to the side, following Bael's gaze toward the foreign light illuminating the arrival chamber. He still couldn't breathe, and the chills running down his spine drew out a thin sheen of sweat across his flesh. His vision swam, and the grey clouds wisping through the room that only he could see were suddenly bathed in flashes of fiery red light.

"What in the Veil is happening?" Bael asked. He looked back down to his General when he heard Rin's wheezing breaths barely breaking past his thinned lips.

"There is nothing to fear!" Grand Councilor Bartol shouted. "This is a sign!"

The lower Councilors stood and backed away from their seats, ignoring the Grand Councilor's words and instead putting distance between themselves and the roaring inferno of crimson light swelling around the platform.

“B-Bartol,” Rin rasped to Bael. He was still in command here, and their top priority had to be protecting the Grand Councilor. “Get... him out...”

Bael left his side and darted into the chamber toward the Grand Councilor. He ignored the usual protocols for stealth and let himself be seen as his arms wound around the ancient man from behind.

“What—”

“General’s orders, sir,” Bael said while dragging Grand Councilor Bartol away from the podium. The ground quaked and large spider-webbed cracks etched themselves into the stone face of the altar. “There’s something—”

“Get off of me, you imbecile!” Grand Councilor Bartol roared.

“Sir, I—”

“I will not show fear of this anomaly. There is nothing that we, as mages, cannot handle!”

Bael pushed the older man behind him just when the altar exploded, shielding him and the still gasping Rin from the debris that pelted the domed walls around them. Shards of opalescent glass rained down and sliced through the heavy dust catching in Rin’s lungs.

Billowing clouds thickened in a torrential whirlwind and sent swathes of the Councilors’ robes whipping wildly against them.

Grand Councilor Bartol gazed down at Rin’s widened eyes when he heard the Magi Elder’s short, huffing breaths. “Get yourself together,” he spat. “And get those morons of yours in there to subdue whoever has come through.”

Rin still felt the weight of a heavy collar around his throat even as he forced his quivering legs to stand. He squinted through the settling dust and nodded to his panting lieutenant. “Seal the exits and protect the Councilors.”

Bael nodded, freezing once he was just past the Grand Councilor when heavy chains rattled and scraped across broken stone. It wasn't so much the chains that caught his attention, but the feral roar that rattled the small pebbles and splintered glass on the ground, coming from the center of the room. "Wh-What is that?"

Rin steeled himself while taking a step forward and removing the leather gloves he always wore to keep his poisoned skin from touching anyone. It was a small comfort knowing that he wasn't the only person hearing the sounds coming from somewhere in the settling dust. Another roar sounded out as he continued moving closer, and he stopped when a pair of familiar orange eyes, nearly glowing with rage, cut through the grit fogging the air.

The same eyes he'd seen minutes before in his head. Eyes that looked as though they held the souls of millions and would drag him to the depths of the Abyss, should he make a single mistake. No one moved, save for the form shackled on the ground. The chamber was still and silent until they could finally see the carnage left in the wake of their newest arrival.

She was small compared to most humans, appearing even smaller where she knelt on the broken stones. Matted auburn hair hung down to her hips and covered part of the simple, tattered canvas dress she wore. Her skin was pale, but Rin's eyes were drawn to the countless burgundy stripes that lined her arms, shoulders, neck, like the tigers he'd only ever seen pictures of in the books at Termath Academy. Or the elves who lived to the north in the Beast City of Rotin.

Her gaze swept across the room, to each of the cowering mages who dared to peek at her, and he blinked in surprise at the long, pointed tip of her ear. *She looks just like an elf...* He took a small step back when the woman's gaze snapped back to him and she bared the terrifying, pointed teeth that had been hidden behind her lips. Lips, he suddenly realized, covered in fresh blood.

A shrill scream of terror ripped through the air, and he found himself drawn from the woman's face to her surroundings. Not to the large chunks of stone that were embedded in the ground at odd angles, but to the people shackled to her. Corpses. All ages, just like every other arrival, some middle-aged and some barely even pubescent. Men and women. All of them dead, staring into a sightless abyss with their mouths opened in silent, eternal screams.

"It's a monster!" one Councilor shrieked from behind a broken stone.

"Kill it!" shouted another who shuffled backward, tearing their robes in the process.

The woman's clawed hands, covered in blood and viscera, lowered from the heavy collar around her throat, and she licked her lips with a wicked grin. She moved on from looking at him as she stood and stepped over the mutilated body of a man twice her size, not chained to her and dressed in thick leather armor. Even her slender legs, covered in mud, bore the same stripes as the rest of her, but Rin's gaze was drawn to the long slash across her thigh from what he knew was a sword. Then to the arrow sticking out of her shoulder.

She was a fighter, just the kind he'd been hoping would arrive.

He hadn't been expecting the small woman to reach back and grab the chains keeping her linked to the other bodies. Or for her to drag them along the ground behind her while making her way across the chamber. How could someone so small pull that weight?

Councilor Farna's hand raised, and her lips moved in the beginnings of an incantation, but it was quickly cut off in a whimper as the striped woman pounced on her with bared teeth.

"You smell delicious," the striped woman rasped. "I'll just take a little bite..."

"Stop her!" Grand Councilor Bartol bellowed.

She struck more swiftly than Rin could see, and his stomach lurched when he heard the animalistic growl from her bloody lips as they locked around Councilor Farna's throat. She cried

out and tried to fend the woman off, and Rin forced himself to rush closer instead of running away as the other Councilors around them did.

