

## Prologue

Alba, 997 AD

There had been a light rain falling for weeks over the northwestern coast of Alba. The fog from the low-lying clouds hindered visibility, covering the cliffs in a mist that swirled with the gale-force winds. On the highest peak of the ridge, a lone figure, a weathered-faced old woman, stood looking out at the turbulent sea. Waves thunderously pounded the rocky shore far below. The stone beneath her feet was wet, slippery and covered with sea foam. Wrapped in a woolen tartan, the old woman scanned the horizon. It had been two days since her message had been sent. There should have been a reply by now. The safety of her young apprentice was at the center of the worry gnawing away at her. The disappearance of the young woman had not gone unnoticed. Even now, at the inn housing the only tavern in town, rumors were taking on a life of their own. There was no way she could calm the growing unease taking hold of the inhabitants. She herself was anxious about what was to come.

The town had stood for centuries. A small chapel, the inn and a modest market were the gathering places for what few residents remained. The cold climate made life difficult in this forsaken land. It was rare that sunlight touched the barren landscape. Most of the year, people huddled indoors in front of their wood fires. The local farms more often than not had little yield. Instead, they relied on food brought in from the lowlands. Why anyone remained was difficult to comprehend. The fishermen were the only ones who managed to make any living. When the winter snow came with its punishing winds, the town appeared deserted. Only the hardest ventured outdoors. Their religion held them together. Trust that the Almighty would not abandon them gave them hope. Anything inexplicable was looked upon with suspicion. Fear of witchcraft and the devil was growing in these tumultuous times. If only they knew how accurate their imaginings were.

The old woman's eyes stared out into the mist, seeing more than what was visible to the naked eye. Across the fog-covered waters lay a land that none knew existed. An island shrouded in mystery and invisibility, which had been sheltering its people for thousands of years. The land was rich and warm, nothing like the desolate, inhospitable home the mainlanders called their own. The old woman had only been there once herself. Few of her kind could see it when, by chance, the fog cleared bringing it into view. To everyone else, the island remained unseen. The security around it was complete. Even fishermen steered clear of the area. It was long believed that anyone approaching the land would be lost.

The old woman had expected a reply from her friend by now. The urgency of the message would have had a profound impact on the recipient. There was no telling how much damage had been done already. Only her friend would be able to gauge the impact with her senses. For some time, the old woman had felt that her apprentice was more than who she seemed. Power, unlike anything the old woman had ever experienced, radiated from the young girl. The old woman was sure that the girl shielded herself. There was something more within her that was being carefully hidden. In all her years, the old woman had never felt so afraid of what it could all mean. The wait was becoming unbearable. Knowing there was nothing she could do to make a response arrive more quickly, she cast one last look over the horizon. Seeing no movement, she turned away from the cliff, walking carefully back towards the inn.

As she made her way slowly towards the building's entrance, the door of the inn swung open. Her eyes were momentarily blinded by the light shining from within. The noise from inside the inn rose to join the sound of the howling winds around her. In the open doorway, a slight woman peered out the door. Sighing, the old woman continued her descent, stopping in front of the young woman standing in the doorway, another one of her apprentices. This one was too unruly to be ready for any formal training. The girl's name belied her character. Her tantrums were becoming legendary.

"Patience, what have I told you? Get back inside! Curiosity will be your downfall one of these days," said the old woman, scolding her young apprentice.

“Sara, where have you been? I sense danger out there.” The young woman’s worried look rested on the old woman.

“There is nothing out there that can harm me. Isn’t it time you were off to bed?”

Not giving her apprentice a chance to respond, Sara pulled her back into the inn. Closing the door behind her, Sara made sure the woman went off to bed. Once her apprentice had retired, Sara went into the sitting room, avoiding the stares of the other occupants. She knew that they feared her. They would not be approaching her for any conversation. Their questions would have gone unanswered anyway. Walking past the only servant girl, Sara asked for a cup of tea. Not waiting for a response, she continued to one of the chairs facing the fireplace. As Sara settled herself in front of the roaring fire, the servant girl appeared with a cup and small pot containing what smelled like mint leaves. She poured some into the cup for Sara, avoiding looking directly at her.

When the girl moved away to serve another patron, Sara leaned back into the chair, bringing the cup to her lips. Warmed by the fire in front of her and the hot liquid making its way through her body, Sara surveyed her surroundings. The eating room to her right was empty. Tables were already prepared for breakfast the following day. There were four other residents staying at the inn. A few of them were still at the bar enjoying a last drink before turning in. They avoided her, sensing something was different about her. Alone, she blocked out the sound of the voices as she stared into the flames, letting the fire’s heat enfold her in its warmth, hoping tomorrow would bring news.

Across the sea, hidden behind a thick fog, the island was aglow with torches that lit the paths around the homes of its people. Crystals emitted a blue-tinged glow from within the walls of the dwellings. What few folk were awake sat huddled together, conversing about their day. In one of these homes, a couple stood watching over their sleeping son. They had waited so long for a child that they did not ask questions when he arrived on their doorstep, accompanied by a celestial being. The woman did not care how it was possible. She had waited so long for a chance at motherhood; she did not care to question why he had been placed in their care. He was a miracle.

