

## PROLOGUE

The icy fog wrapped around him like a clammy cloak, as he wove his way through the deserted streets of Woshantor. In the middle of the night the buzzing metropolis became as quiet as a church. It was so quiet he could hear the distant roar of the river and the waterfalls. He moved past the huge stone buildings that made up the merchant's quarter. Oil lamplights cast an eerie glow in the fog, but did nothing to aid in visibility. Most of Woshantor had been constructed from the granite on which the city stood. The oldest buildings were believed to have stood here for the last thousand years. The island city had become a frequented spot for him. Not only did it have an amazing archive, but it was also the home of his dear friend Lady Taliha Troijan—the Earthfriend. His pace quickened as he thought of her—his leopard skin cloak flapping rhythmically with his gait. He had been summoned to her home in the middle of the night. That could only mean that something was wrong. His friend's house was a large two-story building on a small estate near the edge of the city. The façade was overgrown with thick, green ivy, and the grounds were lined with rows of hibernating fruit trees, their limbs were completely bare from the onslaught of winter cold. A layer of wet, brown decaying leaves covered the ground. As he reached the house he sensed a presence of evil, which told him he might already be too late. He hoped his urgent knock on the door would be answered with a handshake and a smile. He hoped his intuition was wrong—but it had been before, and it hadn't changed.

He was met at the door by the family's manservant. The old fellow was ghastly pale, and looked as though he were near death. With barely a word the manservant led him through the house to where his master sat huddled on the floor, weeping and muttering. Just down the hall was an open door. The glimmer of light from an oil lamp

spilt out from inside the room.

The visitor kneeled in front of the weeping lord of the house, and grabbed him by the shoulders, "Malcolm! What has happened? Where are your wife and your child?"

The only reply the man could give was, "Gone...."

The visitor stood up quickly and rushed down the hallway into the hauntingly lit room. A sight of such horror that met his eyes that was to nearly enough make him vomit up his recently eaten dinner. The room was that of a young child. It was furnished with all the things that showed this child was loved by her parents. However, it was also in a state of disarray as if some great storm had blown through. Yellow-orange lamplight cast wavering shadows all around. He quelled the waves of nausea in his stomach, and moved slowly into the room. Blood was spattered everywhere. Worst of all, the recently disemboweled body of Lady Troijan hung from the ceiling above. The child's bed, over which Lady Troijan hung, was drenched in blood, bile, and intestines. She had been crucified on the ceiling with long iron spikes. Her blood-matted hair hung in tangles from her wounded scalp. She was still wearing the nightgown she had apparently worn to bed, but the front had been torn wide open. Across her exposed chest a word had been carved into her flesh. *Evgoth'naev*. The Drugaazian word literally meant "victory over life". Immediately he knew what was happening here, and why it was happening. He also knew that the end would be coming sooner than anyone expected.

## CHAPTER ONE

The warm water splashed softly against her neck and chin as she bathed. Quietly the steam rose from the bubbling hot spring to mix with the fog that shrouded her pool. The blanket of white vapor swirled around her in eddies of hot and cold air. The faint smell of sulfur drifted out from the center of the pool. She silently rose from the water, donned her

dark blue robe, and quickly walked up the snow-swept trail that led to her home. The soft and icy crunching sound of freshly fallen snow under her feet was really the only sound she noticed. The morning was cold, cloudy and gray and silent. The forest and the distant mountaintops were sheathed in the scabbard of winter. She awaited the coming of the spring, when nature's sword would be drawn once again to swathe the land in green. Though for now, the land slept under a blanket of white.

Her bathing spot was down-stream from the millhouse, which had served as her home for many years. Countless times she could recall returning from the lake to find the mill's paddle wheel turning under the constant flow of water from the higher, inland lakes. During the cold, winter season, however, the wheel remained frozen in place; iced over as though incased in crystal. As she neared the house, she heard her horses' knickering quietly in the stable at the rear of the building.