Her body was violently ripped away from Councilor Farna by one of Onamagi Senka's thick black shadows and tossed to the ground, and Rin collapsed on top of the crazed woman, pressing his hands down on the raw skin around her wrists. She was freezing, her limbs trembling from the chill he could feel on her flesh, but she didn't seem to be fazed by it in the slightest.

She laughed while chewing the bit of flesh she'd torn from Councilor Farna's throat. "I can hear her dying," she moaned. "I bet you'll taste just as good."

Why wasn't she already knocked out from his touch? His skin being in contact with hers for this long should have already killed her! His hands were poisonous by nature – every inch of his body was – but the woman beneath him was nearly groaning in ecstasy instead of writhing in pain. Why wasn't her skin sloughing from her bones in a gelatinous heap?

Rin didn't have time to dwell on it when she started struggling to upend him. His legs locked around her too-small waist. He leaned closer to her snapping jaws to bear more weight down on her and keep her contained. He could smell blood on her breath, so much blood. She growled low in her throat and the sound vibrated through his armor, right down into his soul. It left him vulnerable, unable to move for the briefest of moments.

That was all she needed to lunge upward and let her teeth sink into the right side of his face. Tendons tore and his flesh screamed in agony well before his voice could mirror it. The pain was excruciating, but he bit back his natural reaction to scramble away from her and held on tighter. The Council couldn't see him in a moment of weakness, even as he used what little strength he could muster to pull his head back and bash his forehead against hers.

Her hips bucked and nearly knocked him off balance. She was much stronger than he'd given her credit for, even after seeing her drag nearly twenty corpses with ease. Maybe the pain was getting to him already. Rin blinked away the moisture in his eyes and glared down at the woman, who laughed while chewing on a piece of his cheek.

Olea somni, he chanted silently. A puff of soft pink gas slipped from between his lips and out the side of his face, right into hers, and he waited while she gasped and her eyes rolled back. Just a small dose of oleander would keep her unconscious long enough for her to be removed from the chamber. Her body went limp in seconds, but he held her arms down to the jagged stones until Bael and Onamagi Senka arrived with Grand Councilor Bartol standing between them.

"What is it, Grand Councilor?" Bael asked. He eyed the bodies littering the ground before looking back down at the woman beneath Rin.

"A demon," Grand Councilor Bartol spat. "It has broken through the Veil to kill us all."

"But demons can't appear in our world," Onamagi Senka said. "They were banished from the world by Il'ma's mages centuries ago!"

"Yes, well it seems this one has made a way through!" Bartol snapped. "Vynus, keep that thing under that poison until the Shamans have it strapped down properly. We're not taking any chances."

"Ye..." Rin mumbled. His arms shook as his own blood dripped down his chin and landed on the corner of her mouth. He couldn't get his jaw to work properly, or his lips to form words. Had she torn enough of the muscle away for him to be left incapable of closing his mouth?

Bartol didn't seem to notice the lack of decorum. Instead, the Grand Councilor looked over to the healers flittering about Councilor Farna's lifeless body, shaking his head at the grave nod he was given. "It looks like we'll have to find a new Parthena Councilor to fill her place," he sighed.

Rin glanced over to the blonde woman, to the widening crimson pool beneath her. His gaze settled on the jagged wound in her throat that showed her spine had been snapped. He shuddered as he looked back to the mysterious woman who had appeared, then lifted a hand to pull her pliant lips apart. The flesh and muscle she'd been chewing was gone, swallowed. And all he could see sitting on her tongue and stuck between her sharpened teeth were little bits of vertebrae she'd bitten through.

"The Council will meet in two days to decide this demon's fate," Grand Councilor Bartol announced. "That should be sufficient time to hold the funeral rites for Councilor Farna, and to collect candidate names for the nomination of a new Parthena Councilor. The demon will be treated and housed in the Termath Prison."

Rin carefully moved to kneel next to the demon as several of Elder Pirda's subordinates came into the chamber with ensorcelled binding wraps that would keep her in a suspended state once his poison wore off. He didn't let her go until it was absolutely necessary – only after the heavy iron collar was removed from her deeply bruised throat, and a mask was pressed against her bloody mouth to keep pumping suspension gas into her lungs.

"Do you think that place can really hold it?" Elder Grondi asked.

"It is the most secure prison complex in Il'ma," Grand Councilor Bartol said. He wasn't wrong. The Academy that Rin attended was in an annex just next to the prison. They wouldn't

allow children in training to be near it if it wasn't safe. "Elder Pirda, you will oversee the demon's treatment. I trust your healers will maintain their ethics in this difficult endeavor."

"Of course, Grand Councilor," she said, and Rin could practically hear her bowing. She always bowed to the Grand Councilor.

"General Vynus."

Rin stood as the demon's bound body was carefully carried out of the chamber by several Shaman healers, and he turned to the ancient man. He was tempted to reach up and hold his mouth closed, but chose to remain still with his hands by his sides. "Hn."

"Double the security at the prison once the demon is there," Grand Councilor Bartol said. "And get your lapdogs in here to clean up this mess."

Rin's lips twitched in anger, but he bowed his head all the same as Bartol turned and swept out of the room. Not even a mention of the wound he could feel throbbing along his right cheek. Then again, Bartol wasn't one to point out the obvious, or to show concern for anyone else.

Rin didn't try to follow the slumbering demon's journey out the far door and off to the medical wing. There was no way he could draw more attention to himself than he already had. He could feel the Councilors staring at him, and more specifically, the blood slicking his throat and the front of his armor. The last thing he needed was anyone questioning his ability to maintain his composure, regardless of his injury. There had been whispers of questions concerning his professionalism when he'd become an Elder at the age of 20 – the youngest any mage had ever ascended to such an honored position – and while it had been ten years since his promotion, he still had to show his own strength. Let them whisper instead about his steadfastness and resolve while his face was a mangled mass of flesh.

