

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE
CRYSTAL
MOUNTAIN
THE
EMPYREAN ODYSSEY
Book III

THOMAS M. REID





CHAPTER ONE

Black unconsciousness became . . . buzzing. Joints ached. Muscles quivered. A body convulsed with pain.

It lay upon hard, frigid stone that quaked one moment and rippled and melted the next, blistering skin with intense heat.

The stone vanished, and the body floated without any bearings at all.

A voice groaned, sounding odd. Distant.

An intense crackling filled the air, and the tingle of electricity raced across the body's skin. Loud, staccato pops, roars of wind, and high-pitched whines interspersed themselves amidst the charged crepitation.

A head throbbed, threatening to split open.

A whiff of sulfur, mingled with something charred, wafted past. In rapid succession came the scent of flowers, blood, sewage, and old ice.

A thought formed.

Aliisza.

I am Aliisza.

She realized she was not breathing. Her lungs ached. She drew a deep, ragged breath and exhaled in relief. She dared to open her eyes.

Color flashed in the half-demon's vision. Not merely light from somewhere else, not some rainbow effect reflecting off walls or furniture or landscapes. A million hues filled the veil of her sight.

Nothing *but* color.

Washes of it swirled and fractured, split by the void of blackness. They reformed, became a haze, then a swarm of light points, then an undulating sea. All of it assaulted the alu, crashed against her, made the pounding ache behind her eyeballs grow.

With a gasp, she clenched her eyes shut again and retched.

For long moments that stretched on and on, the half-fiend squirmed and whimpered as the cacophony of sounds, textures, and scents pummeled her. She feared it would last forever.

The world has gone mad, she thought. Or perhaps it has ended, and I just don't know I'm dead.

Sometime later—she was not sure how long—the universe popped around Aliisza. She felt her body react, as though an immense pressure had been released. The torrential storm abated. The snaps and roars faded. Everything returned to normal.

The pain coursing through the alu's body diminished, and she felt solid, unyielding stone beneath her. The scents had nearly vanished, though she could still detect the faint odor of something foul, a mixture of stale sweat and singed flesh.

She realized she could sense light through her closed eyelids. Not the crazy multi-hued swirl from before, but a persistent, stable glow. Though her mind told her it was safe, she was afraid to open her eyes again, afraid of becoming inundated by the insane sea of color.

Taking a deep, slow breath to calm herself, Aliisza let her eyelids flutter the slightest bit, ready to clamp them shut again if the color-storm bombarded her. When it did not, she opened them wider and took in her surroundings.

The half-fiend lay on her back, sprawled upon cool paving stones, staring into the face of a handsome man with long, flowing black hair and a matching mustache. The thick, dark locks fell in a disheveled mess about his neck and shoulders. The glow that had penetrated the alu's tightly clenched eyelids emanated from him like the dim, flickering gleam of a firefly. Dressed in robes of black and gold, he struggled to remain upright on unsteady hands and knees.

"Well met," the man said, smiling warmly. "Are you all right?"

Fear and hatred slammed into Aliisza. "Bastard," she snarled before she even realized the word was out of her mouth. "You should be dead!" She couldn't remember why she thought that, but it didn't matter.

She reached for the man's throat to strangle him.

Her hands scrabbled at his neck, at his silken tunic, but her limbs had no strength and could not gain a firm grip.

A name blossomed in her mind.

Zasian Menz, priest of Cyric.

She wanted to claw his eyes out, but her weak limbs groped fruitlessly.

Aliisza sobbed and let her arms drop to her sides in

exhaustion. “Bastard,” she cried again. Do it, she thought. Just kill me. Finish it!

But Zasian did not. At her vehemence, his eyes grew wide and he retreated from her, staggering a bit and falling on his side. “I . . . I’m sorry,” he said. “What did I do?” His gaze did not convey the cunning of the priest she remembered. A mixture of innocence and confusion filled his eyes.

