

**Blade Bearer**

*Book Two of the Risen Age Archive*

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## *Prologue*

No one threw a High Priest of Queldurik into his own fires of sacrifice and lived to boast of it. Not an Elgadrin knight. Not even an elf warrior. Least of all, a witless girl. And yet, Ba-al Zechmaat, fiend overlord of the Garashean temple, struggled to his feet amidst flame, ash, and bone. He roared in wordless indignation. His fury echoed from the three-story stone walls of the sacrifice pit that towered above him.

The flames that raged along the pit's floor licked over his flesh, familiar, but comfortless. Zechmaat disentangled himself from the last loop of chain around his foot. Despite his broken wing's searing protests, he slammed his talons into the wall and sent chips of obsidian flying in a pelting spray. He hauled his weight, one shuddering arm length at a time, away from the bottom of the moat of flame that ringed the altar platform. The strain of the climb threatened to unravel what remained of his composure.

*Plagues upon the weaknesses I endure while I linger on this mortal plane.*

A temple guard wearing a steel skull mask peered over the edge of the pit. "Your Eminence, can I assist you?"

Even from a full story below, Ba-al Zechmaat detected the tremor that ran through the guard's body. "Assist me, you simp? How about this? Find them!"

“With all due respect, my liege . . . find who?”

Idiot humans and their ceaseless questions. What did the almighty Queldurik see in them?

“Imbecile. The Elgadrim dog and his little decoys.” Zechmaat snarled. “Catch the insolent thieves. Drag them back to me. Then strap them to these pitted idols and slow roast them until their flesh falls from their bones.”

A red-robed priest joined the first guard at the pit’s edge. He extended a length of rope and made ready to toss it to Ba-al Zechmaat.

“Don’t bother.” Zechmaat heaved his way up the final two fathoms of the wall.

At the far end of the chamber, a cluster of three gaping acolytes huddled at the main exit. They parted when another ebony-skinned fiend, akin to Zechmaat in gnashing visage but smaller in stature, shouldered through the group and into the chamber.

Stretching to his nine-foot height before the guard, Zechmaat snatched a fistful of the petrified servant’s tunic, then lifted the man to address him nose-to-nose. “How is it you did not see, you steaming pile of dung? Was it you who admitted a Knight of the Phoenix to the temple?”

“He . . . the knight . . . Your Eminence—he was disguised.” The salty tang of fear emanated from the guard’s flesh. His breath echoed against his mask in erratic gasps. He glanced down to the priest. “It was a powerful deception, was it not?”

The priest stood mute, holding the rope in white knuckles.

The lesser fiend stomped to Zechmaat’s side. “And it was your duty to notice such disguises! You’re not even worth the fuel it will take to burn you.”

Zechmaat wheeled a scathing glare on the second fiend. “And just where have *you* been, Hilekar? Or did you dismiss the clash of weapons as no cause for concern?”

Hilekar lifted his chin. “The doors were subject to a fixing spell. It took me until moments ago to break it.”

The guard clutched at Zechmaat’s wrist. “Your Dark Eminence, the infidels did nothing to diminish Queldurik’s majesty. No need to get—”

“No need?” In a single thrust, Zechmaat flung the guard into the pit behind him.

The man’s scream ended in a fleshy *thud*. Acolytes in the doorway stood wide-eyed as the welcome aroma of charring flesh reached Zechmaat’s nose. The fool of a guard had met his rightful end.

“Are you blind to what’s happened?” Zechmaat ripped the empty scabbard from his back and dashed it to the floor. *Blind to what will happen when Almighty Queldurik learns of this failure?*

The priest shifted his attention from the edge of the fiery moat and turned a frown on the scabbard. His jaw tightened.

Zechmaat drew a breath, ran a hand over the curvature of his left horn, and quieted his rage. He extended his awareness until the priest’s thoughts echoed in his own mind.

*The sword you shouldn’t have been wearing in the first place, you swaggering . . . ?*

Zechmaat belted the priest with a balled fist before the man had time to blink. He crumpled to the black stone floor with a misshapen cheekbone, a blank stare, and blood flowing from his ear.

“Hilekar.” Zechmaat spoke softly. “If this fool regains consciousness, flay him.” He paced and rubbed his tense brow for a few strides. “Deploy hounds. Perform Incantations of Seeing on the falcons—we will learn which way they’ve run.”

“Shall I report their location and heading to you, O Great One?” Hilekar asked.

“No,” Zechmaat grumbled. “I dare not leave the Almighty’s temple in the hands of such incompetent men as these. As soon as we have a notion of the thieves’ location, you will lead the group to capture them. Haste!” He thrust a clawed forefinger toward the door.

Zechmaat turned and marched for his chambers, and though every stride sent shocks of pain through his weary body, he poured great effort into masking his limp. He fumed. Hissing breaths streamed through his gritted teeth.

The heady Radromirian girl would soon discover the bitter price of her mission. Save her precious Papa? Pfah! At Zechmaat’s hand, she would learn the true meaning of suffering.

## *Chapter 1*

### *Not Fast Enough*

Danae Baledric heaved for breath, her palms pressed against her knees. The Tebalese tundra offered too little air for her laboring lungs. Her glance swept the barren expanse. The deepening twilight was treacherous, slowly stealing any hope her untrained eye had of spotting horsemen who might be in pursuit.

*Might be.* Danae scoffed. Of course they were scouring every league between herself and the temple in Garash. The Sword would draw them like vultures to carrion.

Danae hitched the Sword of Creo's Patron higher on her shoulder, but the improvised scabbard her friends had fashioned from a woolen blanket and some rope made the five-foot blade unwieldy cargo at best. The rope shoulder strap ground against her collarbone, and Danae found no spot she could bear the Sword's weight that was not already rubbed raw. She winced and straightened her aching spine. Wisps of hair that had worked free of her braid stuck to the slick of sweat that ran down her cheeks. At least that eliminated their tickling nuisance as they fluttered in the tundra wind.

“Danae! Are you unwell?” Culduin called to her from at least three dozen strides away. His light footfalls approached from the rear, followed by the heavier jangling Praesidio made as he ran.

