



THE
GOSSAMER
PLAIN THE EMPYREAN
ODYSSEY
Book I

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PROLOGUE

Tauran knelt upon a protrusion of rock and surveyed the shimmering pool far below. The distant surface of the water rippled and gleamed, disturbed to a golden foam by a roaring, tumbling waterfall. The astral deva's perch jutted from the top of the cliff alongside the lip from which the cascade plunged. Spray from the churning torrent peppered him with a fine, cool mist and made the rocks beneath his bare feet slick.

It was a long drop.

Behind the angel, the surging headwaters of the river spilled out of a cleft in the side of a towering pinnacle of rock. It was the tallest, most delicately thin peak among a high, sharp ridge of jutting stone that formed a deep basin surrounding the pool on three sides. On the distant bank, opposite where Tauran rested, the water spilled over a lower lip of the ridge, vanishing from sight to other basins even farther below. From the astral deva's vantage, it was as though the pool lay within the confines of a great crater, like the belly of a steep-sided volcano. He knew the far slopes of that circular ridge fell away just as sharply, where they eventually vanished into a sea of white, fluffy clouds.

The powerful effusion of water, coupled with the slenderness and loftiness of its host peak, liberated more power and beauty than any mere spring. The gushing flow of the cataract bursting from the crevice owed its vigorous current to primal and potent magic. Those headwaters held the might of gods, the puissance of deities, within them. In many ways, the essence of divinity itself spouted from that peak.

It was the Lifespring.

The Lifespring derived its amber hue from both its own inner glow and the warm rays of the late afternoon sun illuminating its surface. Even from his lofty perch, Tauran could smell the sweetness of that glow wafting upward. It filled him with energy and confidence, infused him with the glory of Tyr, his beloved and benevolent lord. The urgency the angel felt to bathe in it made his skin prickle in anticipation, but he waited, watching.

Other creatures swam in the water. Tauran could see them despite the glint of the sun reflecting in his eyes. They were angels, like himself, though not all were astral devas. He observed a handful of emerald-skinned planetars frolicking in the pool. Even a pair of solars, silvery gold and larger than the others, had come to relax and soak up the glory of their deity. They remained near the far shore, gathered together for conversation and games. A few swam or drifted toward the center, content to enjoy the spiritual invigoration of the Lifespring in their own way. But none of them approached the cascade.

Nodding in satisfaction, Tauran stood. He unfurled his feathery white wings only slightly, gave a measured appraisal of the distance, and leaped off the outcropping. He straightened his body and pointed his fingers and toes. The wind rustled the feathers of his wings for a moment, then he caught the breeze and lifted in a gentle arc, rising above the churning waters that fell directly beneath the cataract.

The air currents held the angel aloft for a heartbeat. He floated at the apex of the arc, and it seemed to the deva that he hovered there, perfectly balanced between the pull of the world below and the buoyant updrafts of the breezes. In that moment, at that instant of equilibrium, Tauran felt unbridled joy, harmony, contentment. He felt the embodiment of all that was the House of the Triad.

Then the angel's forward momentum carried him through the apex of his arc, and he slid downward, toward the pool. Tauran had to resist the urge to unfurl his wings fully, had to fight to avoid catching the updrafts once more and gliding through the air. That would have been easy for him. But he wanted the greater challenge.

The deva stayed rigid, his body an arrow, his wings the fletching. He nosed downward, increasing speed, plummeting toward the water. The winds whistled past his ears and his long amber hair blew. He accelerated, truly falling, and shifted his wings by fractions, making subtle corrections in his descent.

The exhilaration of the drop mingled with a hint of fear. Tauran had made the dive before, of course. Many times, in fact. But there was always risk, no matter how experienced he felt. One wrong shift, one overcompensation and he might lose control, might crash against the surface of the water rather than knifing through it with barely a ripple. With that uncontrolled fall would come pain, injury. Even with healing magic at his fingertips, the angel dreaded such wounds. He remained vigilant, wary, concentrating.

