

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE
FRACTURED
SKY

THE
EMPYREAN
ODYSSEY
Book II

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CHAPTER ONE

The wind howled and buffeted Zasian, and he fought against it. Learning to fly in dragon form was harder than coercing magical energies to aid him in flight. The priest struggled to familiarize himself with subtle shifts in frame. He practiced flexing muscles he never imagined possessing before. It was not easy.

He had to work all the harder because of the distractions. The wind certainly made things more difficult, but that was a mere inconvenience, an occasional jarring shift that he could account for and dismiss. A gust or down shear might startle him, but it would not ruin him.

He felt some residual queasiness from the mushrooms Aliisza had introduced into the dragon's system, too. The occasional rumble or twitch deep in his belly led him to suspect that they were not completely purged. He hoped they would not become a greater problem.

The dragon fighting to regain control of his own body was far more dangerous. Zasian could feel the being's rage, sense the overwhelming power tucked away, pounding futilely against the dweomers he had erected to contain him. Though

he trusted that the magic was strong enough to withstand the raw fury of the dragon, he had to be careful not to succumb to his crafty wit.

That's not quite right, the dragon would say. You're too stiff with the tail. You must let it glide, not twitch. If you'll allow me, I'll demonstrate.

But of course Zasian would not relinquish control, even for an instant. To do so would mean death for him. Still, he admired the beast's efforts, his desire to live. Despite the panic the dragon must have felt from not being in control, he whispered, suggested, always so reasonable, so helpful.

I understand your fear, dragon, Zasian said, but your efforts are wasted. I know your mind better than you do. My course is set. I know the inevitability of what must happen. You cannot undo this. The dragon grew quiet, and Zasian could feel his fear grow.

He ignored the beast, and the journey continued.

Eventually, the dragon renewed his efforts, but Zasian was prepared. He fought the dragon with the same growing ease with which he battled the unfamiliar shape and muscles.

A searing pain filled the priest's abdomen, and for a startled breath or two he feared that it was the dragon, finally finding some crack in his prison, at last reaching out with some energy to stab at Zasian's presence from within. But the dragon seemed just as surprised as he, and before the beast could take advantage of the priest's confusion, Zasian had his guard up again.

But he was going to be sick.

Damned mushrooms, Zasian thought. I must land. He began to look everywhere below him, desperate for a safe haven. Another sharp, white-hot pain shot through the priest,

and his fear of injury and falling to his death overcame his cautious hesitation. Even if there were any cursed celestials nearby, he would just have to risk it.

The priest spied a smallish bit of land, an uprooted, inverted mountain bobbing and weaving in the tempestuous winds. It slipped in and out of view several times, obscured by the racing, roiling clouds, but Zasian kept his bearing true and half-flew, half-tumbled to its upper surface.

Another sharp agony rammed into his gut as he flopped onto the open space atop the nodule of rock. A handful of scrawny trees whipped around in the fierce breezes, but at least they offered him some cover from unwanted eyes.

Not that anything would be out and about, trying to fly through this, Zasian thought.

He marveled again that the House of the Triad was in such an uproar. It was not known for anything other than idyllic weather, but Cyric's efforts to drive a wedge between Tyr and Helm must have been going better than expected. Zasian almost laughed, imagining the natives' consternation and panic over the disruption to their beloved paradise. A chortle almost escaped his wyrmish maw, but yet another shooting pain turned the sound into a grunt of anguish.

He really was going to be sick.

Zasian was fully in the act of retching something up, struggling to control both the writhing, twitching body and the sentience that wanted it back, when he realized the cause of his distress.

Something was coming through the portal.

Just as he and Kaanyr had crossed into the heavenly plane, another creature was making its way into the House by means of the efreeti sultan's favorite pet.

He and the half-fiend had been followed.

In a brief moment of panic, Zasian worried that whatever was inside him knew he was vulnerable and would attempt to slay him from within. In that heartbeat of alarm, he almost lost his wits, almost allowed the dragon to regain a foothold. But he felt the surge of the dragon's attack and braced himself enough to stem the assault.

Then he coughed once and vomited the interloper free.

Myshik Morueme went sprawling upon the tall grasses at Zasian's clawed feet.



“Justice is not some gaudy cloak,” the angel standing opposite Tauran insisted, “worn only when it suits us and later cast aside as unfashionable!” The bronze-skinned deva fanned his white wings in agitation and punctuated his final, harsh words by jabbing his finger into the air. His dark eyes, which matched his short, dark hair, blazed with ire.