Danae sucked a few more breaths. No matter that she and her companions had been running all day, they would run into the night as well. The elf and the old knight of the Elgadrin slowed to a stop at her side. Neither seemed particularly winded.

Danae had come to accept Culduin’s seemingly inexhaustible physical resources, assuming them to be part of what made elves live so extraordinarily long. As for the pace Praesidio kept, running like a man a quarter his age, it just seemed unfair.

Culduin intercepted her glance. “Are you in need?” He examined her face and furrowed his brow.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Don’t I look it?” The corner of her lip pulled crooked in a tired smirk.

Culduin tucked his copper waves of hair back over his ear points and bound a leather lace around them. “It is insensitive of me to expect elven endurance of you.” He placed a light palm on Danae’s back. “My mind is bent too much upon haste.”

She flinched. Could he tell how disgustingly sweaty she was under the cloak and tunic she wore?

“You’ve been plenty sensitive in allowing me to set the pace.” Danae met Culduin’s clear, blue-eyed glance. Just behind him, a cool glow caught her attention and drew her focus over his shoulder.

Culduin turned.

In the failing light, luminescent fronds of a plant clung to a jutting rock behind the elf. The alchemist's apprentice within her sparked to life, eclipsing her fatigue. Surely she had never labeled any jar in Papa's shop that held an herb like this. She stepped around Culduin for a closer look.

Between breaths that steamed in frosty clouds, Danae pulled a dagger from her bandolier, then applied it to the roots of the fronds, reverent of their snowflake intricacy.

"What have you found?" Culduin asked.

"I'm only guessing." She sawed gently at her specimen and detached it from the stone. "But I think it's a lichen that's specific to tundra. I read about something like it in one of Papa's books about antidotes."

Praesidio mopped his brow and laughed. "Your father's inquisitive thirst for herb and ore has taken quite a root in you."

A dart of worry pricked Danae's heart. For all of their collective inquisitiveness, Papa's peril had not diminished. In fact, it increased with every moment she dared linger. Neither had her brother Tristan's situation likely improved. She sawed faster.

Once Danae detached the specimen from the rock, its glow faded away. She frowned but tucked it into her smallest belt pouch anyway.

"Are you able to press on?" Culduin asked.

"We really should travel another two hours, at minimum," Praesidio added.

The thought of another two hours of running made Danae want to cry, but she swallowed the protest. "Well, if *you* can keep going like this, I certainly had better be able to." She wriggled her parched tongue against the roof of her mouth.

Praesidio rubbed the white stubble on his chin. "Are you calling me old?"



“Mostly I’m calling myself pathetic, given the difference in our ages.”

Culduin smoothed a lock of hair back from her cheek. “The count of our years does not fully define us.” He pulled a waterskin from his belt and uncorked it. “Since I cannot offer rest just yet, at least take a drink while we have stopped. You need not suffer in silence.”

“Silence?” She chuckled. “I’m puffing so loud that Ba-al Zechmaat’s underlings could track us by my panting alone.” Danae gathered another handful of the glowing plant, less delicately, now that she knew careful removal still extinguished the light.

The shrill cry of a bird of prey caught Danae’s ear, and she tipped her chin skyward to seek it against a backdrop of stars.

“Speaking of tracking . . .” Praesidio glared into the blackness overhead.

“That clinches it in my mind,” Culduin said.

“Clinches what?” Danae resheathed her dagger. The sudden tension in both Culduin and Praesidio’s faces filled her limbs with jitters.

Praesidio drew back his hood. “That’s the third hawk I’ve heard tonight.”

“The fourth for me,” Culduin said.

Danae’s attention volleyed between her companions. “And that means something?”

“There is no species of wild night hawk native to Tebal.” Culduin pursed his lips. “We have lingered longer than we can afford.”

Danae readjusted the five-foot Sword again. How the blade seemed to have tripled in weight since she had taken on its burden just a few short hours ago. She grimaced.

“I can bear the Sword if you would like.” Culduin reached out a hand. “And you have not yet taken a drink.”

She accepted the skin and poured a small mouthful from it. “You’ve carried the Sword more than both Praesidio and me . . . combined.” Danae returned Culduin’s water. Did he hear the hint of protest that had crept into her voice?

“Please, allow me to serve you in this way,” Culduin said softly. “My height makes it a lesser burden.”

Plausible, since he stood more than a head taller than Danae. She contemplated his offer for a moment. The weapon dragged on her like a prisoner’s weights.

The raptor’s cry echoed in the distance.

Danae squeezed her eyes shut against a dull pressure that swelled behind them. Embers of dread flared in her stomach. She pulled the Sword from her back and handed it to Culduin. “We’ll be faster if you carry it, I suppose.”

Once Culduin settled the Sword’s bundle across his shoulders, he stretched just a fraction taller, and a resolute look settled into his eyes and jaw. “This is best. Off we go.” He turned to once again run a southerly course.

Praesidio tightened the straps on his pack over his gray cloak and heavy robes, his gaze fixed on Culduin all the while.

“What?” Danae pondered the tightness around Praesidio’s eyes.

With a slight shake of his head, he replied, “Now is not the time for words. Keep up as best you can.”

Just minutes into the next leg of running, Danae’s heart resumed a dizzying rhythm. The landscape transformed from one of seemingly endless flatness to a region of rises and falls, with islands of rock jutting at irregular intervals. Every ascent up the rocky slopes left Danae panting for air.

The moon rode higher in the sky and bathed the landscape in shades of blue, with harsh black shadows beneath the tufts of diamond-leaf, caribou moss, and bearberry. Danae struggled to lift her heavy feet clear of the low flora. Her eyelids drooped.

In a confused moment where the world suddenly whirled on a shifting axis, Danae crashed to the frozen ground with a rattle of teeth and a clatter of equipment. A fiery sting radiated from her left hand. Bright spots danced across her vision.

“Stupid slate. I must have tripped,” she grumbled. She tugged her glove off the hand that had landed first. A scrape on the heel of her palm wept red. She put the wounded skin in her mouth.