Aliisza stared at the man. You take me for a fool? she thought. What did you do, indeed! But his troubled, blinking expression never changed, never gave any hint of duplicity. He seemed perfectly sincere.

She groaned and stared past the priest at the rest of her surroundings, trying to understand.

The only illumination came from Zasian. Darkness cloaked the rest of the chamber. Aliisza lay near the center of a circle of stone columns rising toward a domed ceiling engulfed in shadows. Deeper gloom filled the spaces between those marble sentinels, hinting at vastness beyond the feeble light. The remains of her retching spattered the floor near her head, and Aliisza felt chastened for a moment, guilty at her own disheveled state in the austere chamber.

The alu turned her head to one side and spotted a body lying near her, a dark-clad figure in plate armor crumpled beneath one of the columns, facing away. The hilt of a slender blade jutted up from the figure’s torso.

Dread filled the half-fiend anew as she remembered. The angel Micus had driven the blade—her blade—deep into the knight.

A knight of Torm.

Kael.

Her son!

No!

Aliisza struggled to get to her hands and knees, to crawl to Kael. She had no strength. She dragged herself across the paving stones toward him.

I didn't mean to. I was a fool!

Aliisza had almost reached her son when reality around her flickered, unstable, like some half-effective illusion. A wrinkle passed through the room, making the walls and columns of the rotunda ripple like a flag snapping in the breeze. Aliisza thought she would be sick again.

The ripple was gone.

The alu felt stronger, enough that she could finish the journey and reach her son's side. She pressed her hand on him and peered at the half-drow's face.

He still breathed, but barely.

Aliisza crumpled against him, succumbing to her relief.

From behind her, in the direction of the unsteady light, a soft murmur reached Aliisza.

She gingerly rolled back over, her joints and muscles still aching.

Zasian loomed over a second figure sprawled near another column.

Tauran, the fallen angel of Tyr.

For a heartbeat, Aliisza thought the priest meant to do Tauran harm, but she realized Zasian was instead tending to him, being quite gentle. The priest's eyes were closed and he chanted softly. When he opened them again, Zasian saw her looking at him and said, "I've done what I can. I think he'll be all right, now."

Tauran's curly golden hair lay matted against his face, sweat-soaked and limp, and he was pale. His white feathered

wings, torn and scorched, did not move. Numerous wounds covered his singed skin, but his bare chest rose and fell in slow, even breathing.

Aliisza recalled Tauran's look of pure anguish just before he fell, believing she had betrayed him. She remembered bringing Micus to the chamber to try to stop them from fighting with Zasian.

I *did* betray them, the alu thought. Misery washed over her.

And yet there the priest was, trying to save the angel's life. None of it made sense.

Zasian gasped. Aliisza looked up, but the priest peered with wide eyes somewhere beyond her.

Aliisza spun her own gaze around.

The sweat-soaked face of Micus the angel stared back at her. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion and his mouth parted as if to say something, but no words came. His close-cropped dark hair glistened in the eerie light, which gave his pale skin an unhealthy pallor. The deva stood upright, as though just emerging from the shadows beyond, but something was wrong.

A second set of arms, blue and scaly, protruded from beneath his own. Where his abdomen should have been, a second head jutted forward, all blue-tinged snout and gaping mouth.

Myshik of clan Morueme.

The half-dragon also stared at Aliisza. His beady eyes glittered in Zasian's strange light, and he licked his lips as though anticipating a meal.

Micus tried to take a step, but he couldn't quite make his legs work right, and the reason soon became clear to Aliisza.

The rest of the draconic hobgoblin's blue-tinged body, thick and stout, sprawled out behind the angel, fused with him.

It reminded Aliisza of some sort of twisted centaur, but with draconic, rather than equine, qualities.

The abomination that had been Micus and Myshik staggered forward another step, two human and two draconic legs struggling to work in concert. The thing spun in place as Micus stared down at himself, his mouth agape and his eyes haunted. Two sets of wings, one pair bluish and leathery, the other covered in pure white feathers, fluttered against his flanks. One moment they folded tightly against the horror's body, the next they fanned out like a butterfly's.