The two majestic archons that had arrived at the storm dragon's lair with him stood with their great wings unfurled. They perched on the balls of their feet and watched the proceedings with wary gazes. Except for the feathered appendages, they appeared sublimely human in many ways, but they towered half again as tall as the angel they flanked, who himself stood head and shoulders higher than Aliisza.

The alu saw Tauran's hands clench. He stood confronting his counterpart, his back to her, an unlikely champion in her eyes, shielding Aliisza and her two half-fiend companions from the other angel's ire. “Nor is it a cudgel, existing solely to pummel everything within reach, my old friend,” he said, his voice softer but hinting at anger just the same.

That was it, Aliisza realized. An old friend. She

remembered the celestial from her first day within the House of the Triad. Tauran had named him Micus then.

At any other time, Aliisza might have marveled at her good fortune, serving as witness to two angels bickering. It was not often that celestial beings disagreed so vehemently, and rarer still that they did so in front of others. Despite the privilege, Aliisza did not celebrate her luck. A warm, intense radiance surrounded the two angels, a glow of divine power that pained the alu to her demonic core. She blinked repeatedly, wanting to look away, but she forced her gaze to remain fixed upon them.

Her very life depended on the outcome.

“Not all justice is equal, Micus,” Tauran said in more gentle tones. “You more than most should understand that.”

The other deva’s eyes narrowed in accusation. “You sound like one of Helm’s apologists. Are you straying, my friend? Have you lost your way? Tyr’s Court has no more room within it for a wavering, stumbling soul than it does for the likes of these craven wretches.”

Beside her, Kaanyr Vhok, Aliisza’s lover and commander, issued a low growl and reached for Burnblood, the enchanted blade sheathed at his left hip. The cambion’s mouth curled in a faint sneer. His olive skin and white hair held a peculiar tint in the combined light of the strange, surreal chamber in which they stood and the purplish storm beyond its open-air periphery.

At Kaanyr’s threatening move, the two celestial creatures flanking Micus grew restless. Their forearms transformed into long, formidable blades that blazed with fire. The cool, damp air of the templelike chamber rippled with the heat. Muted thunder rumbled within the endless storm that roiled beyond the edges of the marbled floor, echoing the strained emotions within.

Though Aliisza often considered Kaanyr's good looks and roguish attitudes irresistible, at that moment her simmering anger with the half-fiend made him come off as more churlish than charming.

Playing the indignant, entitled boor again, Aliisza thought.

She reached out to Kaanyr to halt his petulant behavior, but Kael was already there, placing a restraining hand on his sword arm. Aliisza's half-fiend, half-drow son leaned near Vhok's ear and whispered something. The cambion's eyebrows arched up in surprise and anger, but he stayed his hand before shrugging off Kael's grasp. That charcoal-skinned face never changed expression. Kael stepped back again, clasping his hands together atop the greatsword he held point down before himself.

At a soft word from Micus, the archons relaxed slightly, and the flaming swords winked out, becoming forearms once more.

Aliisza wondered how her son had come by such a blade, as well as the glimmering plate armor that adorned his body. He had donned it shortly after she had awakened, during the moments between Tauran's cryptic plea and Micus's unexpected arrival.

So much had happened in those few moments. Aliisza had been surprised to awaken at all, for tempting a celestial storm dragon to swallow her whole had seemed an addle-brained course at best. Doing so to rescue a lover who had tricked her into the convoluted scheme in the first place was pure idiocy. Even afterward, she had expected Tauran to condemn her for her acts, but instead he had asked for their help. None of it made any sense, and Micus and his twin bodyguards had arrived before Tauran could explain anything further.

So many questions, Aliisza thought, turning her attention toward Tauran once more. And he's the only one with answers.

Tauran spoke, answering Micus's question. "I stray no more than any open-minded member of the Court," he said. "Though I may be a loyal servant of Tyr, were I to refuse to examine all sides of a debate out of blind loyalty, I would be a poor one." Aliisza saw Micus bristle, but he said nothing as Tauran continued. "Though Helm and Tyr disagree, each of their arguments must have some merit. When their feud has ended, I fully expect there will be compromise, with parts taken from each to make the whole. Until then, I show respect to all parties by refraining from premature judgments."