In the moment of quiet, devoid of her tramping feet and jingling pack, a low throb reached her ears. Its quality was reminiscent of twenty distant drums, beating at odds with one another.

Praesidio turned back first, who then grabbed Culduin’s sleeve. They both rushed to Danae’s side.

“What’s that sound?” Danae blinked away the motes in her vision.

Culduin paused, then snapped his attention to the northeast, back the way they had come. “Look!”

“Maybe if I had an elf’s eyesight,” Danae said. “What do you—”

“Hush!” Praesidio squinted the same direction as the elf. “I hear . . .” His face blanched. “Hoofbeats.”

Dread filled Danae’s stomach. Not even Culduin could outrun hunters on horseback.

“A score of horses!” Culduin said. He put out a hand to Danae. “Are you hurt?”

The revelation swept away Danae's weariness in a surge of panic. She clasped Culduin's hand and accepted his offer of help to her feet. "Hardly. What do we do?"

"Once they found our heading, we knew it wouldn't be long before they caught up to us," Praesidio said.

"Right. So what's our plan?" Danae swallowed against the tightness in her throat.

Praesidio and Culduin exchanged uneasy glances.

"You mean we've been running for two days with no idea what we'd do when Queldurik's lunatics closed in?" Danae shrieked.

"We had hoped to make the cover of the canyon to prevent anyone from sighting us," Culduin said.

Praesidio blew out a heavy breath. "If we can be clever, we may yet lose them. Come, one more burst of fleetness." He waved them onward and broke into a long-striding run. "The canyon is still our best hope in this wasteland."

Danae and Culduin followed. "But . . . giant scorpions . . ." Danae blurted between searing breaths. "And who knows what else after dark!" She gritted her teeth against the manic quality of her voice.

"Better the worst of creatures than the swords of men," Culduin said.

Praesidio added, "Or the Curses of priests or Inquisitors."

The occasional rock formations and rolling hills worsened to a broken and tumbled maze of treacherous footing, compounded by the darkness. The terrain forced them to a slow jog, and still Culduin labored to choose a path free of hazards. Danae perked her ears for hoofbeats, fully expecting their low throb to grow to a thunderous pounding, but the sound never swelled.

Instead, it diffused. The sudden walls of rock and uneven ground, coupled with poor light, cut off any hope Danae had of glimpsing their pursuers.

Danae staggered after her companions, up the steep face of a rise. As they crested the rocky hill, the lip of the great chasm—the canyon of Quel Mahaar—drew into sight, cut into shards of black and silver by the moonlight. A rough slope stretched before them, the last half-mile before they reached the canyon’s edge.

Culduin slowed to a stop and flashed a smile back to Danae. “Here we are. The depths are nearly ours—”

“If we can get to them.” Praesidio pointed to the southward stretch of the landscape between them and the canyon.

Danae stared the direction Praesidio indicated. There was no denying pursuit now. Eight horsemen closed upon their position from the southeast, and eight more thundered in from the southwest. Behind the southwestern group, three pony-sized canines loped. One of them bayed. The riders slowed their horses and advanced toward Danae’s party, shrinking the gap between predator and prey.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Crumbling Cover*

“They must have galloped to our flanks to cut us off from the canyon. *Cha-thrath!*”

Culduin said.

“No need for incivility.” Praesidio scowled.

Was he joking? The exact meaning of Culduin’s words aside, this felt like a perfectly reasonable time to curse. Danae wrung her cloak and took stock of the riders.

Most of the Tebalese horsemen wore the shaggy cloaks and banded leather armor of soldiers. Boiled hide skullcap helmets, edged in iron, covered most of their dreadlocked heads. All carried swords and quivers. Three wore the red-and-black robes of temple priests, and one came clad in both armor and robes. Despite the bright moonlight, the distance obscured any further details.

The rearmost figure of the group, the cowl of his sable robe shadowing his face, sent a prickling heat across Danae’s skin.

*That prickling can’t be good.*

A hawk's cry screeched above the hissing wind, and a great falcon dropped from the sky. It perched on the sable-robed pursuer's shoulder.

"I think he's a huntsman," Danae said.

"The hawk and the hounds support your guess," Praesidio said.

She took a faltering step backward, then searched the landscape behind them. No place to hide that way. Taking a stand was suicide.

The riders reined their shaggy, dun-colored horses and assembled in two lines, leaving a fifteen-pace break between them, as if to dare the travelers to try a dash through.

"His hood's not deep enough to hide the maw of a dragon-kin." Culduin eyed the falconer.

Praesidio's voice came in a low rumble. "There are worse creatures in Queldurik's service."

Even from the full quarter mile that stood between the horsemen and Danae, a palpable sense of malicious evil emanated from them like a foul stench. Yes, something about this huntsman was different from the reptilian beast who had pursued her before.

"Follow me!" Culduin darted back down the rise and to the west.

Danae fumbled after Culduin, but the stone-littered path and the silty footing slowed her pace. Whoops from the Tebalese horsemen and the hounds' barking echoed off the rocks like the brash notes of horns.

"Where are we going?" Danae yelled.

"Something I saw on the way up. A small chance." At the bottom of the rise, Culduin turned to follow a long-dry streambed.

The course of the streambed deepened as it wandered onward, until the simple gully grew to a narrow gorge. The farther they followed the streambed, the darker it became, until the world around Danae fell into shadow upon deeper shadow. Culduin slowed to a stop, then scanned behind them with narrowed eyes.

“Through here.” Culduin pointed into the blackness ahead. “Their horses have no hope of navigating this crack.”

“But hounds will, and what if it’s a dead end?” Danae’s stomach threatened a revolt against overexertion.

Hoofbeats drummed, closing in.

Culduin grasped her shoulder. “We must deal with troubles as they come. I cannot know, but the likelihood of a watercourse running to a dead end is small.”

An arrow whistled through the air and stuck in the ground by Praesidio’s scraggly boot.

“If naught else, it’ll provide cover.” Praesidio plunged past Culduin, pulling Danae after him.