Tauran's skills proved equal to the task. The deva held his form and kept his angle accurate. Just before he penetrated the surface of the pool, he drew a great breath. Then he was under, gliding into the depths of the water.

The angel felt a surge of raw energy. It permeated every nerve and pore. His body drank it greedily, crackling with

life and exuberance. It was exhilarating, overwhelming him, driving him to burst forth again, yet he wanted to loll within it forever, bathe in its cleanness, its holiness, for all eternity.

The surface light faded as Tauran sliced deeper into the depths, but he had no fear of striking the bottom, which he knew lay much farther beneath him. As his momentum ebbed, Tauran arched his back, angling himself upward. He began to swim then, pulling himself with powerful strokes of his arms and kicks of his legs, back toward the surface.

At last, his head burst forth. He lunged out of the pool and drew in a great gulp of sweet air. He soared up, freeing himself from the water, and spread his wings. Two, three, then four powerful beats of those wings carried him aloft, dripping, into the air above the pool. The angel stretched his arms and legs, rejoicing in how good it felt to be alive, to be in such proximity to unbridled vitality. He hovered a moment, a few feet above the surface, and closed his eyes, soaking in the life-giving force of the pool.

It wasn't just physical, that energy. All of Tauran's cares, all his troubles, seemed to have been washed away in the plunge. He felt more alive, more confident, more capable. He felt spiritually bolstered, close to his god. He was ready to accept any challenge. He felt unstoppable.

"Why do you do that?"

The voice startled Tauran, though he recognized it as Micus, his friend. He had believed himself alone. The other bathers had been at the far edge, away from the place where he had dived.

Tauran blinked and looked at his friend, another deva with wings spread wide, hovering nearby. "I didn't hear you approach," he told Micus.

The other angel smiled when he said, "You seemed preoccupied. I hated to disturb you, but we are summoned."

Indeed, Tauran could hear the faint clarion call of dozens of trumpets. He could see then that the others who had been relaxing in the golden waters were departing, moving away from the water and down the mountain. He and Micus flew together toward that same shore.

“Feeling refreshed?” Micus asked as they neared the rocks at the edge of the pool.

“Yes,” Tauran answered and gathered his loose-fitting pants, belt, and massive mace. “I know some might term it a weakness, a vanity, but I like to reward myself with a dip after accomplishing something of import. It’s not an end unto itself, but it makes the trials and tribulations less heavy.” He finished dressing and the pair launched themselves into the air once more, following the others.

“No harm in that,” Micus said. “Blessed Tyr would not have made this place if he hadn’t intended for us to take advantage of it. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“I thought you wanted to know why I dive into the water.”

“I do,” Micus said. “But not the water part. Why do you start from way up there,” he asked, pointing at the outcropping just before it disappeared from view, “and let yourself fall like that? Why not just glide to the surface like the rest of us and settle in gently?”

“Ah,” Tauran replied as the pair plunged into the clouds. “It helps remind me.”

“Remind you? Of what?”

Tauran could not see his friend in the mist of the clouds, but he could hear the other deva’s voice clearly enough. “That the easiest path is not always set before me. That I must be ready to accept the harder road, and stay wary of distraction or lapse of attention.” The angels broke through the clouds and saw the lower slopes of the great mountain from which they had descended. Three lesser mountains ringed the larger,

each the home of one of the Triad—Tyr, Torm, and Ilmater. Atop the nearest peak, the gleaming white walls of Tyr's Court reflected the sunlight.

"Diving from up there keeps me alert," Tauran continued. "I know that even one mistake will be very painful or disastrous. Out there," he said as he swept his hand around, "one mistake might cost someone his life. Even mine. Complacency has no place in our duties. I dive to help me remember that."

Micus turned and gave his friend an appraising look. "That's very insightful. Perhaps you can teach me how to do it."

"I will," Tauran answered. "When we return."

The two angels neared a great pinnacle of rock jutting from the mountainside where a host of others like themselves had gathered. The various devas, planetars, and solars hovered in orderly ranks, all facing a dais at the top of the pinnacle. A great arch pierced the stone directly below the dais, like the mouth of a tunnel. Instead of blue sky shining from its far side, though, a curtain of pearlescent light veiled the arch.