She entered the house and stood by the fire to warm her chilled body. Her build was athletic and muscular—not so muscular as to be grotesque and lithe enough to be exquisitely feminine. She vigorously ran her hands through her long hair to help it dry. She lifted a comb from a nearby shelf, sat down in the chair by the fire, and began untangling the hair as it dried. The old mill had been abandoned for some time before she had taken up residence. Aside from a little wood rot, she thought to herself, it was a nice place to live. It was what she wanted: cozy and secluded. The interior of the mill was decorated in a very rural, homey style. Herbs dried on strings by the fireplace. Cast iron pots and skillets hung on a rack in the kitchen. Quilts, purchased at the local Spring Faire, were laid across each piece of furniture. Each piece of furniture was formed from rough-hewn oak—not fancy but utilitarian. There were also some things in her home that were out of place in the décor. A rug, brought over the mountains on an eastern

caravan, was centered in the middle of the floor before the fire. An alabaster statuette of a lion sat on her small writing desk. Next to it was a conch shell, which came from some distant shore. On one side of the mantle was a *deschwood* incense burner. On the other side was a small stack of ancient books—some of which an old friend had taught her how to read. The most exquisite artifact in her collection was the sword that hung on pegs above the mantle. Golden firelight was reflected across her face from its shining silver hilt. The steel blue blade was long and straight with a slight widening at the tip, which gave its tip a leaf like appearance. Etched along the length of the blade, in Vrenhrathan script, were the words few people could pronounce.

“*Athwaih ani’ ih Saori Saah!*”, she murmured to herself as she read the words. ‘The strongest chorus of Saori’s Song’, she thought, ‘how fitting it was that a person would name a weapon after such a tragic song.’ She knew from her travels that Saori was a Vrenhrathan woman of legend; a warrior-heroine that risked all for the love of a man. But when Saori found her love dead on the battlefield she gave up the sword and all that she had known. She fled across the sea, never to be seen again. It was a sad tale that was old as the mountains. Some five thousand years old, a friend once told her. The sword, it was believed, was nearly the same age, but it still appeared as though it had just been made.

She smiled as she finished combing her hair. She rose and rubbed her feet on the warm rug. Mouser, her cat, meowed vociferously from the kitchen. Calling her to come and feed him. Gliding swiftly off the rug and across the smooth, wood floor, she headed for the kitchen; her rusty red tresses flowing out behind her as she went. Mouser awaited her with bright yellow eyes and a cheerful meow. She took the lid off a nearby keg and scooped out a bowlful of fish for her anxious companion. The tabby feline readily

devoured the food as soon as it was placed in front of her.

Suddenly, the sound of creaking wood in her bedroom caught her attention. It was not the normal sound of the aged mill groaning on its foundations, but the sound of a careless footfall on a hardwood floor. Grabbing a cast iron frying pan from the wall, she tiptoed towards the bedroom. As she crept softly to the bedroom door, she contemplated what might have caused the sound. It could be moss rats trying to get into the house to escape the biting winter cold. They got in last year, but she had driven them off and plugged the holes where they had gotten in. Besides, this sounded larger. There was another creak on the floorboards as she neared the door. She paused for a moment, trying to catch some hint of sound that would tell her who the intruder might be. Drawing aside the curtain, she slowly entered the bedchamber. The bed was as she had left it; unmade since she arose from her slumber. The curtains remained drawn to keep the light out and the warmth in.