The defile’s absolute darkness obliterated what little remained of Danae’s vision. She groped her free hand in front of her. Praesidio’s shuffling pace implied he, too, saw little or nothing. Danae barked her knee on a jutting rock, and she bit back a cry.

“Here,” Culduin whispered in the darkness. He took Danae by the elbow. “I can lead you both. Just a bit deeper in.”

The pursuing hoofbeats thundered somewhere behind Danae. Culduin guided her on a winding course she could only assume steered her around obstacles. The strength of Culduin’s grasp steadied Danae’s careening panic, until overhead, the raptor shrieked again. Her chest constricted.



“Blast that bird,” Praesidio muttered.

Culduin stopped and released Danae’s arm. His bow creaked, close by, and the hiss of an arrow sped off.

The falcon’s next cry ended in a squawk.

“A shame, really,” Culduin said. “Such a fine bird put to ill use.” He slipped his arm around Danae’s once again. “On we go.”

They inched their way through the narrow cleft in the rock for a dozen paces more. Above, voices called to one another.

“Keep the hounds up here,” someone bawled in Tebalese. “No use hitting them too.”

The distinctive *whoosh* of arrows descended upon them, and Culduin shoved Danae to the side.

“Stay down!” he said.

Lights flared in the gorge. Danae blinked her dazzled eyes. A half-dozen flaming arrows stuck at intervals along the cleft floor. Culduin covered his eyes and grimaced.

“Culduin!” Praesidio yelled. “Take cover.”

A series of mechanical twangs chattered from above, and more missiles rained down. Culduin twisted out of the path of one of the incoming bolts, but a second sank into his shoulder. He grunted and spun around the rock Danae used for cover. The barb stuck too deep to pluck from the wound in a hurry.

Danae craned to see the edge of the cleft, but she could glimpse little more than shifting shadows against the night sky. Certainly not enough to take any kind of aim. No use sacrificing her few daggers to wasted shots. What she could not see, however, she could feel. A thorny onslaught that raked over her skin warned her that the slaving and snarling beasts above were

indeed Hounds of Queldurik. Three hounds dashed along the lip of the gorge. Their cursed presence tormented her. Her flesh teemed with it.

Culduin fitted another arrow to his string. He pulled back with his wounded arm and growled through his teeth. Sweat streamed down his forehead. The moment after he sent the arrow skyward, a cry of pain rang out from the higher ground, confirming his aim.

Danae pressed her palm against her temple. Was there a Virtus she could employ in time to be of some use? How well could she target an enemy she could not truly see? Would the phrases she knew from her father's notes still work, or were they really Curses? So much of how Creo's Virtus worked remained outside her knowledge.

The clacking of gears announced the Tebalese had reset their crossbows, and after a single shout, another volley of ammunition streamed down. Many of the bolts either stuck in the dirt or skittered off rocks. One grazed a rip in Danae's sleeve. She huddled tighter to the boulder in front of her. A quick glance assured Danae she remained unwounded, but the edges of the tear bore an oily green stain. An acrid scent tainted the air.

A thousand miles from home, and here she was, cornered by Queldurik's zealots just like she had been in her father's apothecary. The sting of helpless fury blew away Danae's fear. She checked on Culduin, whose face had shifted from its usual warm glow to an ashen pallor. He grimaced with every move of his wounded arm. Something about this bolt challenged even his measure of toughness.

Danae took a quick sniff of her own sleeve. The acrid odor from before originated here, strong enough to sting her nose. *Poison*. It did not take an alchemist's apprentice to venture that guess.

The first flaming arrows to plunge into the defile burned low, so the Tebalese sent another wave. In that moment, Praesidio burst out in a loud chant. An updraft of wind ripped through the gorge and sent the arrows back toward their shooters, and astonished outbursts broke out amidst them. The arrows landed in the brush above, kindling some to flame.

“Work your way deeper in,” Culduin said between shots. “We’re still too exposed here.”

*A little light to work by.* Danae smirked. On the run to the next hiding spot, she readied a dagger, now that she could target a few of their attackers. But another volley of crossbow bolts sent her for full cover before she could take aim.

“Leave the fighting to us,” Praesidio said. “You must get *certain things* farther from these enemies. *Albetrechne, sule tintaerna!*”

A flare of light swelled around the knight, and from it streaked a column of blue-white energy. The column slammed into the frontmost Tebalese warrior, enveloped him, and broke into spokes of light that collided with the pursuers around him. Their mouths gaped, but any screams they might have uttered produced only silence. The first opponent erupted in a cloud of ash that crumbled to the ground and left no recognizable trace of him. The others around the ash heap collapsed, pale flames licking their hair and clothes.

Danae sheathed her dagger. *Right. I guess Praesidio and Culduin have this under control.*

In the momentary pause that followed Praesidio’s assault, Culduin flung the Sword bundle Danae’s direction. She scooped it up and ducked to the next outcropping of rock in the defile. Slipping the burden back over her shoulder, she eased backward around the bulge of stone.

Culduin let another arrow fly, which caught a robed enemy in the chest. The man fell forward, tipped over the edge of the chasm, and landed with an ugly crunch on the floor of the

gully. Danae took another step back. The victim's spiked steel gauntlet on his right hand marked him as an Inquisitor, a warrior priest of Queldurik, and even with an arrow in his ribs, Danae preferred not to risk a confrontation with him.

Her foot slipped backward when she put it down, as the silt gave way beneath her heel. She scrambled to recover her balance, but the footing continued to drain from beneath her. Before she could muster anything more than a gasp, the ground around her collapsed with a gritty crunch, and down she plummeted, into blind darkness.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Darkness and Lights*

Danae rediscovered her voice when she bounced from a jagged obstacle. Her right shoulder collided with something unyielding as stone, and it knocked her into a spinning fall. Her hip smashed against more rock. No amount of flailing or searching with arms or legs slowed the descent. Had she stepped over the lip of the canyon? No, there would at least be moonlight. Here, there was only blackness and descent.

Her back crashed into another painful barrier, and this time, her head knocked against it in a secondary jolt. Flashes of brilliant color broke across her sightlessness, and a piercing tone filled her ears. She flipped forward. A fraction of a moment later, her whole body hit, chest first.