Oh gods! Aliisza thought and doubled over. That time, she *was* sick again.

"What happened?" Micus asked, his words faint, almost strangled.

"I don't know," Aliisza admitted in a near sob after she had recovered. She stared at the stones in front of her face, afraid to look upon the grotesque thing the two creatures had become.

When Micus growled at her answer, she scrambled backward, retreating toward Zasian, who stared at the abomination with horror. Despite her fears she, too, peered up at the stricken angel once more.

Micus glared at the two of them where they flanked Tauran. Then his feverish eyes widened in recognition. "Traitors!" he roared. "You tricked me, led me into a trap! You have damned me!"

"No!" Aliisza shouted. She shook her head. "It was Shar! She was going to kill Mystra." Her voice trailed off. I tried to stop you, she thought. I tried to stop all of you!

A wail burst from the angel, a haunted, hopeless sound that tore through Aliisza and made her cringe and clamp her hands over her ears. Micus, his expression crazed, drew a deep, ragged breath before screaming again, louder than before. His arms, all four of them, alternated between flailing and grasping Myshik's war axe. It appeared the transformed angel could not decide which limbs to use.

The abomination reared up on his hind legs and raised the war axe high. Micus gave one final shout, a screech of fury and despair. At the same time, Myshik's head growled in delight. Then they lunged at Aliisza as one body.

The alu struggled to get her wobbly legs beneath her. With what little strength had returned to her, she frantically kicked herself to one side. Zasian lunged in the opposite direction.

The war axe slammed down, striking the paving stones with a shrill clang where she had been. On her hands and knees Aliisza scrambled away toward a column. She could hear Micus follow.

"I will send you back to the fires of the Hells, she-demon!" the warped angel screamed behind her. "I will rend you into a thousand thousand pieces!"

Aliisza reached the column and spun, putting her back against it. The abomination that had been Micus and Myshik stalked her. The hobgoblin's eyes glittered in feral hunger and its mouth drooled and snapped, but the draconic head said nothing. Only Micus appeared to retain his sentience. He stared at her with baleful hatred and raised the war axe again. With each unsteady step, he gained better control over his twisted form.

Beyond the wretched creature, Zasian crouched behind

another column, peering around it, his own expression stricken with revulsion.

“Micus, wait!” Aliisza pleaded. “Stop this. Let me find a way to help you.”

The twisted angel snarled and lunged at her again. He raked the war axe from one side in a great, sweeping arc, aiming to sever the alu’s head from her body.

Aliisza cowered and ducked, feeling the wind of the blade’s passing. She scrambled away, her boots slipping and sliding on the stones of the floor.

Micus followed her.

The alu moved to the back side of the marble pillar, struggling to flee the mad angel. She kept circumnavigating the column, trying to keep it as a barrier between herself and her foe. She managed to dodge to the right just as the war axe slammed hard into the stone edifice on her left. The force of the blow reverberated in the floor beneath the half-fiend.

She dodged right again, expecting Micus to continue chasing her in that direction, but the twisted angel had anticipated her maneuver and reversed course. One of his front legs kicked up at Aliisza’s head and caught her squarely in the side of the jaw.

The alu grunted in pain as the powerful blow snapped her head to the side and slammed it against the column. Spots swam in her vision as she sprawled backward hard onto her rump.

Aliisza couldn’t catch her breath. She lay gasping as Micus trotted around the column toward her.

He hoisted the war axe as high as he could, then slashed down.



Eirwyn awoke in a panic. She flailed in the dimness, unsure of anything, before the sinister dream faded and memory returned.

Her cottage, perhaps just before dawn.

The angel blinked, sat up, and peered around. Everything appeared just as she expected it to—every item in place, nothing missing—but she did not feel right. She could feel tremors beneath her, rumbles in the ground.

That shouldn't be, she thought, alarmed. Not here.