She slowly moved around the bed to look underneath it. Kneeling down on the cool wood floor, she quietly lifted up the bedspread and peered into the darkness beneath. Without warning she felt someone leap on top of her from behind. She lost her grip on the frying pan and fought to keep her balance. Her assailant immediately put her into a headlock, which immobilized her head and one of her arms. As she tried to squirm free of the vice-like grip, she felt her attacker reach into her robe and grab her breast. Her vision clouded over red. Enraged, she yelled a curse at the top of her lungs; with her free hand she grabbed for the pan she had dropped. Within moments she had it back in her grip. She swung it up hard behind her head hoping to hit something vital. A resounding gong and a yell of pain told her that she'd hit her target. As the hold loosened, she used the moment to her advantage, throwing her attacker over her

shoulder and into the stony wall beyond. She leapt to her feet and move to a defensible position beside the bed. Her eyes shone in the dim light like bright green, spring leaves. She surveyed her opponent who was now an armored lump in the corner of the room. Slowly the lump stirred, and moaned in pain. He wavered dizzily as he tried to get to his feet. Muddy, wet boots squeaked and chain mail jingled as he leaned against the wall for balance.

Holding the frying pan in front of her like a broadsword, she pointed at the form in the corner. "Who are you, and what the hell are you doing in my room?" she demanded. The lump, which now appeared to be a dwarf, rubbed his forehead and responded in a low, gruff voice, "Good Lord, Dojaan, you didn't have to hit me with the frying pan. I was only playing."

Dojaan tried to keep her frown, but a smile began to spread across her face. Her anger was quickly abating in the presence of her old friend. "Tharsham, you obnoxious little dwarf! You scared me half to death. How did you get in here?" She put down the frying pan and moved swiftly to help her aching friend.

"I came in through the front door when you were taking your bath," he said with a wry smile on his face. He was only slightly taller than she remembered. Even so, the top of his head only came up to the middle of her chest. He was clothed in a fine gray wool cloak that was heavily embroidered all around the trim. A chain mail hauberk armored his torso, while gold-inlay, steel bracers protected his forearms. His braided brown hair was coiled like ropes to fit into his hood.. Still rubbing his head, he gazed at Dojaan. In the tussle her gown had fallen open. Tharsham smiled wide and pointed at her exposed chest, "I see you're as lovely as ever, Dojaan."

Blushing, she closed her gown and kissed her friend on the nose. "And you are

as unthinking as ever,” she replied as she began to examine the bump which had risen on his forehead. It had turned reddish-purple, and was nearly the size of a walnut. “I could have easily killed you if I’d hit the wrong part of your head.”

“Easily?” he queried. “You should know that my skull is far too thick for that.”

Dojaan laughed. She had missed him, no matter how obnoxious or “thick-headed” he was. “We’d better get some ice on that bump,” her suggestion sounding more like an order. She led him to the table in the kitchen and sat him down. She opened the shutters and grabbed a handful of snow from off the windowsill. As she did sunlight broke through the cloud cover, and shined in through the casement to brighten the room with its warm glow. Dojaan wrapped the snow in a shred of cloth and held it to her friend’s forehead. He hissed as the cold compress touched the burning lump. While they sat in silence, Mouser came over to fulfill her job of inspecting the new guest. Purring loudly as if to announce her presence, she rubbed against Dojaan’s bare legs. Although she was concentrating on Tharsham’s head, she could hardly ignore the feline’s touch. The feeling was comforting and ticklish at the same time. Tharsham grumbled, “I never did understand what you see in keeping cats as pets. Why don’t you get a dog or a wolf? They’re much more useful.”

Dojaan could only smile, “Ah, but cats are much cleverer than dogs.” She was proud of Mouser. Any cat that could catch four mice a day was worth having. “This bump will probably last about a week. You should know by now never attack me from behind. You and Kaldor taught me brawling skills long ago. I’ve had plenty of practice--back when we were mercenaries, that is. I’ve not had much practice recently. Five years away from civilization can make you a little rusty. You don’t need to use hand-to-hand combat on farmers and woodcutters. Unless of course they get drunk and surly after a

night on the town, then a good fistfight might actually be necessary.”

“I’ll remember not to try it again anytime soon,” Tharsham replied.