And kept falling. Slower, but breathless, black, and freezing.

No, she had not crashed onto a surface, but water. A wilder sense of panic seized Danae. Which way was up? The weight of her gear stymied any attempts at swimming, her buoyancy compromised. Her near-drowning in the Nuruhan had been terrifying enough. Here, without light, without river flotsam to grab, not only her traveling gear dragged her downward, but the cumbersome bulk of the Sword.

The wailing in her ears persisted, and the frigid water made her limbs sluggish in mere moments. She thrashed and fought the instinct to scream. For all her kicking and paddling, her sightless, watery nightmare dragged on.

If nothing else, her sinking slowed. But a crushing demand for air gripped her lungs. To come all this way and lose the Sword on the floor of some underground lake? To drown with it hauling her into unseen depths? Danae reached her arms toward what she hoped was up and pulled against the water. And again. Still, she did not breach the surface. The erratic throb of her heart joined the shrill tone in her ears.

Would Praesidio and Culduin be able to find her drowned body wherever she had fallen? Or would the hope of destroying the false god Queldurik wash away with her? Would anyone else figure out the truth of Papa's ailment? She tried to reach again, but numbness held her flesh captive. A flurry of bubbles poured from her mouth. *I'm sorry Creo, I can't . . .*

Sharp pain crushed her bicep, and another swirl of confusion hauled at her. Pale pinpricks of light rushed above her. The rumbling, indistinct drone of immersion shattered in violent splashes. Cold air swept over Danae's face.

She swiped at the streams of water running down her cheeks, fighting to clear her eyes. But still, she could see only a hazy cloud of blue motes nearby. She fought for a gasp of air, but her chest constricted, as though a giant wrung her out like a sodden rag.

Someone—or *something*—dragged her by her arm across pebbly ground. Again, her lungs convulsed for want of air, but this time, they erupted. Danae lay on her side. Shallow, frigid water lapped over her legs, and spasmodic coughing forced the rest of the liquid from her stomach and chest. The pitch in her ears receded to a persistent ringing. Her head, her shoulder,

her hip throbbed, and the rest of her was soaked and freezing. Shivers more like a fit overcame her.

Where did the lights go? Were her eyes even open? She blinked and stretched them wide, but all that remained was unbroken darkness. Maybe she had gone blind. *Please, no.*

A series of shifting vocal pitches, punctuated by what sounded like tongue clucks and clicking came from Danae's left. The grate of small stones underscored the reality that she was not alone on the beach. Danae's scream snagged on a burst of hacking that seared her throat.

"Stay away!" she croaked through her distress. She scrambled to sit and flailed an arm toward the sound, clumsy and lethargic. With a fumbling grasp, she sought her bandolier for a dagger.

The gravel chattered again. A hundred tiny flares of bluish light swelled to life but blurred as they darted, in unison, to the side. Faint illumination danced over the watery tumult of a splash.

Danae wrenched a dagger free of its sheath and swung. The weapon cut only through air. Darkness overtook her once again as the points of light dissolved away, somewhere beneath the water's surface. She cringed, waiting.

Only deep quiet and a gentle trickling of water followed the splash. The sounds might have been soothing, were it not for the utter darkness, cold, and pain. Danae's pounding heart marked the passing time. The air smelled cold but green . . . of algae and wet stone.

She bent her knees and pulled her legs the rest of the way from the water. Her joints ached and fog clouded her mind. *Light. Warm up. Am I bleeding?*

She wriggled stiff fingers under the rope strap holding the Sword to her back. As she pulled the wet hemp over her head, it brushed her cheek, and she winced. Her skin burned. Even

the lightest touch to her cheekbone proved the area already swelled. Danae pulled the strap as far from her face as possible to lift it over her head, and once she was free of the weight, she put the bundle partway under her seat where she could still feel its position.

She then shrugged off her pack and cloak. What a relief to drop the weight of sodden wool.

Still, her wet tunic and pants ushered the cool cavern air straight to her core. Her useless shivers demanded she shed the sopping fabric. One danger exchanged for another—with clothing, she would likely freeze. Without it, she was that much more vulnerable to monster bites or weapon blades.

At least the still cavern air carried less edge than the open tundra. She dropped her heavy cloak and peeled her tunic away. Tugged and twisted and fought the boots from her feet, then wriggled painfully from her trousers. The effort brought on a bout of vertigo that plunked her once again on her rear. Once her sense of pitch and yaw steadied, she cupped her hands over her mouth and exhaled warm breath.

She sat in the dark and rubbed her bare arms. What was that odd series of clicks she had heard before? No creature in Radromir made such sounds, at least not that she had ever heard. And what about the tiny lights? Were those just some phantom effect of hard knocks to her head? Or would some awful cave predator return with friends to share her in a quick meal?

A glimmer caught Danae's notice—or perhaps it was just a grasping hope of something other than directionless blackness. She focused where she thought she spied it. Yes, a faint and wobbling glow, but how far was it? It grew until it illuminated the walls of a rough stone tunnel. The light—no, lights, and not hundreds, but thousands, moved toward her in a cloud, just below the surface of the water. Danae scuttled back but soon bumped against a rock face.



The collective light of the underwater galaxies revealed a figure under the water. A woman swam toward Danae, and the tiny motes speckled the swimmer's cheekbones, forehead, and tips of flowing hair. The swimmer held some kind of illuminated orb before it, but the shifting reflections on the water's surface confused any details.

The orb broke the water's surface in a slender, pale hand. Soon after, the woman lifted her head and shoulders from the water.

Danae gaped. The swimmer who brought the orb had smooth skin, slicker in appearance than her own, and though the bluish light that radiated from a fascinating pattern on her face made other colors nondescript, Danae suspected the girl's complexion was whiter-than-human. Lavender hair hung in long, wet sheets, far down the swimmer's back. Each strand ended in a miniscule light, making the woman's hair appear scattered with stars.

She wore a woven garment, no wider than a scarf, that hung around her neck, crossed below her throat, then split to cover her pale breasts. Barely. She remained submerged up to her muscular belly.

