

## Prologue

*When I was a young girl, I scoffed at the prophecies and the myths that came from ages past. They were nothing but fanciful stories to me, full of confusing images and unclear meanings, something that no longer held any significance in this sophisticated era.*

*But then, in a stretch of a half staryear, I finally came to understand. The stories were anything but fiction, and I realized why the prophets had used such vague language to describe what they had seen in their visions...*

*...Because no words could ever do the truth justice.*

Rumil put down her stylus and carefully looked over the words she had written onto the thick pad of paper before her. Finally satisfied, she peered down forlornly at the large pile of failed introductions she had rejected. The mess was almost enough for her to reconsider typing everything on a terminal, but she rejected that thought quickly, having promised herself that she'd at least write it down first. There was a peculiar majesty to writing something on a page, letting her hand guide her words, something that a console display just didn't convey. While she had no doubt that this book would eventually be transferred to the GalNet and other electronic media, the idea that you would still be able to find it in a physical form, bound with a plastic fiber cover, was surprisingly comforting.

She ruefully thought to herself that her opinion might change after she wasted a few more reams of paper... but for the moment, she was firm in her decision.

She took a deep breath, and set aside the page she had just written. As she prepared to press her stylus against the paper once more, her head buzzed with a familiar mental presence, a psionic signature that she almost couldn't believe was there. She jumped up, knocking her chair and her wastebasket over in the process, and dashed out to the balcony. The gentle snowfall and the nighttime cold barely registered in her mind as she stepped out onto the snow-covered deck in nothing but slippers and a thick nightgown. As she narrowed her focus on the source of the presence, her eyes followed until she found what she was looking for.

He was covered in what appeared to be a light gray cloak, the hood drawn over his head and shimmering with a reflective coating. He didn't look up at her, but paused at the entrance of the memorial less than half a TackMet from the front door of her home. It was clear he wanted her to follow.

She didn't bother dressing, and dashed down the stairway at full speed, not caring who she awoke in the process. She practically jumped into a pair of thick boots to keep her feet warm, and grabbed the first coat she found in the closet; a pale blue jacket meant for springtime wear, but hardly of concern to her at the moment.

She was out the door just as quickly, sprinting across the snow as fast as her feet could take her. Nonetheless, it took her almost five ticks to cover the distance between her home and the memorial through the snow piling on the walkway, despite frequent plowing.

The memorial was nothing more than a pearl-colored stone circle about thirty tacks in diameter with names carved along the inside of the ring, and a small gap that allowed for entry inside. In the center of the ring stood a towering four-sided obelisk, ten tacks high and cut from the same stone, with more carved words on the side facing the opening.

She could guess why he wanted to come here. He hadn't been present when the

memorial had been dedicated. As a matter of fact... she was rather curious where he had been.

"I knew that you survived somehow," she said to the figure, who was reading the text on the obelisk.

He didn't look at her when he said, "Did you see it in a vision?"

"Something like that," she replied, then testily said, "Look at me."

Finally, the man turned to her, but to her dismay she couldn't see his face... couldn't tell if it was what she hoped... or what she feared.

She felt ready to ask the question that she dreaded asking, but once again, her courage failed her. "Jonathan and Julianne are with me now, in case you didn't know. They think you're dead."

"That's probably for the best, at least for the moment," he stated. "I'm not sure I'd be able to face them right now. How are they doing?"

"Well, they're obviously still not quite over everything that's happened... but they're moving on. Jonathan's talents are becoming more pronounced with every day. Eventually we're going to need to convince his master to leave Kiros and train him like he was supposed to."

"That won't be necessary," he replied, almost angrily. "I'll do it myself in time. I should at least do that much."

She felt slightly relieved that he remembered the pair. She wasn't sure why he wouldn't... but then again, she would never have dreamed the change he had undergone was possible.

"There's something you want to ask me," he correctly observed.

"I'm not sure how to ask it," Rumil said, waffling between just getting it over with, and wondering if it was better to not know at all. "Do you remember how this all started?"

"Why do I get the feeling that's not the question really on your mind?"

"I'm leading to it..." she said, with a hint of exasperation. At least he could still be as aggravating as she remembered. "It's rather amazing thinking back where it all started, and seeing where we are now. I just want to know if *you* remember..."