Dojaan smiled at that and asked, “So what are you doing here Thar? Dwarves don’t usually travel into the Noordhwood. Especially, since King Dominus came into power. He and his entire peerage seem to hate dwarves with a passion. I’ve heard tell of laws being passed to take away the rights of dwarves. Just a few months ago in Ladrid, a dwarf was executed for killing a family pet. It did not seem to matter that the dog was rabid, just that the dwarf had killed the animal.”

“I’ve heard many dark tales,” Tharsham replied. “The king is like his predecessors, each one getting more suspicious of my kind than the last. On my way here, I was look upon with distain by most people. Only the country folk seem to be friendly to dwarves anymore. “

Tharsham suddenly looked quite sad, and to Dojaan, very much older than before. She decided it was time to move the subject back to what interested her most. “You’ve still not answered my question, Thar. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to make you a business offer. Kaldor and I met in Woshantor recently. There is a matter of great urgency that we need your help with.” Tharsham’s tine made her shiver.

“What type of matter, Thar? Knowing Kaldor, it can’t be anything good.”

“Kidnapping,” he replied.

“Kidnapping?” she asked. “Who?”

“Miska Glyn of the house of Troijan,” Tharsham stated flatly. “Lord Troijan has offered a sizable amount for the safe return of his eight year old daughter.”

“Why us, Thar? Why me? I don’t even know the girl.” Dojaan stood quickly and walked

out of the kitchen and stood near the fireplace. “Why do you and Kaldor need me? I mean...why call on me now?”

Tharsham scratched his chin through his dark brown beard. He understood how upset Dojaan was becoming, and tried to make his voice as soothing as possible, “Because we need your skill. We are friends, Doj. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“Why is this girl so important?”

“Kaldor seems to think the girl is special in some way,” Tharsham replied, “I don’t really understand why. It bothers me when Kaldor starts talking about ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’, but deep down I believe that this is important. Please don’t turn away from us again.

Dojaan, don’t turn away from me.” Tharsham voice had changed and he sounded as though he were pleading for a life-saving draught.

Dojaan turned from the fire to face him. Tears were streaming down her face. “I am tired of fighting, Thar. You bask in the glory of war, not I.”

Tharsham became very quiet. Dojaan had struck a chord in him. His sudden appearance in her home had opened old wounds of the heart; some that had never healed. Tharsham hung his head in shame, “I’m...sorry, Dojaan.”

Dojaan smiled sadly, sniffed, and wiped away her tears. “That’s alright, Thar. You are who you are.” She went to him, kneeled beside him, and kissed him.

Tharsham put his arms around her and kissed back. They held each other close, almost afraid to let go. Warmth and passion began to spread through them both, growing in intensity with each additional kiss. They broke apart momentarily, their lungs searing with the sharp sudden intake of air. Clutching each other tightly, they gave vent to emotions long kept bottled deep inside. Dojaan moan quietly and leaned into him. His stout form was strong and sturdy. He held her with his thick muscular arms as if to never

let her go.

Suddenly, Mouser decided to get into the act. Tangling herself between their legs, she began to purr and rub. Marking these people as her own. It was an unfortunate choice of time and place, as they all tumbled to the floor in a laughing, squirming, mewling heap. They continued laughing as Mouser bolted towards the door.

“You’re right, Mouser,” Dojaan said between laughs, “I think you better go out too.” She extracted herself from Tharsham and let the cat go outside. Mouser immediately ran out the door and into the stable.

Tharsham laughed as he watched the cat go, “Do you remember that night in Burlough when we first met, and that shabby inn with all the mice and cats?”

Dojaan smiled and laughed also, “You mean the night you got me so drunk on *mythlgale* that I couldn’t walk? Then you invited me to your room. It was so run down and mice-ridden I’m surprised we didn’t end up with so awful disease.”

“The room wasn’t that bad,” Tharsham replied.

“I was so full of that love potion that I would have done anything you told me to do.”

“We did have fun, didn’t we?”

“You seduced me!”

“Now wait a moment, who seduced whom? You were an animal. Like a cat in heat!”