*I guess she won't care that I'm only in undergarments.* Danae hunched. The swimmer's scant attire did not make her any more comfortable in her own half-naked state.

The girl opened her mouth and uttered a rapid series of sounds, some musical, others percussive. She held the lit stone out to Danae and blinked her extraordinarily large, tilted eyes. The irises shone in a silvery, iridescent dance, cold and bright like fish eyes.

Danae hesitated.

The swimmer frowned, clicked some more, and thrust the stone forward. "*Lumienne?*"

*Lumienne.* Light-stone. Danae gasped. In the Delsin dialect, she said, "You speak Elvish? Praise the Maker!"

The girl frowned again and looked at Danae sidelong.

“You do speak more than one word of Elvish, right?” Danae asked.

A few clicks and a long, mournful tone provided the visitor’s response.

“Pox,” Danae grumbled. Better a light from a stranger she could not understand than total darkness, for the time being. She eased forward and accepted the stone.

The swimmer drew her hand back, and folds of webbing creased between her fingers. Danae sucked in an inadvertent gasp.

The visitor flinched back. All the lights on her face, as well as the lines of luminescence that appeared on her arms, flared bright.

“No, please. I’m sorry.” Danae squinted at the shimmering surface of the water that obscured her companion’s lower half. “Thank you.” Her voice came out hoarse. The stone, however, was pleasantly warm in her palm. “Remarkable. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The girl tipped her chin higher and returned Danae’s smile. Her lights undulated, bright-dim-bright.

The stone’s illumination revealed that Danae stood on a shore of worn pebbles in a huge cavern whose opposite wall she could hardly glimpse. Rough rock walls ran higher than the orb’s glow would reveal to her, and an underground lake filled the expanse. From a tunnel at one end of the cavern flowed a current of water, and the lake dove through another natural archway on the opposite side.

Danae turned, and behind her, the light glinted in a multi-colored gleam. The Sword lay partially unwrapped. Her throat tightened.

She kicked the loose flap of blanket back over it.

*Hiss.*

What was that? Danae's glance pinged around the cavern. She listened. No other sounds reached her.

After a long breath, Danae returned her attention to the girl. She pointed to herself. "I'm called Danae." She then held out a hand to her new companion.

The swimmer, whose attention lingered at Danae's feet, startled.

Danae lifted her palm. "No, it's all right." She slowly touched her fingertips to her chest again. "Danae."

The girl uttered a few cooing sounds, her brow furrowed. She began again, and wrestled with the sounds for a moment until she made a pitched rendition that could have passed for Danae's name. The swimmer's speech reminded Danae of something between a throaty bird call and a singing child.

"Right, Danae. And you?" Danae kept her gesture small this time, but still pointed to the newcomer.

A pitch, a click, and a quick, higher scoop of sound came from the swimmer's mouth, though she hardly moved her jaw to utter them.

"That sort of sounded like . . . um . . . Ikirra," Danae said. She laid a hand on her chest. "Danae." Pointed to the visitor. "Ikirra?"

The girl in the water shrugged and repeated the tone, click, and scooped pitch. Her lights fluttered in sequence, as if chasing each other over her cheeks, forehead, and arms.

Danae's rendering of the name was as close as she was going to get, so it would have to do. She clutched the *lumienne* closer to her middle, though the stone did little to warm her. Her bent arms shook with deepening cold.

A scraping chatter echoed from above Danae, and she looked up, just in time to catch a face full of sand as it rained down from overhead. Scuffling joined the scraping, and indistinct voices echoed from above.

Ikirra's metallic eyes stretched wide, and she vanished beneath the water's surface. Her glow extinguished.

Danae spun on the shore. Should she grab her daggers? Her panic landed on the Sword. She had already grown too relaxed about leaving it on the ground, but then, multiple knocks to the head did breed muddled thinking. She scooped it up, as well as one of her daggers. How ridiculous. *Shivering in my skivvies, trying to protect a weapon that's as tall as I am with a knife.* Danae's breaths sped, and her head pounded.

Words echoed from above. "She must be down here."

Culduin! Danae lifted the *lumiene*. "Culduin, I'm down here!" Maker's mercy. She crouched and grabbed her sodden cloak, hauled it up to her shoulders, and wrapped it around her body, worsening her shivers. She waved her light back and forth.

More chatter bounced from the cavern walls. Some of it, probably Praesidio's responses, came to Danae's ears too muffled to comprehend, but Culduin's clarion tenor rang in the rocky cavern. "Wait! There!"

Danae squealed. "Where are you? I can't see you."

"Patrons be praised, you're all right!" Culduin said.

"The Tebalese are . . . gone?"

"News should wait," Culduin said. "We will find our way down to you, worry not."

"Be careful. It's a long fall," Danae said.

“Indeed. Longer than our ropes. One moment.” Culduin’s words came with the tightness of exertion.

The wait for him to speak again seemed interminable. Danae squinted into the impenetrable blackness above her, but the elf’s shape did not emerge.

“Have you found any way out, besides the way you got in?” Culduin asked.

“I’m still recovering from the way I got in,” Danae said. “Haven’t gotten to exploring.” She turned and shone the light from the *lumienne* over the water. She whispered, “Ikirra? Are you still here?”

On the very edge of the *lumienne*’s circle of illumination, Ikirra emerged partially from the water, leaving everything from her cheekbones down below the surface.

“My companions,” Danae said. “It’s all right.” She beckoned Ikirra to come toward her.

Ikirra eased about a pace closer but remained mostly submerged. And dark.

“Will you help us?” Danae asked. *This is pointless. She doesn’t know what I’m saying.*

“Danae, are you talking to someone?” Culduin called. “And where in creation did you get a *lumienne*?”

Ikirra glanced toward the ceiling.

An apologetic shrug was the best answer Danae could offer Culduin. “Yes, someone’s here, but we haven’t really gotten acquainted.”

Ikirra eased above the surface, head and shoulders, and pointed to the cavern heights, the direction of Culduin’s voice. She then gestured to the beach.