He lifted a hand to his cheek and prodded at the gaping hole, from the corner of his lips all the way to his ear, exposing his teeth and shredded muscle to the outside world. It had been stupid of him to think he could get that close to the demon's face without some consequences, especially after how quickly she'd moved to kill Councilor Farna.

"Sir, you're hurt," Bael said as Rin held a hand under his own chin to keep his mouth closed.

"I hadn't noticed," Rin replied through clenched teeth. If he was careful, he could talk. Just barely. He made his way out of the room with Bael following closely behind down the long corridor lined with pale yellow orbs of light sitting high in the stone walls. Once they reached the archway leading to a well-tended courtyard, Rin turned toward the spooked knights keeping watch. "Send cleaners," he said. "It's a fucking bloodbath."

"B-Bloodbath, sir?" the first knight asked, staring in horror at the wound on his face.

Rin shook his head and waved a hand at Bael. "Handle it," he said. "I need to eat." If he ingested the venom from the *naag* serpents he kept in an alcove of his office, he could numb the pain at least a little. Then Rin could treat the wound himself instead of involving the Shamans; as a rule, they were wary of treating him because of his poisoned skin. There were a great number of reasons he didn't want them treating him, especially if he was unconscious.

"Sir," Bael said, frowning. He reached forward and flinched when he almost touched Rin's hand. It was no secret that using his poison in more ways than one over a matter of minutes drained the General, but Bael knew from experience – having witnessed several executions carried out by Rin's bare hands – just how quickly his poison could work. "You need a healer..."

"I'm going to my office," Rin said. "Debriefing when you're done. Tell *no one* what happened, Bael."

“Yes, sir.”

“And send Senka now... Gotta talk to him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rin took a slow step away, then another. He ignored the curious stares from other lower members working in the Council as his steps faltered and he put a hand out to catch himself against a wall. His vision grew spotted, and his lids weighed themselves down until all he could hear were garbled voices shouting what almost sounded like his name. Maybe he should have let a Shaman tend to the wound on his face, but he could do that just as easily himself. Once he was in the comfort of his office with the door locked and his standard silencing spells in place so no one could hear him screaming while stitching it up.

He was already far enough gone that he didn't feel his head cracking against the stone walkway as he finally lost consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR: MINA

Mina didn't mind how she drifted in and out of consciousness all that much. It was nice to be free of the dreams that plagued her normally. Instead of glowing red eyes that watched her from a dark realm just beyond her reach, soft hisses and low growls and her skin crawling as she tried to fight her way through brambles that cut into her flesh, it was all just a mass of pale pink filling her vision.

What would those holy men in Paros say if they knew that the place where primals landed after being thrown through the Veil was a land of mages? She'd heard how many of them had been preparing spells without saying a word while she'd been in that decimated chamber. And the man she'd grappled with had more intricate armor than anything she'd seen before, but his thoughts had been careful, calculating in how he used his magic against her. He was smarter than the haulers who'd had the misfortune of transporting her to the Veil.

"... have to take her in... memories of before... Bartol's order..."

Even in this land of primal magic, she still wasn't like them.

But that was fine by her. Mina didn't *want* these people in her life. She wanted everyone to leave her alone and let her live the way she really wanted. She didn't want to listen to people thinking about the nice fresh air or bright sky. She wanted to experience it herself, on her own terms, and for people to just let her be.

She could hear the voices around her, feel the hands that lightly touched her flesh. She felt her nakedness and warm water being poured over her, then soft fabric swiped over every inch of her body.

Mina's eyes opened to slits, and the blurry image of a woman with flowing silver hair hovered over her. "... *like she's barely conscious...*" The woman's face turned away from her. "... *not worried... she's docile now...*" The woman looked back down at her, and Mina blinked slowly. The tender touch of soft fabric swiped across her lips, her cheek. Was someone taking the time to clean her? Is that what this feeling was? The monks had never done this before. They just threw buckets of cold water on her to get rid of the worst of the smell and wash away any waste she'd managed to produce on the few scraps they fed her once a week.

Was this what those children in the prison transport had been remembering? A soft caress of comfort? Fingers massaging her scalp along her hairline? Mina's eyes closed again, and she breathed out a slow, steady breath. She could sleep well if this was how they would treat her.

'Tharsis holden in iminde...'

The fingers on the sides of her face suddenly pressed inward with enough force that Mina felt as though her skull would shatter. Her back bowed from the table on which she laid just as the woman's fingers phased through her, wriggled around inside her head.

"Do not be afraid. Forget the world you're from, child..."

Was that what this feeling was? Were they trying to make her forget where she was from? The non-life she'd lived so far in Carnin's basement as nothing more than a bloodletting tool to execute primals? More hands wrapped around her arms and legs and a heavy weight draped itself across her hips to pin her down again. The foreign fingers burned just behind her eyes as the woman's magic spread outward in a sickening web.

"Miss Pirda, if she'll be executed, why are we doing this?!"

"It's just as likely she won't be executed, Tara. If she lives, we can't allow her to remember the horrific land she came from."

Like hell would she let one of these imbeciles kill her. The monarch's primal haulers and the Veil hadn't been able to get the job done, and neither would these mages. Mina's eyes opened wide, and she snarled up at the silver-haired woman above her whose face was still mostly blurry. "Pirda," she growled.