Dojaan could only laugh, “It the berries they make that wine out of. They’re really potent stuff.” Again she kissed him, this time longer. This time, when she felt his hands inside her robe, she didn’t resist. His touch brought back a longing she’d buried so deep she’d forgotten. “Mmmm, too bad we don’t have any *mythlgale* now.”

Grinning widely, Tharsham produced a dusty bottle from a pocket in his cloak. It was filled with a violet black liquid that sparked in the firelight. Mythlgale! Still smiling, he

held out the bottle lovingly and said, "I'm glad it didn't break in our 'wrestling match'." Without a word, Dojaan rose, went into the kitchen and returned with two silver goblets. Silently, she led him back to her bedroom. Soon the bottle was open, and the lovers lost themselves in each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

The little white-haired girl sat quietly in her cell. Darkness was all that she'd seen or felt since her kidnapping. She had no real idea how long she'd been in the dank, dark oubliette, but deep in her spirit a voice told her that it had been several days. She wanted her mommy. Mommy could always make the darkness go away. Mommy knew how.

Miska Glyn huddled against a wall, hugging her knees up close to her chest; trying desperately to control the chills that were both caused by fear and by the damp cold stone. She stared into the darkness and opened her senses. Even here there were living things. Beetles skittered across the floor and rats nested in the walls. They would have to be her allies in this evil place. She knew this, not because her mommy had told that all living things knew her, but because she could feel it in her soul. For an untrained eight year old, she had remarkable insight, or so Uncle Kaldor had told her. Her senses were attuned to the living things around her. Even the stone whispered her name. She did not know the name of the place where she was, but she knew *where* it was. She knew how far from home she was. She knew it down to the very inch, but that knowledge couldn't save her.

The evil-badman had taken her from her bedroom in the middle of the night. He scared her. He'd hurt mommy. He was evil as a demon, black as a raven, and sweet as venom. She knew him, but not by name. He was the life-ender--the corrupter of the

earth.

A clank of metal at her prison door brought her to attention. The creeping dread crawled across her skin like a million angry ants. Her back stiffened and her blood ran cold. She wanted to be brave. Her ice blue eyes showed no emotion as she stood to face her jailer. She clenched her fist and closed herself to the feelings encroaching upon her spirit. He was near.

The evil-badman came into the cell and stood before her. His presence like a black and festering wound. The beetles scurried for cracks in the wall and the rats silenced in their burrows. His presence made her shiver. He stood and stared at her for a long time before he spoke, "You look cold, little one. Can I get you a blanket?"

"No," Miska replied.

The evil-badman grinned. "Wouldn't you like to come with me and get warm? I have food and candy for you." His voice reminded her of a snake. He smiled widely, and asked sweetly, "Are you hungry?"

"No," she replied coldly. "I want to go home!"

"I'm sorry, child, but you'll have to stay here until I'm ready to send you home." He smiled again and held out a piece of cake dripping with frosting, "Wouldn't you like some of this to eat?"

Miska looked at the cake and frowned. She gazed at the sweet confection with distain and illusion he'd created faded away. She could see it as it really was; crumbly, black and covered in squirming maggots. It was magic, and it was evil. She slapped it out of his hand, and tried to run past him out into the hall, but her legs were too short and he was too fast. He caught her by her snowy white hair and flung her back into the cell. She landed sharply the floor, the wet granite scouring her cheek and chin. Blood ran

from her cracked lip.

Angrily, like some seething, rabid beast, he came in after her. He towered over her, shrouded like death, and winged like some monstrous bat. “You are a foolish child! You mother made you powerful. Not as powerful as you could be, but I shall soon change that. You shall be mine. In the days and years to come, you shall call me father, and brother and lover. Through you I shall reshape the world!” He slowly stifled his rage and walked back towards the door. I am a patient man, and we will be together for a long time...my daughter.” He let out a laugh that could have poisoned life itself; a dark and unnatural guffaw, like the grating of steel on stone. The iron door slammed shut behind him as he left. The laughed echoed loudly as he stalked away.