Danae called to Culduin. “I think she wants you to come down, but I don’t know if she can help us. She doesn’t speak. Well, not like us, anyway.”

“Caving is not my area of expertise, but neither of our routes onward are ideal,” Culduin said.

Ikirra eased back into Danae’s circle of light, her gaze fixed upward. A smile blossomed on her full lips, and a sparkle lit in her eyes. She toyed with her long hair, pulling it over one shoulder and smoothing it.

The impish look on Ikirra’s face tightened Danae’s jaw. “Are you *sure* I shouldn’t try to find a way up to you, Culduin?” The girl may have saved Danae from drowning, but why?

“A pair of enemies fled on their horses, so it is only a matter of time before they return with reinforcements,” the elf replied. “The odds of finding a hiding place down here are better than on the surface. We need to regroup.”

Danae swallowed. The odds of dying in either place looked stacked against them.

“I am going to throw our gear to your landing. Then I will drop and swim to you. Without more rope, that seems the only solution.”

A moment later, an overstuffed pack came hurtling out of the gloom and skidded across the stones. “My bow is coming next. Please try to catch it,” Culduin said.

“I’ll do my best.” Danae braced herself for the next arrival.

She managed to catch the white haft of the bow and prevented it from hitting the landing or dropping into the lake. The quiver came so quickly after, she could only dodge it. Culduin’s aim seemed to be deteriorating with each throw. His longsword plunked into the shallows, but Danae managed to retrieve it. A heavy splash announced his plunge into the lake.

Danae scuttled to the shore’s edge and extended the *lumienne*.

Culduin breached the lake’s surface and took a noisy breath. “Really cold!” He swam toward Danae and pulled himself ashore, mostly using his left arm.

Danae wrapped her wet cloak closer, but her teeth still chattered.

He stood, and streams of water ran from his clothing onto the beach pebbles. After a quick survey of the shore and cavern, he tipped his head. “You are certain you saw someone else down here?” He reached toward her throbbing cheek but did not touch her skin. “This fall was not without collision, it would seem.”

Danae searched the areas the *lumienne* revealed in soft, shifting light. “Well, somebody was here. I’m pretty sure I’d be at the bottom of the lake otherwise.”

Culduin clucked his tongue. “A mystery to unravel later. Your lips are blue, dear one. You need something dry. I thought I taught you better.”

Danae folded her arms. “If I had anything dry, I’d be wearing it. But since you were joining me, I figured I’d better not be standing here in my undergarments.”

A smile pulled at Culduin’s lip. “As your surgeon, I have seen you in less.”

All Danae could manage was a sputter, but at least her chills lessened for a moment while everything from her shoulders up flamed with a sudden flush. Perhaps it had been a product of her amnesia that prevented her from contemplating just how Culduin had once assessed and treated her broken ribs—or maybe it was pure avoidance.

He brushed past her and grabbed his pack. “I have an extra tunic and a blanket. I shall keep the pants for myself.”

The prospect of changing clothes on such a small beach made her stomach flip and her mouth dry up. Did he mean to march around shirtless while she wore his spare tunic? The thought drew her attention to Culduin’s ripped sleeve, where a new, round wound still wept blood.

She pursed her lips. “I forgot you had been hit. Is your arm all right?”

“If I could feel it, it might seem worse,” Culduin said. “Everything around the wound is numb, and my lower arm is tingling. I am fortunate to have made the climb down.”

“We need to see to that,” Danae said.

“Not before I see to your hurts and your warmth.”

*Stubborn elf.* Danae prepared a rebuttal, but Praesidio’s echoing voice cut her short.

“Culduin!” Praesidio called from the heights. “Are you ready?”

“Oh, right.” Culduin handed his satchel to Danae. “Ready. Heave it hard, Praesidio. It is farther than it looks.”

While Danae pulled the dry clothes from Culduin’s pack, Praesidio lobbed his gear to Culduin, who caught it one-handed and set it on the beach.

Danae put her back to the elf, dropped the wet cloak, and shoved her arms into the tunic’s sleeves. She yanked it over her head and down in an unreliable grasp. The garment hung nearly to her knees. The smooth, thick weave of the fabric slid over her skin, its touch far more luxurious than her own clothes. Rather than spoil the tunic’s potential to warm her, she also unlaced her sopping stays and slipped them from beneath the shirt.

The old sage soon joined them, drenched from his quick swim to shore. He wore only a long, linen garment that reminded Danae of a nightshirt, and its lower hem ran rivulets of water down Praesidio’s shins and over his bare feet.

“I’m glad we find you only bruised,” Praesidio said. “When we saw the drop, I won’t hide that we feared much worse.”

Culduin lifted an eyebrow. He glanced at the *lumienne* Danae had set on the ground. “Where did you get that?”



“From the person who found me. Very strange! She had glowing spots on her face, arms, hair—”

“Is that so?” Praesidio’s expression darkened.

“She’s clearly skittish, because she keeps coming and going.” Danae stroked her upper arms, as much caressing the silken sleeves as warming her skin. “Her name is something like Ikirra.” Danae glanced about, then raised her voice. “Well, this is all of us. Can you help now?” The dripping quiet of the cavern answered with melancholy emptiness.

Culduin stripped off his wet tunic and dropped it on the ground. He hopped lightly on the balls of his feet and rubbed the gooseflesh that sprang up across his arms. “Still cold enough down here to cause trouble.”

Clearly, a lifestyle of swordsmanship and traveling had chiseled Culduin’s physique into a state of statuesque definition. Culduin’s glance intersected with Danae’s stare. He smiled.

Her cheeks warmed. Forcing her eyes away from the elf and squinting into the dark heights, she strained her vision for any signs of pursuit. “Have we cornered ourselves down here?”

“No more than we were already cornered, and at least here, no one is shooting at us.” Praesidio wrung out his garment and shuddered.

Danae lifted her sodden pack, and a steady stream of lake water ran from it. “But wandering caves—Papa always stressed that unmapped caverns are no place to try your luck.” A wave of melancholy bubbled up in her chest. Had her family given up on her returning with any help by now?

