

“The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?” -Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter I

Long, long ago the planet called Gaia was nothing more than a barren rock. Floating aimlessly through the cosmos. Unwelcome was her place amongst her brothers and sisters, the stars and planets. So she traveled alone, aimlessly for eons and eons, without purpose. Her cries fell deaf on the ears of all that she came across. For they all had a purpose, they were all full of life and teeming with power. While their sister was empty and weak. Powerless and small. Their guardian, the Moon Goddess, heard the cries of her wayward child across the galaxies and came to her aid.

From her rock she carved out three figures. Three siblings, three sisters. And they were all such ethereal creatures. With skin that illuminated even the darkest corners of space. Eyes that saw farther than anything could ever fathom. Eternal beauty that would never fade. The moon named these three beings the *Celestials*. Charging them with the task of bringing her child Gaia happiness in abundance. Growing her body from a barren wasteland to a flourishing paradise. She granted them power beyond comprehension. The great power of creation. *Magick* is what it came to be known. And the three, with their task in mind, set off to begin their great work.

Marlá, the quiet and thoughtful sister, sought out to transform the deserts and mudlands into sprawling bodies of liquid. Providing an endless solution to Gaia's thirst. And so the oceans, rivers and lakes came into creation across the planet. Pēloniá, the stoic, strong and dutiful sister, sought out to carve great peaks and rolling hills from the abundance of flat land. Providing safety, defense and stability to Gaia. And so the towering northern mountains and curving hills came into creation across the planet. And Siofra, the fairest of the sisters, graceful and loving, sought out to create acre upon acre of fields composed of wood, flora and fauna. Providing pure

air and beauty to Gaia. And so the woodlands, along with bountiful flowers, plants and small creatures came into creation across the planet.

Gaia was no longer the empty husk that she once was. She was now purified. Overflowing with life and filled with love. Finally earning her place amongst the ranks of her siblings. The magick given to her by the celestial sisters coursed through her. It made her whole and gave her new life. And over time the creations of the celestials came together in perfect harmony. Blending into one another and spreading far and wide. Until not a single inch of Gaia remained untouched.

Days turned into weeks and the weeks into years. And those years morphed into centuries. The planet was thriving under the watch of the sisters, as were their creations. The dwellers of the sea created a breathtaking city atop the crashing waves of the ocean. With Marlá and her son, Muirín, as their leaders the kingdom of Atlantia was a sight to behold. It was home to the children of salt and waves, who lived in harmony with the creatures of the depths. Atlantia was a peaceful nation. Welcoming those from all across Gaia. They were known for their excellent markets and trade business. They also played host to the Festival of the Moon year after year, where everyone far and wide came to pay reverence to the Goddess.

Síofra founded the forest kingdom of Áillecht, where she and the elves lived peacefully. The elves were most adept in the ways of magick. Their power rivaling that of their creator. It was a special power, one that could heal the earth and create. That same power granted them immortality, grace and beauty. To know the elves was to love them. Síofra had fallen deeply in love with an elven warrior and their union birthed two daughters. Both Atlantia and Áillecht were quite close. A reflection of the relationship between the two celestial sisters.

But as time passed on and on their sister, Pēloniá, became more and more distant. She took to the north. To the snow capped mountains that she loved. Within them creating the empire of Láidreach. A kingdom built upon strength and only strength. Its people, humans, were an immortal race as well. Warriors tasked with the defense of Gaia and all who inhabited her. But the methods taken in the name of that defense were seen as brutal and unnecessary by many.

Pēloniá was not one to dwell in complacency. Where there was peace, tragedy followed close behind. As excellent as their work had been, the people of Gaia had grown minds of their own. Opinions, thoughts and feelings. And should they choose to go against the will of their creators, against the Goddess herself, well... Gaia would fall into ruin. And that very thought haunted her mind through the long days and nights. Slowly corrupting her.