The woman's magic wavered inside her head, and a pair of vibrant green eyes stared down at Mina in horror.

"She can hear us?" a woman's voice asked from somewhere near her stomach. "Miss Pirda—"

"Get out of my head!" Mina roared. Something snapped inside her with a sharp twang that curdled the contents of her stomach and sent her vision swirling. But Pirda's hands left the sides of her face, and there was a sudden bloodcurdling scream that ricocheted through the air.

"My fingers!" Pirda shrieked.

"What did she do to you?!"

Mina's eyes rolled backward, her eyelids fluttering as she drifted back into the strange, barely conscious state she'd been suspended in before. She was left unaware of the Shaman Councilor Pirda kneeling on the floor beside her, staring at the cauterized stumps where her fingers had once been, or the other Shamans bustling around to strap Mina's limp body more firmly to the bed.

"... memory wipe may not be successful..."

"... in the prison... hope they execute..."

Ω

By the time Mina was able to open her eyes, everything was dark around her. Instead of colors of any sort, she could only see shades of greys and blacks. That could only mean there

wasn't a single source of light anywhere around her. This was familiar, at least. The monks had always kept her in the dark, and her cell with Barrett had been pitch black until the haulers draped canvas bags over their heads and chained them together.

She wiggled her toes and found she could barely move her feet where they were pinned together. A small test of her fingers gave the same results where her arms were crossed over her bare chest.

Had these people washed her off just to leave her naked in a prison cell?

A set of heavy metallic bars stood guard several feet in front of her. The floor of her cell and the hall just beyond it was made of smooth stones, and there was a pile of straw in the far corner that she could just barely make out from the corner of her eye.

She couldn't turn her head to look around, and something covered her mouth and kept her jaws locked shut. Did they anticipate not feeding her or giving her water? Did they already know that she didn't need to eat or drink as often as a human? She already knew that she could go an entire week without water before it would start to affect her. The longest she'd gone without food was two months, and she hadn't really felt any discomfort from the lack of nourishment during that time.

Just the thought of eating sent a flash of hunger ripping through her belly. Not for the bread she'd been raised on, or even the single bite of salted meat she'd tasted while still in the monastery. Mina knew the craving she had by the way her mind kept spiraling around the splashes of blood on fallen bodies. Their flesh. Their muscles and bones. The feel of a heartbeat slowing beneath her lips and fingers clawing at her in hopeless desperation. Her skin tingled with the thought of getting to taste that again.

"Looks like our guest is awake."

Mina let out a low growl at the guard standing by the iron bars of her cell. His wide jaw and too-square face made her want to rip off his skin and eat it right in front of his deep grey eyes. He could watch her slowly mutilate him until he died from shock, and she would have the immense pleasure of hearing him scream until he choked on his own blood.

“Growl all you want,” the guard snorted. “The Council’s deciding what they’ll do with you.”

“Kort, don’t talk to her.” She couldn’t see the other person who spoke, but this Kort – what a stupid name – was starring in a vivid fantasy of hers involving his flesh being flayed in thin strips, then cooked over a roaring fire. She’d yet to eat cooked meat, but the monks loved it. She was curious if it tasted as good as they’d thought. “We have to do our rounds.”

Mina tried to struggle within her bindings, realizing after the fact that she was strapped to a wall and hanging several feet from the ground.

“They should have killed the demon instead of debating what to do,” Kort said, sneering at the owner of that other voice.

“That’s not our decision to make,” the other said. His voice was high, almost like those little boys the monks took in from time to time to teach the way of Tharsis.

She tried to part her lips to speak, but nothing worked. All she could do was make sounds that would hopefully scare these men off. If she had to listen to them for much longer, Mina was sure she would have to find a way to kill herself. Only if she couldn’t get out of this and kill them first. It seemed that the only way forward was to bide her time. Once they made a mistake, she could slip through the cracks between the changing guards. The monks had grown complacent in the care they took to keep her bound, and these people would do the same.

Kort turned to look back at Mina. She could feel his heavy gaze as it trailed from her face down the length of her body. “It’s a shame, though,” he mused. “Demon looking this good.”

“Kort, that’s disgusting.” She saw a second guard appear and step between Kort and the bars. “They might not have put clothes on her, but that doesn’t mean you need to act like an animal.”

“Relax, Tramin,” he snorted. “A monster is still a monster. Not like I’d try anything.” He peeked around the smaller guard to look back into Mina’s cell, and she listened intently to the quiet shifting of metal against leather. “Watch this. Day guards told me something crazy…”

Her burning eyes narrowed while Kort’s hands stretched just past the bars separating them from her. He took the dagger she hadn’t yet seen and sliced it across his opposite palm, then squeezed several large drops onto the ground.

It took only a few seconds for the smell to reach her, and when it did Mina started struggling to get closer to him. She still couldn’t move a muscle, and her exertion was only evident in the rising volume of her hungry growls. She wanted it so badly that her vision blurred until all she saw was her hazy grey surroundings. It hurt to feel her stomach suddenly protesting its emptiness. She couldn’t take this. She *needed* it.

“See that?” Kort laughed. “I never knew demons went wild for blood like this.”

She was going to murder him. Every guard that watched her would feel her wrath as soon as she was free from these bindings. Every man who stared at her body, teased her with the strong scent of life flowing in their veins, would be nothing more than a lifeless pile of limbs. And the bastard who’d found a way to silence the thoughts from those around her was at the top of her list. She needed to know what they were thinking, so she could plan properly. And if there were no thoughts to listen to, no words or images or desires she could feed off of to pass the

time, Mina wasn't sure just how much longer she was going to last with her sanity intact. The guards finally walked away, only after Kort smeared some of his blood on one of the bars for her to smell, and Mina started counting.