Miska huddled back against the wall, knees held tightly against her chest her frosty tresses hang down around her face like icicles and blood ran from her now swollen lip. She wanted to be brave—for mommy’s sake, but all she could do was cry. The evil-badman was right, and she knew it. She couldn’t hold out forever. If she couldn’t get away from him, she would become his plaything. She tried to scream out her mother’s name, but a choking sob caught in her throat and would not let her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dojaan awoke with tears in her eyes. Tharsham lay beside her. He was sound asleep. The nightmare haunted her. The black form laughing maniacally. The little girl crying and calling her name.

## CHAPTER TWO

Bright morning sunlight cascaded across the snowy landscape. Amethyst shadows and golden sunbeams striped the hillside. The tall, snow-covered evergreens stood silently—immortal sentinels watching over the entire countryside. As the sun rose over

the distant mountain peaks, Dojaan stood watching. She was wrapped in her thick wool cloak at the top of the hill. The sunlight warmed her face against the biting cold of the dry, winter air. At her waist was the sword that had hung over the mantle. It felt right to have it there she thought to herself. It was a part of her that she'd tried to forget, but part of her that she had to accept.

The crunching of snow under leather boots told her that Tharsham was near. "Reminds me of the Talisor campaign," Tharsham said in his low and gravelly voice.

"Yes," Dojaan replied, "but at Talisor we had to fight. We plodded uphill in two feet of snow, fighting like madmen. Soldiers, good men, fell all around us as the enemy's arrows pierced their bodies a hundred times over. I remember. I remember the clang of metal, the screams of the dying, and all the blood. All the red, blood-stained snow. This is different than Talisor. It's quiet here. So very quiet."

After a long silence Tharsham spoke again, "Our horses are loaded and ready. Are you sure you want to leave your cat alone here?"

"Mouser will be fine. With all the mice she catches she eats better than I do. There's a trapper named Rendor that comes through twice a month. I usually let him stay in the loft. He should be passing through in about a week on his way to Woshantor. I've left a note asking him to take care of Mouser." Dojaan turned and walked slowly towards the waiting horses. She had been uncommonly quiet all morning. Tharsham wondered what was upsetting her. He also wondered about this "Rendor". Dojaan had never mentioned him before. The fact that he stayed with her from time to time, brought out a twinge of jealousy in Tharsham. He pushed the feeling to the back of his heart. He had no time for jealousy. Besides, it had been five years after all. He trudged through the snow to his horse. Dojaan had provided a large bay mare for him to ride. Dojaan had mounted

her grey and brown speckled gelding, and was smiling at Tharsham.

Tharsham grumbled as he struggled into his saddle, "God, how I hate horses."

For the first time in the morning Dojaan laughed. She tried to keep the smile in her heart, but the previous night's dreams still weighed heavily on her soul. As they rode on down the hill, Dojaan did not look back. Her home was behind her and she knew in her heart that she would not be seeing it again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The man stood motionless on the marble platform. It was an ornately carved disc some twenty feet wide, floating free in the cinnamon scented air. All around him the peach-colored sky was mottled with a thousand white, round clouds, and wisps of lacey vapor. Here, in this airy, ethereal realm, he waited for his most reviled foe to arrive. His leopard skin cloak flapped heavily around his tall, muscular form. His braided ebony pigtail fluttered in the warm breeze, which seemed to blow unceasingly in this place. Still he waited, unmoving. In all directions the skyscape went infinitely on—a dimension of endless open skies. There was a time when he took joy in coming to this place. Now his visits were only to parry with his foe, and there was no joy in battle.

Suddenly a shadowy form appeared on the opposite side of the platform. "Greetings, Kaldor," spoke the black-cowled figure.

"Geosaan," Kaldor replied, "you go to far!"

"I hear the hatred in your voice, Kaldor. What is the matter that troubles you so?"

Geosaan chuckled, and then smiled a wide, psychotic smile.