Tauran and Micus took their places among the other devas as a great silvery solar settled upon the dais. As she furled her wings, the gleaming being's golden eyes surveyed the gathering critically for a moment, as though assessing the attendants' worth. After a moment, she spoke.

"Today, we fight another battle in the war to free the oppressed. Though we seek the destruction of all that is evil and depraved, we strive by equal measure to offer redemption to those worth redeeming, to save those who can be saved. Our goal, our duty, is not merely to provide salvation to all who wish it, but to rescue those who cannot fight, or even speak, for themselves."

A murmur of approval ran through the assemblage. The solar waited until the noise abated, then continued. "Blessed

Tyr has bid us embrace this duty, so that one day, all the multiverse might glow with the shining warmth of equality and acceptance.” The solar paused, then delivered her next words punctuated for emphasis. “Today, we once again take the fight to our enemies, and thwart their foul schemes before they have a chance to grow to tainted fruition!”

The gathered crowd roared with eager acceptance. Tauran and Micus cheered along with the rest. After his glorious swim, the deva felt ready for anything. He thrilled at the prospect of fulfilling his duty, shivered in delight at the chance to bring Tyr’s glory to one who had never known it before.

“You know your tasks. You’ve prepared. Go and bring Tyr’s light to the multiverse!” the solar commanded.

Another roar rose up from the host. The planetars sounded their horns, a cry of battle that reverberated through the skies, echoing from the mountaintops. To Tauran, the sun seemed to blaze just a bit brighter, the sky seemed to turn a sharper hue of azure, and the air smelled faintly sweeter. The atmosphere was electric with expectation and impending triumph.

The angels began to sing as they sorted themselves into bands. A hymn of Tyr’s glory, extolled in perfect harmony, accompanied the horns. Micus gave Tauran a hearty pat on the back and a handshake before he moved away to gather with his own group. Tauran lifted his voice in song, joining with the chorus, as he bid his friend farewell with a wave and went to join his own band.

His was a small force comprised of Keenon, the solar leader, and four planetars. He was the lone deva, assigned to the group for a special purpose. He grasped his mace and steadied himself, waiting for the command.

Other units swarmed around the arch in anticipation. In orderly succession, they passed through the veil, disappearing in a wink. When it was time for his own unit to surge into the

portal, the angel drew a deep breath, remembered his admonitions of staying wary, and followed his team.

The landscape twisted and changed. Light bent and warped around Tauran, deepening into a purple gloom. The crisp, clean air vanished, replaced by the charnel scents of a battlefield. Lightning crackled and thunder pealed in a sodden sky that sent a cascade of fetid rain down upon all beneath it. The deva settled upon slick, clutching mud and surveyed the scene.

The angel and his cohorts stood within a low river valley, along the rim of a great bowl surrounded by the silhouettes of low hills. Two armies collided within the middle of that valley, slipping and slogging through the torrential rain and mud to slaughter one another as best they could. One force, badly outnumbered, found itself surrounded on three sides by its enemy and pressed hard up against a churning, frothing river.

“There!” Keenon shouted to be heard above the din of war and weather. “Near the river!” He pointed, and very quickly, he and the four planetars took flight, racing in that direction.

Tauran took to the air along with his companions, but his mission was different. They went to save the brave-hearted defenders who desperately called for the angels’ aid. The deva sought a different life-force, one that wouldn’t be eager to welcome him. Knowing he would not be well received, he cloaked himself in innate invisibility.

Swooping over the plain toward the center of the engagement, Tauran soared above snarling clusters of savage beasts, orcs and ogres—and worse things from the Abyss—that surrounded tiny defiant pockets of men and women in mismatched armor. The mercenaries—and they were mercenaries, hired to fight for some petty lord—stood back to back in tight circles, clinging to their final moments in desperate

hope that someone or something might save them.

The deva felt remorse course through him, saddened that he could not spare the time or energy to save them all. But they prayed to different gods, and ineffectually called on other celestial beings for salvation. Their lives were not his to assist. He had a different goal.