"Perhaps your wisdom is unmatched in such troubling times," Micus admitted—grudgingly, it seemed to Aliisza, "but Tyr's law on this matter is clear and not subject to interpretation. These . . . these *intruders*," he said, gesturing at Aliisza and Vhok, his distaste punctuating every word he spoke, "have broken those laws by their very presence here! Justice is absolute in this case, and there is no room for debate. Were Helm able to perform his duties properly, you and I would not even have need to discuss this. Justice already would have been meted out."

"And yet he cannot," Tauran countered, "and I suggest that it is by corrupt design. I dare not speak more here, but I ask you to trust me. Extenuating circumstances exist with regard to their intrusion and should be weighed before judgment is rendered. Let their story be heard, Micus."

The other deva grimaced. "I've known you and called you friend from time immemorial, Tauran, but I think you tread in dangerous places now. I fear your wisdom is lacking in this

instance, but because you have asked it of me, I give you my trust. I pray you do not suffer for it.”

With that, the deva gave a curt nod in the direction of the three half-fiends and turned away. With one graceful leap, he took flight, launching himself out into the raging storm beyond the perimeter of the mystical place where the rest of them stood. The other two creatures, as if sensing his intentions, kicked themselves aloft in mirrored motion, following behind Micus. The trio disappeared into the churning, purple clouds.

The moment the three interlopers had gone, Kaanyr spun to stare Kael down. “Don’t you ever lay a hand on me again, you son of a mongrel. I will slice it from your arm if you do.”

The half-drow blinked his garnet-hued eyes once and said in an even tone, “Please try. So much good would come of ridding the world of you. I welcome the opportunity.”

“Kael,” Tauran said, moving between them. “Vhok still has a part to play in this. Reign in your killing lust for the moment, please.”

The half-drow stepped away and returned his attention to adjusting the straps of his armor.

“And you,” Tauran continued, turning to face the cambion, “you would do well to remember to hold your temper in check while visiting the Court of Tyr. Don’t make it more difficult than it already is for me to maintain your status as a guest here. Until we can convince them otherwise, most citizens of the Court, like Micus, will perceive you as an invader.”

Kaanyr scowled. “‘We’? I have no intention of convincing anyone of anything. That’s your game, not mine. When you were bargaining with Micus, you forgot to consult with the bargaining chip. I never agreed to go anywhere with you or tell anyone my ‘story.’”

Tauran nodded. "Of course. Forgive me. I should not have presumed." He turned and began to pace, clasping his hands behind his back in a studious manner. "Based on your stance, then, I trust that you would prefer to be considered a deadly intruder to be slain on sight. Is that correct? Please let me know in no uncertain terms how you wish to be treated, so that I might inform the folk of the realm. Once they hear of your unwelcome entry into our Court, they most likely will be lining up for the chance to slay you." He turned back to Vhok and gave the half-fiend a level stare. "So? What say you? Bargaining chip or outlaw? The choice is yours."

Vhok's eyes narrowed, and Aliisza saw his hand twitch, hovering over Burnblood. When Tauran didn't react, Kaanyr relaxed his posture and folded his arms across his chest. "Entice me," he said with that same smug sneer Aliisza was growing tired of. "What do you have to offer me besides your supposed protection from harm, in return for my cooperation?"

"Why, your freedom to return home, of course," Tauran replied with all sincerity. "The portal through which you traveled here has flown away, it would seem, and you will not get far hunting for another." Vhok's expression changed only subtly, but Aliisza could tell he was admitting to the veracity of the angel's comment. "All I ask for in return is that you travel with me back to the Court and explain in exacting detail everything you know about Zasian, his intentions . . . all of it."

Kaanyr scowled at the mention of the priest's name. "Not as much as I believed, obviously," the cambion muttered half to himself. "His deception was thorough." Vhok straightened again. "But your offer is not strong enough to convince me to admit as much before a court of sniveling wretches such as yourself." He stepped closer to Aliisza. "I think we'd rather

take our chances finding our own way home, without aid from you.”

Aliisza sidestepped away from Kaanyr and turned to face him. “Remember what you just said about bargaining chips, and the follies of not consulting with them?” she asked.

Vhok’s face darkened in anger. “You would betray me for this . . . this *angel*?” he snarled, waving his hand toward Tauran dismissively. “That is not the Aliisza I know. Perhaps Zasian’s spells of shielding did not work as well as he promised. The simpering celestial’s magical coercion has changed you after all.” The cambion adopted a dismayed expression. “He lied about everything else, why should I have expected him to be truthful in this?”