This led to the rift formed between Pēloniá and her sisters for those long centuries to grow into a gaping chasm. The Imperial army marched far and wide, conquering and bringing the ungoverned lands and people under its banners. All in the name of safety. The Empress and her pursuit for power were relentless. Her dominance and ambition grew and soon she wished for the title of Goddess. She wished to take her mothers place as the true ruler of the world.

During the early days of their union, Pēloniá witnessed time and time again as their mother favored her sisters. Drowning them in her favor and power. The elves and sea children were simply extensions of the Goddess herself. Their power was far greater than anything humanity was capable of. But why? Pēloniá was the strongest. She alone was the one who brought strength and stability to Gaia. If there was anyone in their family worthy enough to be her successor, it was her. But the Goddess did nothing but look past her ambitious daughter, despite all that she had accomplished in her name.

That oversight only served to twist the disdain in her heart into malice. Pushing her further and further away from the sisters that she once loved so dearly. She once wished to be with them forever, to protect them and their people fiercely. But that feeling burned away within the fire raging inside of her. Fear, jealousy and hate took hold. Corrupting and uprooting the magick coursing through her veins. A wicked paranoia and a dangerous, insatiable lust for domination set in. She knew nothing of love anymore. She threw everything to the wayside in pursuit of claiming what was rightfully hers. She would make the Goddess see her. If Siofra and Marlá bent the knee, acknowledged her strength, then their mother would have no choice but to shine her light upon the Empire. Upon her.

And so the conquest began. Adorned in pitch black armor the army of Láidreachta marched across Gaia. Leaving a trail of despair and conquest in their wake. None dared to approach them. To even attempt to reason with Pëloniá was a death sentence. Either you fell in line or your life was forfeit. The aether within her ran cold and poisonous. That poison spread through her people like the roots of a great tree. Her own daughter was a victim of that plague. Bronagh was a fierce warrior, much like her mother. Words never passed from her lips, though the swing of her sword spoke loudly enough.

She was known as the *Death Dealer* across the land. Once upon a time, long long ago, she was much like her aunt Marlá. A bright child with so much curiosity for the world around her. But now she was just a hollow shell. Her sole purpose was to fight, without question. Anyone or anything that stood in the way of her mothers rightful ascension would meet her blade. The shadow of mother and daughter, paired with an ambitious empire, fell over Gaia. The time for war was fast approaching.

Having sensed the fall of their beloved sister, Marlá and Síofra held a council. Though they had sensed a darkness within her heart all of these long years, they struggled to reconcile with the reality of the situation laid before them. Their dear Pëloniá, once a pillar of unwavering strength and resolve, now a slave to the evil that had taken root. If she was not stopped then all of their labors, their reason for existing... It would all be for naught. And so they braced the world for battle.

It was not long until the trio met on the field of war. Mere miles away from the borders of Atlantia. So close that one could taste the salt from the ocean in the air. Sand marking their steps. Pëloniá's conquest had been swift and dominating. All that remained was to bring her sisters to heel. True victory was just beyond her grasp. She would claim it on this day, force them under the empire's banners.

Scores of Elven and Atlantian warriors stood behind their leaders, Síofra and Marlá, on the battlefield. Their children by their sides, weapons in hand. As far gone as she was, Pëloniá employed her sisters to stand down. Asking them to join the empire and help her rule, as the new Goddess. She did wish to harm them but she would do what was needed of her.

The pleading words of the ever peaceful Marlá were mute to Pëloniá. Failing to sway her heart towards sense and peace. The logical and loving words of Síofra did nothing more than anger her. For when the elven queen spoke all that she could hear was the Goddess. The time for needless words had long passed. And thus, in that sandy meadow on the borders of Atlantia, did the War of Accession begin.

The fighting was turbulent. Every strike of mythril against mythril could be felt. Vibrating into the ground, shaking the very bones of Gaia. The cries of the planet echoed across

the cosmos. She called out for her guardian, her protector. Pleading for the Goddess to aid her daughters in this conflict. To stop it before something more precious could be lost forever.