He quickly found what he sought. At the far end of the battlefield, near one edge of the great bowl-shaped valley, flapping pennants atop a pavilion tent marked the location of his quarry. Numerous campfires, sputtering feebly in the rain, surrounded the tent, and brutish creatures huddled near those fires, cursing their ill luck at both the weather and their guard duty. They wished to be out among the others, gleefully fighting and killing.

Tauran drifted unnoticed past them, the soft whisper of his wings drowned out by the concussive clash of combatants in the distance, as well as the rumble of thunder overhead. He settled upon the ground near the entrance to the tent and studied the two guards flanking the opening.

Each creature appeared as a hulking, upright toad, equally as tall as Tauran himself and easily surpassing his own bulk. The slick skin covering their bloated bodies was green and bumpy, but unlike a normal toad, rows of jagged teeth lined their mouths. They both wielded massive axes, which they held cradled in their arms. The pair exuded a nauseous stench that nearly made the deva gag, but he stood still for a moment to adjust to the smell before he approached them.

Gripping his mace, Tauran stepped as lightly as he could, hoping to catch the creatures off balance for an initial strike. Though he moved with deftness and grace, one of the two must have sensed something was amiss, for it jerked upright and hefted its axe. A low, menacing growl issued from deep within its voluminous body.

“I smell the stench of a celestial!” He snarled, taking one step forward and drawing his axe back as though to strike. Tauran saw that the demon’s beady eyes shifted back and forth, and he was reasonably certain the demon could not sense where he was, but his moment of subterfuge had come and gone. Not waiting for the creature before him to determine his location, the deva channeled divine energy, summoning the holy power of his kind and pouring it into his weapon. He swung his mace with both hands, smashing it against the demon’s shoulder with a brilliant flash.

The beast snarled in rage and pain and staggered backward as Tauran spun and struck the other in the same manner. The second demon howled and stumbled against the side of the tent, but Tauran could not close in and finish him with a blow to the head, for the first one had recovered enough to take a swipe at him.

“Your time is over, fiend,” Tauran said, once more calling on his innate divinity to aid him in the fight.

He blurted out a word of power, a word of divine force, a holy word. He spoke it clearly, and there was no mistaking that the two guards heard its utterance. Simultaneously, they shrieked and dropped their weapons. One clutched at his eyes, while the other wrapped his arms around his head and cowered.

Tauran drew his mace back, ready to crush the skull of the first demon as he writhed before him. Just as he brought the weapon down in a great, sweeping arc, though, the fiend vanished. His weapon thudded hard against the sodden ground, spraying muddy water everywhere. The deva growled in exasperation, but his frustration was short-lived, for a cloying miasma enveloped him, as though a greasy darkness had descended upon him.

The angel’s stomach roiled and he doubled over in agony.

All his limbs ached and lost their strength. He thought he would retch. Tauran stumbled away from the remaining demon and gasped for breath. The clinging, sickly blanket of darkness moved with him, filling his nostrils with horrific odors. He spat, trying and failing to expunge the awful, sour taste.

Slowly, the cloaking darkness evaporated, leaving the deva standing in the rain once more. His stomach still churned, but he could breathe again.

Tauran turned toward the tent and saw the demon flailing about blindly with his axe. The beast stopped and listened, cocking his head to one side for a moment, then swung the huge blade once more. The massive axe whistled through the air, seeking flesh to cleave.

The angel left his feet and soared above the demon. He ascended sharply and swung the mace with all his might, once more drawing upon the holy power of Tyr to aid him. The crushing blow landed true, right against the back of the demon's head, and he heard the satisfying sound of crunching bone as the thing's skull collapsed.

With a sickening plop, the demonic toad sprawled forward into the mud and quivered. The beast's axe slid to one side, no longer needed.

Tauran spun away from the creature and approached the opening of the tent. Not knowing what other defenders might be lurking within, he nudged the flap sideways with the head of his mace, expecting an assault at any moment. When no attack was forthcoming, the deva stepped inside and drew the flap shut behind himself.