"I have no wish to banter with you, Geosaan," Kaldor replied. A storm brewed behind his silver grey eyes. "Where is the girl," he demanded.

Geosaan's smile widened, "Which girl do you mean?"

“Damn you Geosaan!” Kaldor’s voice thundered as the storm of anger began to swell in him. “You know full well who I’m talking about.”

Geosaan’s demeanor was undaunted by Kaldor’s fury. He stood casually with his hand’s clasped behind his back. “Oh, you must mean the Earth Child,” Geosaan taunted. “You must be looking for the snow-haired child of that meddling Troijan. She is safe.”

“Safe?!?” Kaldor exclaimed, outraged by Geosaan’s arrogance.

“Yes,” Geosaan replied, a strange, hot light smoldering in his eyes, his face hidden buy a shroud-like hood, “safe with me.”

“No one is ‘safe’ with you, dark one,” Kaldor responded angrily.

Geosaan laughed out loud. His black cloak fluttered about him like giant wings. “You are a strange one to call me dark. Compared to you, I am as pale as the moon.” He laughed again and pulled back his gauzy hood to reveal his pallid, thin face. His skin was tight and smooth against his yellowed teeth.

Kaldor reached up and pulled back his own hood, exposing his face. His square, muscular jaw and chocolate brown skin contrasted sharply with Geosaan’s almost undead form. “I do not speak of skin color Geosaan! I speak of souls. Yours is a black festering thing that will ruin the world! Return the child!”

Geosaan’s smile faded, “Who are you to make demands of me? The child is mine!”

“The child is not yours,” Kaldor raged, “She belongs to no one! She is the Earth Child!”

Geosaan sneered, “Fool! Why do you think I took her? Of course she is the Earth Child!

With her breath so goes the breath of the world. With her blood goes the life of the world. And with her soul goes the form of the world. I intend to make sure that world is mine!”

“Never!” The storm inside Kaldor spewed forth, as his magic rage around him like a

cyclone.

Geosaan stood in the face of that cyclone and did not flinch. “Do you challenge me, Kaldor?”

“I do.” The force of Kaldor’s reply struck Geosaan like a sledge and he stumbled back several paces to the edge of the floating dais.

“So be it,” Geosaan answered as he regained his footing. He clapped his hands and the force of a thunder clap snapped out. Kaldor fell back on one knee, as though the weight of the world had suddenly fallen upon him. Geosaan transformed into a creature that was vaguely dragon-shaped, but was shadowy and wispy as a wraith. He flew straight at Kaldor and enveloped him in shadow.

Kaldor also changed form. In an instant he became a glowing, bronze-skinned titan. In his hands he held a staff of light. He swung the staff around him and Geosaan’s form began to dissipate. Geosaan retreated out of reach and changed form again. This time he became a hideous, giant demon, with razor claws, metal scales and huge, leathery wings. In his grip he held a long sword formed of black power. The battle was met—each man wielding forces that would rock the world. All around them the ethereal realm began to fill with lightning and storm clouds. Fire blazed as their weapons clashed. Shockwaves of raw magical energy tore the floating marble disc asunder. Kaldor lost his footing as the platform crumbled. He fell into the infinity of sky. Above him the storm still raged, and he could hear Geosaan laughing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kaldor awoke in his room at the Troijan House. Since the murder of Lady Troijan, he’d become the guest of Lord Malcolm. Sweat ran down his brow and into his eyes, and the salty taste of blood was in his mouth. The psychic combat against Geosaan had drained

and wounded him. His foe had indeed grown much more powerful. Kaldor rose and went to the washbasin. He poured cold water from the stoneware ewer and splashed his face with the frigid liquid. He then returned to the bed and laid back down. He needed to get some rest before the morning came. Tharsham and Dojaan would be arriving soon, and he would have to be prepared for the questions he knew he would have to answer—some of which he hoped would not be asked.

\* \* \* \* \*