Aliisza ignored Kaanyr’s shallow tactic. “He’s not the only liar,” she shot back, letting that simmering anger erupt at last. “You deceived me, you bastard,” she said, shoving her chin up a bit in defiance. “You let him weave spells upon me, let me become hunted and caught, let me suffer an angel’s ‘healing ministrations,’ all for your own gain! You put my child, a child I didn’t even realize I bore, in danger!” She gestured toward Kael, who had stopped studiously ignoring the whole proceeding and was now watching the two fight with an implacable stare.

Kaanyr snorted in derision. “A child that was not mine!” he said. “The moment I’m out of your sight, you’re tumbling between the sheets with a drow wizard and who knows what else!”

Aliisza rolled her eyes. “Don’t play indignant with me,” she said with equal coldness. “You’ve shared many another maiden’s bed in your time, too. We both know that we do what we do. It’s beside the point.” The alu waved her hand to dismiss his argument. “You thought the child was yours when

you hatched this scheme. You believed you were sending your own son into harm's way, and me along with him, for your personal gain."

"It worked, didn't it?" Kaanyr asked. "You and I are both standing here, at the other end of the journey, aren't we? Why are you whimpering about it?"

"I'm not," the alu retorted through clenched teeth. His ability to change the argument around never failed to annoy her. "As I said, we do what we do, and I shouldn't expect anything different from you." She stepped back, joining with Tauran and Kael, leaving the cambion by himself. "Just don't expect me to 'take my chances' with you when there are better offers on the table."

And don't expect me to leave my son just because he's not your child, she silently added.

Kaanyr stood glaring at the alu for a long moment, as if sizing her up. Finally, shaking his head almost in disgust, he shrugged. "Very well," he said, turning to Tauran. "Let's negotiate."

"My offer still stands," the angel said. "Your freedom to return home in exchange for your testimony before an assemblage of high members of the Court. Everything you can recall concerning Zasian in exchange for free passage from this place with your health intact."

"A fine bargain for most, I'm sure," Kaanyr replied, folding his arms across his chest once more and beginning to pace, "but I require something more."

"The reason you came here in the first place," Tauran said. "It must be a great prize, if you were willing to risk your lover, your child, and your own life in order to claim it."

Kaanyr nodded. "Indeed. And I will have it before I return to claim Sundabar as my own. But it is a trifling thing for you

to grant, I think, and thus not something that should cost overly much.” He drew a deep breath and said in the most casual, off-hand way, “I wish to bathe in the Lifespring, to partake of its influences.”

“I see,” Tauran said, sounding doubtful.

“As I said, a simple request, easily granted. And in exchange, I will happily provide you and your assemblage the most exacting, detailed tale of Zasian Menz I can muster.”

Tauran shook his head. “Alas, it cannot be, Vhok, for that is a sacred pool, and you are not worthy to enjoy its soothing, healing embrace. It is, after all, the very potency of godhood.”

“I will have its energies,” Kaanyr said. “Even if I must slay every one of you stinking, self-righteous poofs to get to it.”

The sharp ring of sword on marble was the only indication to Aliisza that Kael had moved, but almost instantly he was standing between Vhok and the other two. “Me first,” he said, assuming a defensive stance. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Kaanyr pulled Burnblood free and dropped into a crouch of his own. “I see you inherited your father’s bluster,” the cambion said, beginning to circle. “And it seems you are also destined to inherit his method of demise—at the hands of demons.” He feinted a strike at Kael’s leading knee, but the half-drow slid his much larger blade into place to block the blow with a mere flick of his wrists.

Later, Aliisza would find it difficult to recall the word that Tauran muttered. The instant after he did so, however, a thundering, concussive roar and a blinding flash of light slammed against her, knocking her to the marble floor in a daze. As the world around her tilted askew, she curled into a fetal ball and clamped her hands over her ears, fighting to regain her equilibrium and sight.

As the ringing and afterimage of searing whiteness faded from her ears and eyes, the alu rose onto her knees and looked around. She saw Kaanyr sprawled nearby, his arms clamped around his own head. Burnblood lay unattended a few paces away. Then he, too, sat up, blinking and rubbing at his eyes.

“Enough,” Tauran said. “You try my patience.”

Beside the angel, Kael had returned to his stoic stance, greatsword point down before him. He seemed none the worse for wear from Tauran’s powerful magic.