The stones on the floor.

The seconds ticking by.

PASSUS THREE

Little record remains of the spell that Shaman Elder Pirda used to erase the memories of Parosian citizens. In 301PV, historical archaeologist T. Barrow provided his findings at the Society of Veil Anachronism's Annual Veil Conference (colloquially referred to as the "Svavik"). In his presentation, Barrow showed scans of a weathered vellum manuscript that was confirmed to be a confession from Elder Shaman Pirda, the last of the Shamans to survive the cataclysmic events of the Veil's destruction. We have provided an excerpt here:

"I can no longer remember the incantation we used to remove the remnants of Mishnal's god from their memories. I used it on myself after the Veil was destroyed, after I saw the horror that my complacency bore. Only the Shaman Elder and four trustworthy subordinates could know about what Bartol said was "a land of strife and misery, where no mages would be accepted." The only way to be promoted to Shaman Elder was to be within that group who knew the truth. We saw firsthand how the mages came to us from the Veil. We knew they were tortured before arriving here. I believe the other Councilors allowed themselves to believe the lies about Veiled mages' origins because it was easier to think they were born in the Veil. We were sworn to secrecy. We willingly bound ourselves with a blood pact to keep the secret intact, and it would end only upon our death. I had a hand in perpetuating the lies that Bartol fed to the people of Il'ma, and there is no way for me to atone for what I've done."

There is no record of the magic used by the demon Mina to sever Shaman Elder Pirda's fingers while erasing her memories. Current magical scholars in both Primal and Divine studies have yet to determine how Mina was able to complete such a task without the use of an incantation.

Several theories credit the mystical nature of Mina's demonic heritage, and the potential for a deeper power having been awakened; however, there is no substantiated evidence to support these theories.

No memories belonging to Shaman Elder Pirda have been found for transcription. We may only ever know her side of history through the perceptions of those whose memories are still being analyzed, and T. Barrow's dissemination of her writings. We are, however, hopeful that further excavations of the Veiled Lands will reveal more of the truth of our world.

Now that the toxic mist in the Veiled Lands has mostly dissipated – and no longer disintegrates fabric and skin and bone, even with the most powerful protection spells layered atop one another – research teams with ensorcelled masks to prevent inhalation of the pale pink gases in the air can continue their search for the truth. A recently discovered map dated 720v, marking the Veiled Lands as the Beast City of Rotin, may offer more information concerning key structures of what historians call the Beast Resistance. An inquiry into the Beast Resistance's potential involvement in the Veil's destruction is ongoing at Per'Doa University.

CHAPTER FIVE: GRAND COUNCILOR BARTOL

Bartol sat behind his desk while watching three of his conjured gnomes bustling along the wall lined with scrolls. “Bring it all to me,” he said. “This cannot be discovered.”

It was something he’d been hoping to keep from happening for a long time. The arrival of a demon in their land was going to ruin everything. The only good that could come out of this was if the woman who had arrived two days prior was killed right away, before she could do any more damage. Even if this demon woman wasn’t the one in his late wife’s prophecy, he couldn’t take any chances. He couldn’t allow her to find allies in the wild.

The gnomes padded across the floor, their spindly grey arms laden with thick scrolls that they deposited on Bartol’s desk before disappearing in three small puffs of green smoke.

The only way to keep this information from getting into the wrong hands was to hide it more securely. Why he had decided to keep his wife’s prophecies in his office at the Council in the first place was merely an oversight on his part. He’d wanted them close, available at a moment’s notice, but there was too much at stake in keeping such telling information away from his home. Bartol’s wrinkled fingers fumbled with the intricate knot on the first scroll, and he cursed his younger self for having been so shortsighted.

He should have destroyed the evidence of Marta’s clairvoyance after her death. Then again, he’d kept every scroll she’d written over the years until her final breath, and not a single prophecy had been wrong. Marta’s magic had been such a rare gift, and the accuracy of her visions had no equal. These scrolls had served him well in the years after her passing, giving him insight into the world he and the others from three centuries before had created after being pulled

through the Veil during that awful war. He never would have been able to keep such a tight hold on the tremulous government of Il'ma without her insight.

But no one in this time knew the true history of how only magical beings had come to live in Il'ma. He'd been able to convince the others that keeping the truth hidden was for the best, and so they'd created a spell that would silence any Il'man mage who tried to speak of the time before the Veil appeared. The words would never pass their lips; their hands would tremble if they tried to write about the history of Mishnal and the war primal mages had waged with King Gideon. Eventually, the spell faded, but the only one who was left alive to tell the tale of Il'ma's origin was Bartol himself.

He couldn't let the people of Il'ma know that there was a land beyond the Veil. If they knew, then they might want to go there, to learn more about the land of their heritage, and whatever pompous king was in power now would kill them all. That was why he ensured that a select group of Shamans carefully tended to any mages who arrived in Il'ma through the Veil. Their shackles were removed, their bodies gently cleaned. And their memories were erased. Those mages would never be able to tell a single Il'man citizen what life was like in the land he and the others had come from 300 years ago. This was the only way to keep the world as his people knew it safe.

With an irritated huff, Bartol finally loosed the tie and unrolled the parchment to read his wife's final words. "*The vysayge Vayle vnbynden þe valay forthi faith-dedes ond fayryze fe3tyng,*" he read aloud, his fingers drifting across her scrawling, shaky penmanship that was still the same as he remembered. Marta's final breath spelled out the future he couldn't allow to come to fruition.