A noisy splash erupted behind Culduin. The elf snatched his sword from the ground in his off hand, spun, and leveled it at the commotion.

Ikirra emerged, upper body only, from the settling froth, about eight strides from shore. She uttered a long, low tone.

Praesidio froze mid-motion, the fabric of his clothing clutched in white knuckles. His glance snapped to Culduin.

Culduin's eyes rounded, but as the newcomer and the water stilled, he relaxed his stance. "Well, greetings. Are you the one Danae has called Ikirra?"

Praesidio leaned close to the elf. "*Caudi prenemiten*, Culduin," he whispered.

*Proceed with caution.* A nervous quiver skittered through Danae's gut.

A quick, baffled glance passed from Culduin to Praesidio. In the moment the men spoke, Danae studied Ikirra, whose probing glance crawled over Culduin from head to toe and back again.

Ikirra adopted a cross between pout and smile, then closed the distance between herself and the shore. When she reached the shallows, she pushed up on her arms and lifted a silver-gray, sleekly muscled tail from the water. A thin, translucent dorsal fin ran from her lower back and along about a third of the tail's length, and matching flukes flared from its end. The edges of the fin and flukes brightened with cold, blue light, as did the patterns Danae saw before.

Danae's jaw fell slack. *Impossible . . . a woman with fins? Underground?* But then, the journey had so far been a string of one impossible encounter after another.

Ikirra tilted her head and blinked slowly, her attention still fixed on Culduin. She cooed and clicked.

Praesidio muttered in his own tongue under his breath. He then raised his volume to more audible speech. "If this has any hope of success, at the very least, we'll need to understand one

another.” He stepped between Danae and Culduin, then set a chilled hand on each of their shoulders.

The chant he uttered had a soothing quality, despite his touch awakening sharp pain that radiated down Danae’s arm.

“You are a finless soothsayer,” the fish-girl said.

Danae sputtered. “You can talk? Why all the games till now?”

Praesidio shook his head. “It is by Creo’s might we shall seem to share a language.”

“Oh . . . of course.” Danae’s posture collapsed into a sheepish slouch. “The Virtus in the Account of the Sojourners, right?”

The old sage nodded. “Excellent, young learner.” He then regarded Ikirra with a hard expression. “We call my talent Thaumaturgy. I am a servant of the Maker.”

Ikirra blinked. “At least the sounds you are making are much better now.” She returned intense scrutiny to Culduin. “You must be what my people call an elf? Unless there are other finless with such *very* interesting ears.”

*I guess it isn’t rude to stare when you’re a fish-girl.* Danae bit her cheek. In that moment, it struck her why Ikirra’s facial appearance had seemed odd. Her wet hair did not part around or curve over any external ears. Her closer examination determined the girl had slits behind her cheekbones.

Culduin’s cheeks flushed. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Well . . . yes. I am elfkind. How do you know of us?”

“The males of my people sometimes trade with overlanders. They have described beautiful ones like you who give us the brightstones like the one I brought Danae.”

“That explains why we see one down here,” Culduin said.

Ikirra twirled a lock of her hair. “It seems to me, my people have under-described—”

Praesidio stepped forward. “Too much chatter. What is your price to help us? Our chances of evading our pursuers using a surface route dwindle with each passing moment.”

Ikirra flinched. “Who said I had a price?”

“Other overlanders.” Praesidio’s posture was rigid.

“Well, I don’t believe I’ve met your kind before.” Ikirra reared onto her tail and folded her arms. “Are you all so snappish?”

Danae gaped. If she knew anything about Praesidio, snappish behavior only came after long provocation. Whatever he had heard of Ikirra’s ilk must have been memorable. In the worst possible way.

“You have not answered my question,” Praesidio said.

Culduin moved to Praesidio’s side. “I see no reason to start on such unyielding footing.” He bowed to Ikirra. “I am Culduin Caranedhel, and it is my pleasure to meet you, as it is my companions’.” He flicked a brief glance of reproach to Praesidio. “We are in dire need of your help. Is it possible to navigate these tunnels for many leagues south, and then return to the surface?”

Danae’s shoulders tensed at the unspoken conflict roiling between Culduin and Praesidio.

Ikirra smiled again. “It’s possible. But only if you have a guide. The only other finless I’ve met down here are the skeletons of those who must have tried our tunnels without one.”

“As Praesidio indicated, we do not presume upon your help uncompensated.” Culduin crouched to meet her eye level. “Is there a price you would name? I do not know the currency of your kind.”

“I think the company should be reward enough.”

Danae's chest tightened. Her brows furrowed reflexively. She shook the tension loose. *What am I getting all in a knot about? I mean, she is quite lovely in her own way. And barely dressed. Oh, please, you insecure fool. There's no reason for any of this to bother me, unless it's for Praesidio's reason—jawing instead of escaping.*

Ikirra gestured to Culduin's blade. "You are the warrior of the group?"

Culduin shrugged. "I do my part."

"Your friends look like they're in good hands," Ikirra replied, her voice stretching into a croon.

The rumble of irritation rolled through Danae's middle. "And I need a place to tend Culduin's wound. I think he's been poisoned." She gathered up her wet clothes and bundled them for carrying.

"Another reason we should move now," Praesidio said. "Which way? Will we have to swim?"

Ikirra narrowed her eyes at him. Her lights flared and dimmed. "Not to start, if you're not a fumble-fins . . . I mean, foot." She turned to the tunnel the lake flowed into. "There's a narrow ledge on this side of the outlet."

Culduin squinted that direction. "I wish we had a raft or boat. It would be much quicker."

"What you might get depends on who's doing the wishing." Ikirra shrugged one shoulder higher.

A fall of small stones chattered in the cavern. Ikirra's glance snapped to the ceiling. "It sounds like we're running out of time. This way." She glided through the water toward the tunnel she had come from.

Praesidio huffed. He took the *lumienne* and held it high.

Danae wriggled as quickly as she could back into her wet boots. The group gathered their gear and scuttled for the tunnel. Somehow, Danae could not shake the feeling they were fleeing known enemies simply to discover new ones.