Pēloniá's might had known no equal in this world. Her strength, paired with a unique control over malice, overwhelmed the sea folk and the elves. Their attacks did nothing to halt the advance of the empire. The empress could no longer think properly. All that she saw, all that she wanted now, was power. Her sisters were standing in her way. Their lives were no longer their own. They belonged to her now and she would snatch them away. And so the blade turned to Marlá. With a single leap and thrust of the blade it pierced through the Sea Queen. Twisting the magick right from her veins, until there was nothing left.

Marlá was never a warrior. Her purpose always dwelled within peace. She had no place here. But to save her sister she would brave any trial. No matter the odds stacked against her. As she looked in Pēloniá's eyes she could see a glimmer of the one she once loved. Placing a hand on her cheek, Marlá died. Knowing that there was still a chance left at victory.

Síofra wept. Falling to her knees in the midst of battle. Screaming out in anger as she watched Marlá's body fall limp. It was at this moment that the sky had awakened. Clouds gathered and rain poured down. The heavens wept for the loss of the Queen of Atlantia, the Goddess wept for the loss of her child. Síofra begged for the Goddess to show herself, to answer the call. And so she did.

In an instant the empire's forces were petrified where they stood. All but Pēloniá. She watched on as the Goddess, in a flash of bright light, took on her physical form next to the Elven Queen. Now that she had shown herself it was time for the Empress to end this fight. It was time for her to claim her birthright. She rushed towards her mother, frantic and hungry for slaughter. Blade over head, ready to deliver the final blow.

With a single lift of a finger Pëloniá was stopped before the blade to fall upon its target. The Goddess could feel the corrupt aether leaking from her daughter. The malice gripped her very soul and refused to let go. Tears trickled down her face as she looked at Pëloniá. Had she intervened sooner, not left her children to tend to Gaia on their own, then perhaps this fate could have been averted. In pushing her away, fearing the growing power and ambition within Pëloniá, she created the monster before her.

She would save her. Save them all. Her final act as Goddess and as a mother.

Enlisting the aid of Síofra the two of them pooled all over the remaining aether together. Crafting a spell that would seal away the malice in Pëloniá's heart. Stripping her of her celestial power. They would cleanse her. Pëloniá would die but, like Marlá, she could be reborn again. This time in a better world. Free of her ambitions and free of her demons. This spell would give Gaia a second chance. In the final moments before the spell was complete the Goddess had but one request for her last remaining child. To protect the world that her sisters helped create. To be there when they were reborn and guide them. All of this would be the role of the newly crowned Goddess of the Moon. Síofra, Queen of the Elves, would take this mantle from her mother. The spell was complete and the darkness within Pëloniá's heart was sealed away as her body collapsed onto the sand. Lifeless. In the arms of Síofra the goddess took her final look at the rain falling from the sky. All of the magick within her expended. Her body faded into glowing star dust

The war had finally ended. But the shadow of loss was a dark one indeed. And there would be those on both sides that would never forget what happened here.

Peace was restored to Gaia over the centuries that passed. The Elves protected the world under the guidance of the new Goddess. The humans secluded themselves in the snowy

mountains in the north. Within the bones of their fallen Empire. The choice to spare them and her niece came as an act of goodwill from Síoфра. Pēloniá's daughter would be allowed to rebuild her mother's legacy under peace and love. She would be permitted to see her mothers return. Marlá's son assumed his mother's crown. Preparing Atlantia for her return. He ruled with kindness and compassion for his people. The same way that she had for those many years. The kingdom's were stitched together again and all would be well on the planet called Gaia for many years to come.

But can evil truly be contained? Or will it always find its way back into the hearts of those who are open to it?

Many Years Later

War was not something that was foreign. Its companions' death and suffering were never too far behind. Riding comfortably in its shadow. Ithiliené knew the trio quite well. Having walked side by side with them for many, many years. That familiarity, that strange kinship made the sight before her easier to take in.