He had to end this demon's life now. She couldn't be allowed to live, and if he could just convince the other members of the Council to allow it, they could execute this monster who would tear their world apart.

A soft, timid knock on the door drew his attention, and Bartol let out a small curse while swiping a hand over the blood red knob to the bottom drawer in his desk. He ignored the swirling black and red mist within that led to a pocket dimension only his blooded family could access and tossed each scroll of his wife's prophecies inside before locking it again with a swipe of his hand in the opposite direction.

"Enter!" He stood and straightened his everyday black robes, then made his way around the solid pine desk as the door creaked open. "What is it you want, you moronic—"

"Grandpa?"

Bartol paused at the sight of his ten-year-old granddaughter, fifteen generations his junior, standing in the doorway. Her short, pale blonde hair framed her youthful blushing cheeks, and her wide blue eyes gazed up at him with adoration. Just like they always did.

"Annabelle," he said, smiling. She was the only person in existence who could draw out even the slightest upturn of his lips. The only one who deserved all the love his centuries-old heart could muster. "What brings you all the way to my office?"

"You told me you have an important meeting this morning," she laughed. "Can I take you there?"

"You'd walk these rickety old bones down there?" he chuckled. Bartol reached out and took her offered hand, letting Annabelle lead him out of his office and down the carpeted hall toward the Council's meeting antechamber.

As they walked, he listened to her recount the lessons she'd learned in the Tarsa Academy over the past weeks as she trained to become a valued member of the Parthena. Her questions about the logistics surrounding summoning spells captivated him, widening his smile even though they were in public.

"Grandpa, I don't get it, though." Her steps slowed almost imperceptibly, and he glanced down at her once again. He very nearly frowned along with her when he saw the pinch between her delicate brows.

"What do you not understand?" he asked.

"If I have to draw a summoning circle and call out an incantation, how will that make it a useful tactic in an emergency?"

"That is something you need not to worry about, child," Bartol said. He drew her to a stop just outside of General Vynus's office and knelt on the ground to look more easily into her eyes. "All you need to focus on is perfecting your circle and the incantation."

"But, just in case..."

"As you practice and develop a connection with the beings you summon, they will appear more easily. One day, you will sign contracts with them, bringing them under your control and ready to defend you on a whim."

"Can I summon a giant boar?" Her eyes gleamed with excitement.

"I'm sure you can, with enough practice," Bartol said.

"Just no fog-boars," General Vynus said while stepping out of his office and smiling down at the wide-eyed girl. "Those are poisonous."

“I bet I can handle them,” she said, frowning. Annabelle took a step closer to her grandfather as he stood, her eyes honing in on the new scar that stretched across General Vynus’s cheek.

“Annabelle,” Bartol said. “General Vynus is a master of poisons. I would suggest heeding his warnings when it comes to those beasts.”

General Vynus lifted his gaze to the Grand Councilor, then gave them a small bow. “I’ll see you down at the meeting, sir,” he said. “Miss Ferin, good luck in your studies.”

Bartol watched as he turned and left, making his way swiftly down the hall with nearly silent steps. Even wearing that garish armor that he never took off, General Vynus could be so quiet. The young man had a great many skills that had put him ahead of other candidates for the Elder position, and this was definitely one of them.

“I don’t like him, Grandpa,” Annabelle whispered. “He’s scary.”

“Vynus is the General of the Magi for a very good reason, child,” he sighed as her hand clasped with his once again. “He is loyal to this Council, and a fierce defender of the laws of Il’ma.”

“But we don’t have wars,” she said. They began walking down the hall again, much slower than General Vynus had. “Why would we need military at all?”

“Because peace is fleeting. We have lived in peace for three hundred years, and while I would love nothing more than to have that continue for another three hundred years, there is no guarantee that it will happen.” They rounded a corner, and he ignored the few lower Council members who bustled past them, rushing down the halls with scrolls and packages for one Councilor or another. “This is why we must always seek knowledge, and a deeper understanding

of our world and the magic in our lives. We must be prepared for the worst and strive for nothing less than our best. Does that make sense?"

Annabelle smiled up at him. "Sort of," she laughed. "There's a lot I don't understand, but Professor Tempest says that I should write down everything that confuses me and reflect on it every day."

"That is a wise choice," Bartol said, nodding.

"I asked her what spell I needed to use to make ink like a mirror."

He couldn't help the rasping laugh that fell from his thin wrinkled lips. "She meant that you should think about it, child." The sudden dawning of understanding in her eyes reminded him so much of his late wife, Marta, when they were younger. He was sure that was why he loved the little girl so much. Annabelle's mother, and every other member of his bloodline, was a moron and he was surprised that the woman had made it through her childhood, let alone into adulthood long enough to bear children. Even Annabelle's siblings made Bartol want to send a quick spell out to obliterate them.

He was a firm believer in population control.

They reached the large green double doors that led to the meeting room's antechamber and Bartol gently squeezed her hand. "I'll have to take my leave now, child," he whispered.

"I know, Grandpa. Can... Would you tell me why you're having a meeting today?"

"I cannot. You know that, Annabelle." He refused to let her worry over a demon who would be executed soon enough.

She nodded and took a timid step forward. His arms wrapped around her slender shoulders, and he felt the tension that should never have been there, easing. "I love you, Grandpa. Have fun, okay?"

“Of course,” he chuckled. “And I expect to hear great things of your studies in the coming weeks.” He watched as she pulled back and made her way down a hall off to the left, most likely toward the kitchens for a healthy helping of steamed potatoes with roasted chicken.