The dimness of the tent did not hinder the angel. His acute vision allowed him to easily discern the interior. He gave a quick glance in the direction of a table with maps spread upon it, but the figure before him, languishing upon

numerous rugs and cushions, interested him most.

He stepped nearer.

“No closer,” the figure said. “Your stench is awful enough from this distance.” It was the voice of a woman, though she sounded husky, tired. A cough followed by several wheezing gasps confirmed what he already knew.

She was wounded, dying.

Tauran paused to let her show herself fully. A human torso and head rose up into a sitting position, her six arms pushing her upright. Where her legs should have been, twenty feet of reptilian flesh writhed in discomfort. The massive, coiled body might have been capable of crushing him, had she been hale and hearty, but Tauran saw an arrow protruding from her chest directly beneath one bare breast. It penetrated her from front to back, and though very little blood leaked from the wound, he knew the missile was killing her.

It was also holding her there, preventing her from traveling back to the plane from whence she had come. She could seek no solace, no rescue among her own kind in the Abyss.

“You’re dying,” Tauran said, taking another step toward the fiend. “I can help you,” he said. “I can ease your suffering.”

“Stay back!” the demon snarled, and she hoisted swords in several of her hands. The blades shook, would not stay on guard.

Tauran looked at her face, saw the pain glazing her eyes. She might have been beautiful, had she been fully human. Even half-human in shape, she was attractive. But her dark hair hung in bedraggled clumps from her head, and her skin was sallow and glistened with the sweat of sickness. She swallowed hard, then groaned and collapsed back upon her pillows.

“Gloat and get it over with,” she mumbled, closing her eyes. “I don’t have much time left.”

Tauran shook his head, though he knew she did not see. “I am not interested in dancing on your grave. I cannot even claim the honor of having fired the arrow that leeches your life away.”

“Then what do you want?” she asked, her eyes still closed, her voice growing more hoarse by the moment. “Whatever it is, I won’t give it to you.”

“It’s not yours to give,” Tauran replied, “but if you do not fight me, I will ease your final moments before claiming it.”

The demon opened one eye and looked at him. “No,” she said simply. “I would never bargain with your kind.” She coughed, tried to catch her breath, coughed again. Blood dribbled from her lip. When she regained her breath, she said, “That you would try to bargain tells me it is very special to you. You have piqued my curiosity. Tell me what you want. Perhaps I will make an exception and give it to you, just this once.”

Tauran breathed in and out slowly. He was obligated to give her the chance, though he knew that revealing his desire would most likely enrage her, making his task that much harder. But he was obligated.

“The child growing in your womb,” he said.

Both of the demon’s eyes flew open then, and she shrieked in realization. “No!” she screamed, and the coils of her body twitched to life, writhing and whipping around the tent.

Tauran had to leap into the air to avoid being struck.

“Never!” the demon cried.

She rose up, her blades out, as though ready to fight him to the last. He braced himself for the duel, but then he saw the cunning gleam in her eye.

Just as she began to reverse the blades and drive them into her own body, to slice the burgeoning life out of herself to deny it to the angel, he reacted. With explosive force, he

flung the mace forward, channeling every bit of strength, both natural and preternatural, that he could muster.

The weapon sailed across the space between them. Tauran watched it tumble through the air as though it moved in slow motion. The blades of the demon's long swords descended, and the mace moved closer.

The head of the angel's weapon collided with the once-beautiful face at the same moment that the tips of several swords punctured her scaly skin. An explosion of blood and flesh splattered the cushions, the rugs, and the tent wall as the demon's head disintegrated.

The muscles in her arms kept working for a heartbeat longer.

The blades sank deeply into flesh. The two life-forces that were there, one inside the other, grew faint, then vanished. The unborn child was lost to him, slain by its own mother.

Tauran hung his head in sorrow for a long moment, reminding himself that the easy path was not always the one set before him.

He turned, grief and disappointment hanging heavy around him, and departed, returning to the House of the Triad to report that he had failed.