

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

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The only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire. Meleah sat motionless at the table with her back to the window. The elf had been listening for Ambrosia's return. Staring into the fire, she brooded. It had come to this.

She had been many years here, in the manor house she had ...inherited. Centuries, in fact, had passed since she seduced the former inhabitant and ...survived him. It stood on a cliff in a bleak and isolated region, in the far Northern reaches of E'Atara.

She had been desperate. Nursing her wounds. Needing to regain strength. In need of a hiding place to regroup and develop a plan; a hiding place in case her enemy had second thoughts about sparing her life.

The plan she had devised was deceptively simple. She would keep quiet and lull the others into a false sense of security. Then when she had faded into the furthest recesses of their memories, if they recalled her at all, she would strike quickly to remove all obstacles. All the while she would monitor their actions, in order to judge when the time was ripe.

So here she had hid. She had settled in well, to life here. There had been no sign of pursuit. Her goddess, Noird'eau, had provided well for her. She soon had a following among the locals. It seemed she wasn't the first to run North till she could run no further, and she probably wasn't the last either. Many were curious as to her...practices. She took on students. Those that completed her... training, served as her assistants. The company they provided had been sufficient. She had needed no more...until recently.

Even after she learned of her niece's existence, nothing had changed. The descendants of that line were not to be allowed to survive. It wasn't until she first set eyes on her, that it began. The gnawing questions. The "what-ifs". What if she had never fought with her sister? What if she had found a way not to have to kill their mother? What if she had been the one that Ewen had chosen to wed? What if she had been born first?

She had never minded being alone. A mind without many distractions can become a finely honed instrument, and the eerily beautiful elf had most definitely taken advantage of that. However, these alien questions kept sprouting in her mind recently. They bothered her enough that she had deviated from her plan.

To ask the young elf to join her was surely a mistake. This one walks the path of light with a sure-footedness that makes the chance of a misstep almost impossible. And yet, she had to try. She was entranced with this youngster. It had almost become an obsession. But...it wasn't just the female. It was the idea of family. She had been a long time without any real family. Her assistants practically worshipped her, but it was not the same. She had rescued them from one bad situation or another and as such they were grateful and adored her, but gratitude does not a family make.

Deep in thought, she started at the sound of footsteps in the hall. As her favorite assistant entered the room, Meleah inquired sharply, "When did you return? I did not hear any horse approach."

Ambrosia kneeled beside the chair Meleah occupied and gazed at the floor. "I only just returned. I have not yet washed from the journey. I thought you would want a report." Drawing aside her green wool cloak, she reached into her pouch, withdrew a message and offered it to Meleah.

Meleah grasped the message. Examining it closely, she noticed the wax seal with the symbol 'MM'. It was the Seal of the Sisters, and she had devised it with Melusine so long ago, back on Alayta Amrun. She stood

and walked to the hearth. Breaking the seal, she unfolded the note and read the rejection that it contained. She stared into the fire for a long time as Ambrosia sat motionless.

Meleah addressed her loyal assistant without turning to face her. "Tell me."

Ambrosia sighed. She did not wish to hurt her mistress as she knew her words would. "I don't know what words she used in her letter, my lady, but she appeared frightened and I sensed some regret as she told me that she was rejecting your offer. She seems fully aware of her circumstances. And yet I sensed a determination in her choice." Pausing, she evaluated her impressions once again, "I do not think that a repeat and sweetening of your offer would change anything."

Meleah turned towards her favorite, "Stand, child."

Ambrosia rose to her feet and raised her green eyes to look upon her mistress. Meleah began to pace back and forth in front of the fire. Suddenly she halted. With her back to Ambrosia, she inquired, "Did any of them guess that you are an empath?"

The assistant shook her head. "I gave them no reason to even consider it."

Meleah turned around. "They have an empath amongst them. You did nothing wrong, if they found out. I just need to know if they know, so I can make informed decisions about which course of action I ultimately should pursue."

Ambrosia again shook her head. "Your training taught me to know when others were tapping into my emotions and even my thoughts. No one attempted either. I am positive."

Meleah turned to face her student. In a cold and calculating voice, void of all emotion she began. "This is the time. All that we have been preparing for has come. We are threatened, and yet from the threat, we will now arise to claim what should be ours. The time of destiny is nearly at hand. The wheels have been set in motion."

Ambrosia, not fooled by her lady's composure, approached Meleah, "I'm sorry. I wish that things could have been different."

Meleah laughed at this. Yet it was a hollow laugh. "That is the story of my life, child. My destiny is not an easy one, and yet the time is approaching when all will be repaid. Do not think that I don't remember who has stood by me."

Once again, Meleah began pacing. The question now, was which move to make first. She stopped in front of Ambrosia and cupped her hand under the assistant's chin, Meleah searched her clear green eyes, "You are wearied from your journey. Go freshen up and rest. Join me for breakfast tomorrow. I will hold council with my assassins and I would have you present."

"As you wish, my lady." Ambrosia turned to leave. As she neared the threshold, she turned back to Meleah. "I am glad that you will finally come into your rightful place, mistress. You rescued me by bringing me here. I am forever in your debt. The young elf does not know what she has lost." She turned and left before Meleah could respond.

Meleah sighed but would no longer allow herself time to brood. She pulled a torch down from one of the sconces and followed Ambrosia from the room. She walked the length of the hall until she came upon a heavy wood door. After verifying that it was indeed locked, she drew a heavy key from her pouch and unlocked the door. A dark and winding stairway led down in front of her.

As she descended, she began to think of the Sacred Scrying Pool. She was haunted by a vision of herself, kneeling, seeing images sent by Noird'eau. She spoke aloud to ground herself, "I must not get ahead of myself." She remembered that she must take this one step at a time. First things first. All the threats must be eliminated. Of course the young elf, but her aunt as well. They are the only remaining descendants. It might be necessary to eliminate the young elf's father and love interest, but only if they got in the way.

First she would send the assassins. It should not be hard for them to locate the female. That Clan she belongs to has regular gatherings. They do not advertise the locations, but neither do they take pains to

conceal them. And if the assassins should fail, unlikely as that may be, she still had other weapons. A cold smile crossed her face at the thought of Ambrosia. Not many know what a powerful weapon an empath can be.

When at last she reached the bottom, she was in a cavernous room with a dirt floor. Chains and manacles were fastened to the wall. Her dungeon was empty now. She held the torch up so she could see the door at the other end of the room.

She strode towards a door that looked identical to the one she had opened at the top of the stairs. She drew another key from her pouch and proceeded to unlock the door and enter a small room. This was the shrine. The walls were painted with symbols so ancient that few alive would recognize them. There was a basin of water in the center of the floor. Meleah approached and kneeled before the basin.

Staring into the water's depths, she let her eyes lose focus. Scarcely more than a whisper, she breathed the words, "It has begun."