His smile faded along with her footsteps, until only his usual scowl sat on his lips. He pushed the doors open and strode in with all the grandeur that was expected of him. Bartol hated these meetings. They were pointless, in his humble opinion. Twenty-seven pompous idiots sitting in chairs and spending hours to come to terms on new policies for the land, when it took him a matter of minutes to decide the best course of action. But this had been the best way to mediate things three centuries before, when everyone was battle-worn and clueless on where to begin.

He knew it was time to begin when he entered the antechamber and found it empty. There were no Councilors milling about along the stone walls, discussing what their decisions were going to be for the next items on the agenda. He didn’t have to watch them making deals to try and push their own goals onto each other.

He made his way across the room and slipped past the heavy blue velvet curtain, ignoring the wash of suppressing magic that fell over him. Silence greeted Bartol as he stepped forward and took a seat on the plush armchair that was identical to all the others in the room, nestled in a narrow space between two walls to block out the Councilors on either side. Nearly opaque screens slid down in front and behind him, locking him into the small area.

As he made himself comfortable, braziers around the room lit with gentle blue flames, one sitting just below each screen obscuring a Councilor in a wide circle around the room. There was only one brazier that stayed empty, the one that would have held Councilor Farna in the seat just above, had she not been murdered two days prior by that demon. They would need a

separate meeting to appoint a new sorcerer in her stead now that her burial was complete. It was never clear who sat behind each screen since the seating shifted with each meeting according to a translocation spell on the compartments. It meant there was no way to try and hex a particular Councilor's seat.

These people were pathetically petty.

"All are gathered," Bartol said, as was his duty. He waited for each flame to shift into a soft green, denoting that the meeting had officially begun.

The voice of Councilor Nori of the Parthena was the next to sound out, reading off each item on the agenda. There was only one in particular that everyone cared about.

"Item number one," Councilor Nori said once she had completed the bulleted list. "This Council will come to a decision on the actions of our only living arrival in the Veil's Awakening ritual. Charges against the arrival include the murder of Councilor Farna Malthus, Parthena's Head of Transmutation; the murders of twenty-two unknown mages, shackled to her; the murder of three unidentified men in armor, who appeared with her, unshackled; and the assault of Council Elder Rin Vynus, General of the Magi. The arrival is currently incarcerated in level seven of Termath Prison, awaiting this Council's ruling on how to proceed."

There was a pregnant pause before someone finally decided to speak.

"How can we be sure she killed those other people?" Shaman Elder Pirda asked. "Just because they were dead when she came doesn't mean *she* killed them."

"You mean *it*," Parthena Elder Grondi said from behind his screen. "That *thing* killed one of our Councilors. It's no stretch of the imagination that it would have killed everyone who appeared with it."

“Councilor Farna’s death is a travesty, but we have an obligation to think about the laws governing magical creatures,” Elder Pirda said.

“It’s a demon,” Elder Grondi shot back. “Or have you forgotten that demons nearly destroyed the whole world before our ancestors banished them?”

“Can we be sure that she’s a demon?” General Vynus asked. For once he seemed invested in the discussion taking place, but that was to be expected. The demon *had* torn part of his face off in front of the rest of the Council. It was no secret that the thirty-year-old captain didn’t care for these meetings. He had plenty of work that was handed his way in delegating training to troops and overseeing the entirety of their military. Bartol only insisted that he appear at every meeting because, as the leader of their knights, his opinion weighed heavily in these situations.

“She does appear to have elven markings,” another Councilor said.

“Those markings might appear elven, but they’re not,” said Councilor Lano, an expert on magical creatures. If any of the Shamans would know something about this, it would be him.

“The striping pattern is different—”

“Yes, but we’ve already determined that the striping pattern that’s most common isn’t the *only* pattern elves have,” Elder Pirda countered. Interesting. She’d countered a statement made by one of her own lackeys. “Woodland elves have stripes, but the few cave-dwelling elves we’ve encountered had spots instead. We should not rely solely on the pattern for racial identification.”

“Yes, but the coloring is wrong,” Councilor Lano said.

“Your last report indicated that the coloring correlates with their hair color,” Bartol sighed. “If I recall correctly, the stripes closely resemble the demon’s hair.”

“She does have pointed ears like an elf,” a female Councilor added.

“And what about the claws?” Elder Grondi asked. “Or those teeth that ripped out Councilor Farna’s throat and nearly took off Elder Vynus’ face! That thing isn’t an elf!”

“What if she’s only half elf?” Elder Pirda asked. “We’ve seen several varying species in our research of elves breeding with other races and providing interesting offspring.”

“I wasn’t aware you Shamans were dissecting creatures in the Beast City,” General Vynus interjected, the disdain dripping from his every word. “Isn’t that against the Conventions we signed five years ago, protecting magical creatures from experimentation?”

“Those are only for intelligent beings getting kidnapped and killed,” Elder Pirda said. “What we do is research. Interviews with them. Questionnaires. We don’t cut them open like the heathens in the Parthena did.”

“Questionnaires,” scoffed Elder Grondi. “How will that give you *any* concrete data? It’s biased by their beliefs.”

“Back to the point,” Bartol said. “Per the Conventions that General Vynus mentions, we will need to determine race before moving further. Elves are a protected species, and if the newest arrival is, in fact, an elf then we will need to act accordingly and contact the High Elven leader.”

“Which could take weeks,” Elder Pirda said. Bartol knew she spoke from experience. It took months for the Shamans to submit reports concerning their contact with elves because of the delay in reaching intelligent beings in the Beast City of Rotin.