The tremors subsided, and the angel was left sitting in the pre-dawn quiet of her bedchamber.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember what she had been dreaming. Nothing returned from the depths of her slumber, but her worry did not abate. It was the third time in as many nights that such night terrors had afflicted her, and she had yet to recall anything about them.

Eirwyn rose and dressed. She began to wonder if she had merely imagined the shaking of the ground. Either I'm getting old and infirm, or something truly dreadful is approaching, she decided. Not that knowing can do me any good.

The angel went through the motions of preparing a morning meal, though she no more needed it than she needed to sleep. Both were simply a means of passing the time. As she moved around the small kitchen within her quaint prison, she expected the nagging feeling of dread to pass, just as it had the previous two days, but it would not. As a result, she only picked at her food. Finally, Eirwyn gave up the pretense of eating and went outside.

The morning promised to be a fine one, as all such day-breaks were within the House of the Triad. The sun, on the verge of breaking past the clouds on the horizon, splashed them with pinks and oranges. The angel imagined soaring among them, gliding on her white, feathered wings without a care. She closed her eyes and could almost feel herself among the wispy things, but a fantasy was all it could be. She could no more fly at that moment than she could reverse the course of the sun.

Eirwyn opened her eyes and took in her place of exile.

The cottage, a simple whitewashed building of two rooms, sat nestled among a handful of trees along one side of a clearing. A small spring bubbled up from an outcropping of rock and spilled into a pool in the middle of the tiny glade. From there the cold water meandered away as a small stream into the thick brambles that made up the border of her domain. Though she could not see it, beyond those brambles lay the edge of her tiny world. The prison builders had placed the thick foliage there so as to maintain the illusion, but the angel knew otherwise.

Eirwyn recalled the day Tyr's archons brought her to the tiny island of rock, accompanied by Viryn, the solar charged by the High Council of the Court with delivering her to her own personal purgatory. Such was her punishment for defying the blind god—an eternity spent pretending to keep house far, far away from Celestia, the great mountains of the gods. She had been given a refuge and was left wanting for nothing. Her cupboards were never bare and the little garden that grew in the clearing just outside her front door offered a means of keeping busy. No, she had want of nothing—except for her freedom, of course.

It's not such a bad way to be put out to pasture, Eirwyn told herself for perhaps the thousandth time. There are certainly worse fates than this. And I did what was necessary.

The angel smiled softly as she thought of Tauran. A mixture of satisfaction and sadness washed through her as she wondered where her friend might be at that moment. She had done the right thing in protecting him. She knew that. She only hoped it had been enough.

Did they succeed? she wondered. Did they uncover the truth? Would anyone come to tell me if they had?

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Eirwyn scolded. His sacrifice was as great as your own, if not worse. You lost Helm's patronage because he died, not because you were forced to turn from him. Tauran has willingly accepted the far more tragic fate.

If Eirwyn still had a god to pray to, she would have murmured a blessing for Tauran's safety and health. As it was, she could only send him good wishes in her thoughts.

The angel mourned Helm's death anew. The emptiness created by her deity's demise still filled her, still felt like a fresh wound that would never scar over. It was more than just the absence of his dedicated love, and more than the loss of her angelic powers. Eirwyn missed her sense of purpose, of responsibility. The joy of serving had gone from her life, and she was left with merely being.

Not a terribly promising existence for an immortal creature.

The sun broke through the clouds, a burst of morning brightness heralding the coming of another beautiful day. It was in many ways a false portent to Eirwyn, but it did remind

her that life continued on despite her—or anyone else’s—trials and tribulations.

Eirwyn was on the verge of returning indoors when a flash in the sky caught her eye. She turned fully toward it and watched, bringing her hand up to shield her vision from the brightening sun.

The second time it flashed, the angel got a better fix on the point and focused her gaze there, waiting.

Two figures grew from twin specks against the backdrop of the lightening sky. By the time they were distinguishable, Eirwyn could tell they were celestials, flying toward her on wings of white. When it became obvious that they were coming directly toward her, the angel’s heart leaped in excitement, though a shadow of foreboding, a residual worry from her unremembered dream, also coursed through her.