Mountains of fallen trees blanketed the open field that she stood in. It was not always this barren, this lifeless and cold. It was once a lush, serene forest. Its soil was hardy and its sky ocean blue. That was the way that she remembered it from her days as a girl. But now the trees brandished charred limbs. Brittle and naked they were. She could no longer hear them speaking, for their voices had left them. And in the midst of the destruction were cold and lifeless bodies.

They belonged to the humans. Ithiliené had slain her fair share of them on this day. Their dark red blood stained her fair skin. Faint streams of steam flared upwards in the cold. It slowly dripped from the tip of the black, mythril blade clutched in her hand. Her face did not tell the tale of a hard fought victory. No, the elves had dispatched the intruders on their land with ease.

Rather, a dark look was painted across her perfectly sculpted face. Eyes lowered and teeth clenched like the chains of a prisoner. A sigh finally broke the stillness as she sheathed the blade back into the holster slung across her nimble shoulders.

“General?” A voice called out to her. It was low and smooth, like silk. Dancing on the sway of the crisp and gentle breeze. Its owner placed a steady hand on her shoulder. “Are you alright?” He asked as she turned to face him.

“Ariël.” She responded. It came out as nothing more than a faint whisper. Those without the keen, pointed ears of an elf would be hard pressed to hear the words. Her lavender eyes narrowed. Darting around the desolate battlefield. A pensive look began to form. Something did not feel right still. Her spirit was restless and anxious. Though the fighting had long ceased. “These were the woods in which I was born into... My sister and I.” Her words were thoughtful. “And our mother, she was so very fond of this place. So much so that she chose it as her final resting place. And now this most sacred of places is nothing more than fire and blood. The greed of humanity engulfs everything that it touches.”

Ariël took her hand in his own, feeling the cool touch of her milky skin against the warmth of his own. “What is broken may be rebuilt. The trees will tower to the sky once more, the flowers will bloom and the moon will shine brightly over this land. The magick of your mother, our Lady of the Moon, will see it done. Do not lose heart, deirfiúr.”

Ariël was a strong and dependable elf. His smooth and dark skin reminded Ithiliené of melting chocolate. And his golden eyes held so much power within them. His words seemed to settle her worry, for the present. But yet her senses remained unsatisfied, so she stayed alert. Listening for what her eyes could not see. She smiled softly at him, tightening the grip around his hand. So very warm he was, always.

“Do we know the full extent of the damage? Do we know why they were here? The humans would not risk crossing our borders without a just cause. How fare the village and the sanctum?” She asked, looking past the tall elf in front of her, to a soldier surveying the area. There was a thin layer of smoke covering everything. Branches snapped and fell to the ground, blades of grass seared under small flames. All of this suffering did not fall deaf on the ears of all of the elves present. It saddened their hearts greatly.

A young soldier, no more than two hundred years old, approached them. His face was caked in dirt and shallow cuts that would heal completely in a few short hours. “General.” He bowed graciously. “The village remains unharmed. Thankfully their full force did not manage to make it in that far before we arrived. But the wards...” He trailed off.

“Yes?” Ithiliené questioned.

“The wards have gone quiet and the sanctum along with them...”

This revelation stirred Ariël into motion. “They have grown quite? The magick that flows through these woods is that of a Celestial. It cannot fail.”

“We have a group investigating the situation as we speak, my lord.” The young soldier followed the pair as they walked further into the woodscape. Worry and skepticism hung on to Ariël’s words.

The main sight of the battle was near the entry point to the region. There was once a breathtakingly large gate, composed of winding wood and blooming red flowers. It was warped into the shape of an arch and the ends of both sides sat two endlessly burning fire pits. Their flames glowing a serene green, safeguarding the path into the village hundreds if not thousands of years. But that sight was nothing more than dust now. Another slight that the elves had to

repay to the humans. But beyond that were full forests still and the deeper one trekked the thicker it became.

