

Prologue



Falling, the angel thought, wasn't nearly as bad as it was made out to be. Then it hit atmosphere. Shrieking with horror as friction set its wings afire, it arced incandescent ruin across the velvet night.

From the countryside below, people looked up in wonder at the meteor, never considering that it could be any other form of heavenly body.

Chapter One



Perchance to Dream

Beneath the glacial waste of Alaska's Brooks Range, the sorceress Tairin Elantich slept in her prison of ice and stone. For eons, she had suffered unrelenting solitude, confined until the end of time by the gods she had offended.

Tairin passed the ages in a time-leaping trance, seated on a high-backed, alabaster throne located at one end of a large, oval chamber. The room had a high, arched ceiling supported by four-foot thick fluted pillars of green marble. The floor was translucent blue ice, as were the windowless walls.

One end of the hall where Tairin slumbered opened to a vestibule that was similar in shape though slightly smaller in size than the main chamber. The chief difference between them being an arched entry

door of oak bound with iron. That, and several life-sized statues scattered in various poses around the room. The sculptures depicted creatures of all sorts; men, angels, demons, and other beings. All had such lifelike detail that they seemed alive, an effect made more intense by the eerie way the statue's eyes seemed to follow a person around.

Tairin's prison had a third room, twenty paces across, that was little more than a cube carved out of the ice. The rare times when she was awake, she used it as a library and a magical workshop.

Deep in the sleep of ages, Tairin felt a pulse of unease as a dark premonition wound its coils around the sorceress's dreams.

Something's coming.

Then it had her, caught her up shrieking to spin like a yellow cinder burning across the night. Tairin arched her back in agony as fire lashed her skin, wrenched her head from side-to-side as she gagged on the sick-sweet smell of her own burning hair. Tairin's scream as she woke echoed off the walls of her frozen prison.

For a time, all she could do was tremble as the images of the foretelling lingered in her consciousness. *Something's coming. Something bad.*

Tairin took a moment to steady herself, then blinked several times to moisten her indigo eyes. She slept with them open, and after a few centuries, they tended to dry out and become itchy. A quick glance showed that she was still alone. There was nothing to see but the translucent ice of the glacier that formed the walls, floor, and ceiling of her prison. Tairin's long, pointed ears twitched and turned like a cat's as she listened for a sound. All she heard was the snap of ice, something she had grown used to during her eons of imprisonment beneath the frozen mountains of northern Alaska.

She wiggled her fingers and toes, felt a brief tingling as circulation returned to them, followed by the intense cold of her surroundings as full sensation came back to her. Then the pain hit. She felt the never-ending fire come to life in her left hand, fought to hold onto her sanity as the skin bubbled beneath the glove that she wore on that hand. *No. I will not give in to the madness, not again. The dark times are behind me.*

After a few slow breaths to calm herself, she rose from the ivory throne where she had slept. Her white silk gown rustled as she went to check the vast, outer hall that was the only entrance to her prison. She sniffed at the air as she went. After so many millennia the rooms smelled of old, stale frost. She made a mental note to refresh the sandalwood scent

diffusers later. There was no sign of an intruder in the outer chamber, just the frozen statues of creatures who had visited her with ill intent over the years.

Tairin crossed to the workroom/library where she studied her magic arts. She ran her fingers along one of the half-dozen wooden tables scattered around the room, felt the grain of the oak beneath the grit that had accumulated over time. *Nine centuries was a long time to sleep. I wonder if the world changed during my rest?*

The shelves covering the walls of her workroom held thousands of tablets crammed with arcane knowledge. Blocked from ordinary writing resources by the magic that imprisoned her, Tairin had made use of the material available and recorded her spells on slabs of ice. She scanned the shelves until she found what she was looking for, and then laid the tablet on a workbench. She took a few minutes to refamiliarize herself with the spells that she needed.

What is it? What's coming? And where?

Tairin worked for hours, sending tendrils of magic across the world in search of what had disturbed her.

It's not on land, and not in the sea. That leaves up. Have they progressed that far, then, while I slept? Or is it something else, something not human. Not going up, but coming down...

Tairin adjusted her spells, then with a wave of her slender hands opened a window that let her view the outside world. She changed the view to scan the skies until she found the source of her anxiety.

Far above the earth, she saw a point moving across the darkness; an angel falling from the sky. She watched the creature's mouth open in a soundless shriek as it hit the atmosphere and burned across the night.

Tairin was used to the cold, coming from a race that was native to the mountains of the north, but now she felt it in a way that she never had before. She folded her arms across her breast, but she knew that it was not the surrounding ice that raised the hair on her forearms.

That's an archangel. Killing one of those takes godlike power.

Across the countryside below, she could see people look up in wonder at the spectacle in the sky. *They have no idea what just happened. But I know. The time has come again when the veil of heaven opens as it does at the end of every age. And magic comes again into the world. Magic, and something darker.*

Tairin returned to the main chamber of her prison and began to pace.

At the end of each age, the Elder Gods who had imprisoned her sent messengers with terms for her release. None had been acceptable; the price for her freedom was always too high, and so the failed messengers had joined the other statues in her vestibule. But her dream troubled her, for its portent was clear. This would be the last time. It was unclear to her why, but she was sure that after this, there would be no more offers, no more messengers from the Gods. There was a dire foreboding to the dream, a shadow of doom over it that she could not divine in spite of her immense powers.

With that thought, she returned to her throne to wait for the one who would come. It was something that she was good at, waiting; she'd been doing it for three ages of man. Sinking back into the trance that had helped her endure generations of loneliness, Tairin sat, unmoving. With no breeze to stir her gown, her ivory skin and hair a match to the cold stone, there was nothing to show that she was other than a statue, except for the violet intensity of her eyes.