Initially, she thought it was a solar and a planetary approaching, but as the pair got nearer, she realized that the green-skinned creature was, in fact, a trumpet archon. It had been the archon’s long, silvery trumpet gleaming in the morning sun that had tipped Eirwyn to their presence.

The two celestials arrived and settled to the soft ground. Together, they bowed before Eirwyn, who returned the affectation with no small amount of curiosity. Despite her puzzlement, she was deeply grateful for the visitors. It had been quite some time since she had been given the chance to interact with anyone.

“We bid you good morning on this blessed day, Eirwyn,” the solar said. She knew him. Viryn had commanded the escort that had brought her to her prison. “We hope this visit finds you in good health and spirits,” the archon added, “and we trust that we are not interrupting anything of import?”

Eirwyn laughed. “I think you both know that I would welcome *any* interruption. Viryn, there’s no need for formalities; I do not hold you in contempt. You were just doing your duty.”

The other angel inclined his head slightly in thanks. “I am glad to see you taking this so well, Eirwyn. It gave me no joy to leave you here.”

Eirwyn shrugged, then frowned. “If you’ve come to see if I will reconsider and testify before the High Council, I’m afraid you’ve made the journey for nothing. I still believe in the rightness of my actions, and of my freedom to make such a decision. I’m afraid I still share Tauran’s sentiment that Tyr was not acting in his right faculties, and that will not change.”

The two visitors looked at one another and frowned. “Of course, there’s no way you might have known,” Viryn said solemnly, “but I thought you might suspect . . .”

Eirwyn cocked her head to one side, puzzled. “Suspect what?” she asked. “What has happened?” Then her heart leaped in joy. “Tauran’s returned! He’s brought news of his success!”

Viryn’s frown deepened.

“Alas, he has not,” the other angel replied. He opened his mouth to add more, but the archon cut him off.

“Have you not heard the summons?” the trumpeter asked. “Have you not felt the Seer’s connection, calling you?”

Eirwyn’s eyes grew wide. “Erathaol has been trying to contact *me*?” she asked. The notion of the great archon who ruled Venya, the third layer of Mount Celestia, reaching out, stunned her. “Why?” Then she recalled the tremor that had awakened her.

And her dreams.

Eirwyn seized on the palpable worry radiating from the two creatures standing before her. They had come bearing profound news. “Tell me,” she commanded them.

“For three days, portents have come to the Seer, announcing something profound and dire. He has been attempting to interpret these warnings, but the only insight he has gleaned thus far is your name. He’s been trying to summon you to him, but to no avail. It was only this morning that he learned you had been banished. He sent me to intervene, and we rushed here at once, but now I fear we may be too late.”

“Too late for what?” Eirwyn asked. How could I be a part of the Seer’s visions? she wondered, feeling overwhelmed for the first time in eons.

“It seems you and Tauran were right,” Viryn said. “Mystra has been slain. By Cyric.”

Eirwyn gasped and sank to her knees. “No!” she breathed. “This cannot be!” Oh, Tauran, she thought. You saw it coming, didn’t you? And no one believed you. She prayed that her friend still lived.

“Sadly, I am not finished with the dire news,” Viryn continued. He placed a hand on Eirwyn’s shoulder to offer her comfort. “Dweomerheart was destroyed in the process. Savras is dead, Azuth is missing. The World Tree is no more.”

New sorrow welled in Eirwyn’s heart. “So many lives lost,” she murmured, trying to absorb what the deva was telling her. “So much death and destruction. What has Cyric wrought?”

“I do not know,” Viryn answered. His voice sounded grave, frail. “Everyone is trying to determine how far the

aftereffects reach.” He took a deep breath. “But that’s why we are here. You must return with us to the Court of Tyr at once. You have been pardoned. It appears that you have some role to play in all this, and the council wants to find out what.”