“Maybe months,” Elder Grondi added. “You never know how long it’ll take to get the elves to actually talk to you. I question whether they can even read.” That was idiotic, and clearly showed Grondi’s close-mindedness where the elves were concerned. How would intelligent creatures who lived for centuries be illiterate?

“If she *is* an elf, then maybe she’s just gone rogue,” one Councilor suggested. “If that’s the case, then we won’t need to involve the elves in deciding her fate, since they’ll just turn her over to us as reparation for the damage done in the first place.”

“We’re dealing with a demon,” Lano interjected. “It’s plausible this woman may be only half demon, but still a demon. There’s no indication--”

“It should be turned over to Parthena!” Councilor Prano of the Parthena shouted. Bartol could never stand how he and his brother, Lano, bickered with one another. Especially since they held identical positions in different sects of the Council. “We can determine the actual race using more than a simple *questionnaire*. As if that *thing* could tell you anything of value.”

“Demons can’t be trusted,” Elder Grondi spat.

“We’re teaching every student in the Academy that demons can’t appear in our world,” Magi Councilor Kratol said from somewhere on the left side of the room. The deep voice of the Southern Knight Contingency leader startled even Bartol. He never spoke during these meetings. It seemed the Magi had a vested interest in this matter, after all. “How can we be sure that this is actually a demon we’re dealing with?”

“And the *Magi* chime in with more pointless drivel,” Elder Grondi drawled.

“Watch your tongue, Elder Grondi,” General Vynus hissed to the Parthena leader. “He has a point.”

“Of course, *you* would think so,” Elder Grondi said.

“What I’m saying,” Councilor Kratol continued, “is that all we’ve seen are illustrations of demons from lore, but none of those have shown a thing even remotely similar to the woman who came to us two days ago.”

“And the Academies teach that demons don’t have the ability to speak human languages,” Elder Pirda said.

“She does have the ability to speak,” General Vynus said. “I heard it, myself.”

“So maybe it’s a half-breed,” said Elder Grondi. “A demon is a demon, and we have a duty to the citizens of Il’ma to execute it.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Elder Pirda said. “She doesn’t know the laws of our land, but that shouldn’t mean an instant execution.”

“Well, it’s been two days. And it will take another couple of weeks to arrange a public execution.”

“You can’t just decide that is our course of action!”

“Someone has to make this decision!” Elder Grondi bellowed. Bartol rolled his eyes when he heard how the Parthena Elder’s fists slammed down on the arms of his chair in a tantrum. “You Shamans will just fret and twist your hands and hope you can give it candy to make it into a reformed citizen!”

Bartol was exceedingly happy that no one could see the moment his head dropped to his hands. It would be hours of this nonsense if they didn’t find a way to just agree that the woman was a demon, like he already knew she was. Once that was established, they could move on to arguing about how to best handle the death of Councilor Farna and the assault on General Vynus. And eventually, he was sure, they would all just come to the same conclusion that he had as soon as she had appeared.

The demon had to be executed to protect their country.

He tuned out the voices rising around the room as more Councilors chimed in with their own opinions on the demon’s origins. Bartol couldn’t take much more of this idiocy, that much

he was sure of. This was a stark reminder of why he should have taken the opportunity to change the governmental structure when the others he'd joined forces with after appearing here from the Veil had died after the first hundred years in Il'ma. The Veil didn't bring any mages from the old country for nearly fifty years after they arrived, well after the government had been established. He could have controlled most of the country for the past two hundred years, nearly every decision that was made. Instead, Bartol had stupidly allowed this Council to remain intact – as Marta had warned with another vision of hers – and now this was what he had to deal with.

“Okay, we can all agree that she's most likely a demon!” General Vynus shouted over the others in the room. “Let's just move on already with the understanding that we're dealing with a magical creature *of some sort*. What are the suggestions on the table?”

“Execution!” Elder Grondi bellowed.

“Rehabilitation!” Elder Pirda screeched.

The three heads of the Council just under Grand Councilor Bartol were the reason for the great majority of his headaches. Well, General Vynus was never that much of a troublemaker. The man knew his place and kept to his job description. Elders Pirda and Grondi, however, were constantly at one another's throats in attempts to prove the superiority of their sects and specialties.

“It has been three hours,” Councilor Nori announced. “We will adjourn for second meal. Councilors, please return prepared with your decision on the matter of the newest arrival's fate. For clarification, the choices are execution or rehabilitation.”

“What are we discussing after that?” Councilor Kratol asked.

“The next item on the agenda is the increasing reports of protests concerning the equality of magical creatures. Most recently, a band of gnomes was found surrounding the Orcalis Academy.”

Bartol suppressed a groan at that. Every two weeks, they discussed this same thing. Some pathetic little group trying to change the way things were handled. They were wasting their time, but at least they hadn’t resorted to violence. Still, he had a feeling that the Council would need to deal with these protesters before too long. He remembered all too well how he and the others had started rebelling against King Gideon’s treatment of primal mages. They were peaceful at first, trying to reason with the monarchy. And when that didn’t work, they realized violent protests were the only way forward. Then the war between the monarchy and mages tore the world of Mishnal apart.

He refused to let that happen again. Whoever these protesters were, needed to be stopped before they could cause any damage. Still, Bartol knew that he needed to have this demon business finished before he moved on to the next threat. All it would take was making sure two-thirds of the voting members decided that the demon needed to be executed. He was sure he could make that happen.

“This meeting is in intermission,” Councilor Nori said. The green flames in the braziers faded to a soft blue, then dimmed as each of the Councilors took their leave of the meeting chamber for second meal.