“If you wish to die trying to gain access to the Lifespring, I will not try to discourage you from it. But that was just a taste of what I and my kind can inflict upon you here within the Court, Vhok. Do not consider yourself so potent that we all would fall helplessly before your blade.”

Kaanyr grimaced but said nothing.

“If such a quest is so important to you, then at least hear me out before you begin your ill-conceived rampage. I propose an expansion of our bargain. You desire to claim the powers of the Lifespring for your own. Though rare is the instance when outsiders are permitted to draw on its essences, such an act is not unheard of. In such dire circumstances as these, I believe I can bring it to fruition for you.”

Kaanyr cocked his head to one side, considering. “I’m listening,” he said quietly.

Tauran continued. “The price you will pay is steep. You must earn this blessing, Vhok. You must redeem yourself in some fashion, not only for your trespasses against the Court of Tyr, but for your very base nature itself. Only by serving me for a time that I choose and in a task I designate do you fulfill your end of this bargain. In exchange for that service, I will persuade the Court to permit you full access to the Lifespring.”

“What type of service? What duration? I will not agree to vagaries, angel. Your terms must be explicit. I will not succumb to trickery.”

Aliisza had to turn her face away to keep from letting Kaanyr see her smile. So he thinks, she thought. How little he knows.

“You must aid me in stopping whatever scheme Zasian Menz, priest of Cyric, plots within this realm. You must assist me in hunting him down, capturing him, and putting a stop to his machinations.”

“That could take but a few hours or tendays on end!” Vhok exclaimed. “I do not have the luxury of limitless time to devote to this.”

“Then you have no accord with me,” Tauran replied with cold finality. “That is the price you must pay for claiming the benefits of the Lifespring. And know this, Vhok. I will bind you to this service once you agree to it of your own free will. You will be coerced to comply with your end of the bargain.”

Vhok rubbed his chin with his hand. “What if Zasian succeeds with whatever scheme he has developed before we catch him? What if he accomplishes his plot and returns to Toril before we can put a halt to it?”

“If we come to a point where your services are no longer beneficial, I will release you from your servitude and permit you to return unharried to your home, but you will not so much as set eyes on the Lifespring in that case.”

There was a long silence then, as the angel and the cambion eyed one another, each waiting for the other to flinch, to falter and give the other the final upper hand.

“Think of it this way,” Kael spoke at last. “He offers you a chance at revenge against your betrayer. I know your kind, Vhok. You’d like nothing more than to hunt Menz down

and ruin his plans. That's what you do, isn't it? Disrupt and depredate?" It was the first time Aliisza had seen Kael smile. It was Pharaun's smug smirk, and it unnerved her.

Kaanyr mused a moment longer, then turned to Aliisza. "Walk with me," he said, and he took her by the elbow and led her away. They followed the edge of the pool of water, passing through the mist that wafted from its surface until they were almost out of sight of the other two. Aliisza began to wonder if Kaanyr had deemed their chances higher if they simply fled right then. She cast a glance back, at Kael in particular. She was not yet ready to abandon her son, despite the strange nature of his behavior. Whatever his upbringing, he was still her child.

"What do you think of the idiot's offer?" Kaanyr asked as he stopped and turned her to face him. "You've dealt with him before. How cagey is he being? What tricks will he try to play upon us?"

Oh, no, Aliisza thought. You must run this gauntlet on your own, just as you forced me to do. Aloud she asked, "What's so important about this bath?" It had better be damned exhilarating, she thought, to send me through all I've endured just to get yourself here. "What is this Lifespring you keep speaking of?"

"It is a wellspring of golden waters that brims with the energy and power of godhood. Though it would not make me a god, it would grant me the power to rule like I have never had before. With that magic at my command, I could enter Sundabar not as a mere conqueror but as a beloved leader, a sovereign worth worshiping. The people would cast out Helm Dwarf-friend, pull him from his throne, and kneel before me in adoration, never wondering why at all."

Aliisza looked upon Kaanyr's face, so full of rapturous,

fervent conviction, and had to keep from shuddering. His preoccupation with unseating the Master of the Hall of Sundabar had gone beyond sensible. He was edging close to the abyss of unreason.

So be it, she thought. “Everything he will tell you is truth. Every promise he makes to you will be honored. He cannot help it. It is his nature.”