Outside, lush green foliage swayed in the gentle breeze and sounds of crickets filled the air. The deep green forest surrounded the village, protecting and camouflaging the homes. Built on stilts, the dwellings reached up into the foliage of the trees. Winding stairs made their way around the trunks. At the highest point of the island a citadel occupied the cliffs. Its courtyard garden held species of flowers no human had ever seen. Their brilliant colors provided enough light to walk the cobblestone paths easily. One of these pathways meandered through the garden, leading to an immense interior great hall. White flowing drapes were pulled back and tied with red sashes to allow the breeze to enter. Across the stone floor of the vast room, twenty white marble columns stretched to the ceiling, ten on each side, lining the way to the woman sitting on a gold-leafed throne.

Eliana sat rigidly on her throne, her fury growing as she reread the words written on the paper she held in her hand. The magnitude of the betrayal she felt nearly overwhelmed her. She had no doubt that the message was true. It pierced her heart to read the treacherous actions of someone she had trusted. She crumpled the paper into a ball, letting it fall at her feet. She rose from her seat, walked over to one of the archways that looked out at the courtyard and stepped out into the night. She was dressed in a flowing emerald gown that matched her eyes. The gossamer material hugged her curves, outlining her ethereal five-foot-eight-inch frame. Her long, almost white, hair framed her gentle facial features, running down her back to her waist. Almond-shaped eyes, a straight nose and full lips graced her heart-shaped face.

She always enjoyed this time of night. Everything seemed so peaceful. She could almost forget all the decisions and impositions her title put upon her. Her eyes took in the splendor of the night, the village below and the stars scattered across the sky. *How could such a peaceful night hold so much treachery?* Realizing she had little choice about what needed to be done, she re-entered the hall, stopping in front of her throne. With more strength than she felt, she called out to the guards standing at the end of the great room.

“Bring Elsam to me immediately!” She ordered.

As two of her guards hurried from the room to do as she ordered, she sat back down on her throne. The pressures of being queen to her people had her questioning her every

decision lately. She could not afford to make any mistakes. Her people were not the only ones at risk. From a young age she had been able to see far into the future. Her clairvoyant ability made it possible to intervene when necessary in order to protect her people from discovery. For thousands of years the Eruvians had managed to exist without their presence becoming known. Humans were not yet ready to know about them. The human's mistrust and ignorance would be the end of her people if she allowed it. Somehow, Elsam had disrupted the course she had laid out. Searching with her senses, looking into the future, she could not see what he had done to undermine her. The fact that he had been able to disrupt her plans without her being aware of it had her very concerned. It was essential that she make things right. Not knowing what Elsam had done to make changes, she was unsure of what she needed to do to correct things. This only further increased her ire. She needed to know what it was that he had done in order to fix it. Lost in her thoughts, she did not feel Vanya, her closest friend, until she touched her shoulder, bringing her back to herself.

The two women had grown up together and shared everything with each other, but the contrast between them was striking. Vanya stood at five-feet-five-inches tall. Her sinewy figure and skill at combat made her an asset to Eliana. She was always present, protecting her queen from any threat. Her diminutive form made others underestimate how lethal she could be. Short, dark chocolate hair with wispy bangs framed a face that held mismatched features that somehow worked together. The same emerald-coloured eyes that marked their entire race were wide spaced from a small upturned nose. Thin lips circled a small puckered mouth. Vanya would know and understand the deep hurt that she was feeling at that moment. Eliana was not yet ready to voice all that she felt, however. The time for that would come. For now, she needed to face the next few minutes alone, to gather her strength for what was to come. Vanya, perceiving her friend's needs, stepped back far enough to give Eliana the space she desired, but remained close enough to come to her aid if requested.

Indecision on what course to take, how to undo Elsam's actions, weighed on the queen. She wondered about his motivation. He had been her most trusted adviser. Their

connection had been strong at one time. She had even considered taking him as her mate, even though the joining had not manifested. Her race rarely felt the illusive bonding between males and females any longer. In the rare cases where two souls belonged together, they would be joined eternally. Although she had believed herself to be in love with him, they did not forge the binding that would have made them dependent on each other. His present actions, going against her edicts, were punishable by death. It was beyond her comprehension what his reasoning was for the chain of events he had put into motion.

The sound of the returning guards caused her to look up to see if they had found him. Elsam marched defiantly between the guards, his eyes locked on hers. *What a shame it would be to see him gone from her court*, she thought. Elsam towered over her guards. His powerful leg muscles flexed with every step he took. He was dressed in his usual black leather, and the gleam of his sword, where it rested on his hip, drew the eyes to his tapered waist. Approaching the throne, he fell to one knee, his head downcast, leaving her looking at the top of his head. At one time, her fingers had combed through his shoulder-length, wheat-colored hair, and her hands had caressed the muscles of his strong shoulders. He raised his head, looking at her boldly. Not waiting for permission, he stood, facing her, silently waiting for her to speak.