Empty buildings, various homes and shops. All silent, all vacated. Many residents fled back to the capitol while others stayed to fight in defense of their homeland. In defense of *her*. Those who chose to remain were not trained in the ways of combat but they were all that stood between humans and their goal. The bravery shown by them is not something easily conjured. For it takes immense strength and selflessness. Now, they are bodies left to burn and rot in piles on the field of battle. Not a trace of magick left in their veins. Ithiliené would make sure that their spirits came to know peace. They would be bestowed every honor that an elf could receive on their journey back to the stars.

“Something is very wrong.” Ithiliené spoke as they moved through the woodlands paths. “Can you not feel it, Ariël?”

“Yes...” He responded solemnly. “My connection to the aether flow is not as strong as yours but yes, I can feel it.”

“The magick is still here, but it is fading rapidly.” She kneeled down, digging thin fingers into the cold dirt. A weak pulse vibrated through her body. Like that of a failing heartbeat. “We need to get to the sanctum. *Now*.”

There was not time for the moment to pass before several more elves dropped from the treetops above. Silent were their movements and light was their weight. Not a single grain of dust had kicked up when they landed. With hands across their chests and over their hearts they bowed. Rose red cloaks engulfed them both while black hoods covered their heads. They spoke in unison, addressing them both “Lady Ithiliené, my king.”

“Please, just General or Ithiliené... What news do you bring?” The pair were silent. Hesitating to answer her question. Though their eyes were shrouded by the cloaks over their heads, it was sure that their gazes were downward. She inched closer “What is it?”

“The two of you must come with us. There is no time to delay..” The cloaked she-elf spoke.

“Yes. There is something that you must look upon for yourselves.” The second elf spoke.”

Though the sanctuary of the past goddess was built a millenia ago, there was no sign to show that. The sun shined so brightly above but the deeper that one traveled into the forest, the darker that it became. Masterfully crafted buildings and structures became more frequent. Glowing cerulean lamps illuminated the sanctuary as if powered by sapphires.

The Lady Síoфра built this place when she was young. Using her magick to do what her hands could not. It was the beginning of the Elven Kingdom. It was where she wed, where she birthed her children and where she laid herself to rest. Ithiliené exhaled quietly. Thankful that the inland village remained untouched.

Rearing up to a formation that was much different in size and architecture, the group stopped. Vines wound up and around the entire building. Encasing its mythrill skin in flora armor. There were no doors on this place. Only wide windows and tall archways. The brisk air flowed effortlessly into its halls. Bringing in leaves on its breeze. And if one peered through the entryway hard enough they would see her there. Sleeping soundly, as still as freshly fallen snow. The Lady Síoфра.

Ithiliené was the first to breach the hallowed ground. Pacing quickly and effortlessly up the stairs. In a single bound and blink of an eye she was at her mother's side. Taking the slumbering hand of the goddess in her own, she knelt down. Moondust trickled down slowly around the slumbering body. Twinkling like small stars in the ambient blue light shining from the open windows.

A sign that Síofra was still alive, unharmed. But the look upon Ithiliené's face was not borne from comfort at the revelation. Her narrow eyes and sharp frown indicated something more.

"So that is what they were after." She said as the others caught up. Ariël shuddered the moment he stepped within the chamber. The magick here was mighty indeed, compared to that of an ordinary elf such as him. Both his wife and Ithiliené carried that same mighty magick within them. But this was much different... It was weaker than it should be.

The hooded elves rushed to the general's side with haste. Awaiting their next order. Now that she had realized what they had. This situation was much graver than anticipated.

"What are your orders, general?" The she-elf spoke.

"We return home. Quickly." Her eyes fell upon the two hooded soldiers. "You did well to sense the change in her aether. It is not something that is easily noticed without a connection to the plant itself... But if what I fear is true, then we must convene with the others... The whole of Gaia and her people are in danger once more."