“That’s not what I asked you. Can you see any trickery in his offer? Have I established the parameters solidly enough? Is there anything I am missing?”

It’s not what you think you see that gets you, she thought. That’s only what he distracts you with. It’s what you never expected that will be your undoing. And you’ll deserve every last bit of misery from it, you bastard. “Only that the timing is so vague. All the impetus is on you to help catch Zasian quickly. Succeed admirably, and you gain all that you seek. Falter or fail, and your prize becomes less and less valuable.”

“Yes,” Kaanyr replied, stroking his chin again. “And though the angel has every impetus to accomplish this quickly—at least based on his comments to Micus—your whelp has every reason to interfere, to watch me fail spectacularly. In truth, he might already be instructed to trip me up, just at my moment of glory. We can’t have that,” the cambion said with a chuckle. “I’ll just have to make sure that sabotage is prohibited in the contract.”

With that, he turned and strode back toward the other two, leaving Aliisza without so much as a thank you. The alu stared daggers into his back then followed after him. She couldn’t wait to see how Tauran yanked the rug from beneath Kaanyr.

“You have my solemn word,” Tauran was saying as Aliisza rejoined the group, “that neither Kael nor I will do anything

to thwart you from completing your duties, nor will we urge anyone else in the service of the Triad to do so. If you succeed in helping us stop Zasian, you will have nothing but our gratitude.”

“And the right to immerse myself in the Lifespring,” Kaanyr added.

“Yes,” Tauran said.

“Which *will* grant me the legendary powers it is renowned for. I will gain preternatural leadership qualities. All mortals who look upon me will wish to worship at my feet.”

“I cannot promise that each and every one of them will be enslaved to your charms, but your influence and charisma will be august.”

“And the freedom after that to return to Sundabar and claim its throne, with no interference from you or anyone else within this realm.”

“You may leave here unmolested at that time, but once you return to your home, how you choose to wield your newfound powers and the Court’s reaction to it are beyond the scope of this agreement.”

“Good enough,” Kaanyr said. “I accept.”

Tauran nodded and closed his eyes, as if in prayer. When he opened his eyes again, Aliisza wondered if he had woven the coercive magic upon Kaanyr. “It is done,” he said. “You are now bound to serve me until your appointed task is complete.”

The cambion frowned as the angel turned to the alu.

“And you?” Tauran asked.

Aliisza shrugged. “I have no need to bathe in the Lifespring,” she said, smiling in bemusement. “I see no reason to agree to anything other than what you offered me before. In exchange for what I know of Zasian—which is quite little, actually—I am free to return to Toril.”

Kaanyr gaped at her for several seconds. In return, she smiled at him. “How does it feel?” she asked in her sweetest, most innocent voice.

“You treacherous, conniving little—”

“Help us anyway.” It was Kael who had spoken, and he looked at his mother with a strange expression.

Aliisza wasn’t certain what it conveyed.

“Why?” she asked, a sense of caution sweeping over her. “What’s in it for me?”

“The chance you wanted before, back in the garden,” the half-drow replied. “The chance to know me.” Aliisza wasn’t sure how to respond. It was almost as if he were baiting her. “If you return to Toril, to your home, that will be it. Whatever chance you have of showing me your maternal love will be lost to you. *I* will be lost to you.”

Aliisza peered into those garnet eyes and felt a deep pain in the core of her being. Despite the notion that her transformation into a being of goodness had all been a lie, a deceit of Tauran’s from which Zasian’s magic had shielded her, there was still some truth in that message of selflessness. If she walked away, no matter how much fun it would be to spite Kaanyr, she would never see her son again.

“Very well,” she said in a small voice. “I will remain here and help you.” Then she quickly added, “But of my own volition. I do not submit to any magical coercion, Tauran,” she said, giving Kaanyr another smug smile. He only glared at her in return.

“As you wish,” the angel said in answer. “You serve of your own free will. But know this; should you interfere with my efforts at some point in the future, I will also have no compunction against dealing with you.” There was a hint of something dangerous in the deva’s tone as he said that.

Aliisza nodded.

“Now then,” Tauran said, “it’s time to explain to you all that has happened since you escaped the garden. Incidentally, because of the nature of the portal you traversed to get here, time has flowed quite differently for you two than for Kael and me. Twelve years have passed since the day you entered the storm dragon’s maw.”

Kaanyr’s howl of anguish and betrayal made Aliisza clamp her hands over her ears.