

# PROLOGUE

## THE ZERAKIIM

Elaryn pressed her back against the sharp cliff rocks, panting as she sucked in the stale, toxic air. Her team, huddled together around the corner, felt the fumes scraping their lungs as much as she did. They wouldn't have thought much of her forced, frantic breathing. They didn't know.

They had to die.

She'd been planning these murders for months, but her resolve was untested. She knew there'd be no going back, and once it started, she'd have to be quick.

A crashing force shook the cliffside. Elaryn heard a few stifled screams as she fell onto her hands and knees. Her ears were ringing and her vision blurred, but she turned to take in the chaos. Four members of the team were bloodied masses scattered around the small crater where her pack had been. *Good. There needed to be blood.* Her heart raced, but the cold edge to her inner voice was unnerving.

Vorsha, the Selvan envoy leading the mission, began to stir and whimper a few paces away. Elaryn charged, covering the distance in seconds and driving her knee into the woman's face. Vorsha's head snapped back and cracked loudly against a rock. Shrapnel wounds peppered her abdomen and stained her scarlet dress a deeper crimson. She wouldn't be trouble. *Five down.*

*One last kill.* Elaryn knew this one would be the hardest. She stepped over the corpse by her feet, boots dripping blood that pooled in charcoal sand. She left the woman's eyes open, her face already pale with death. Evil like this didn't deserve peace.

But Paltess was different. The boy was seventeen, just five years her junior. And she couldn't be sure he was compromised. Unlike the others.

Paltess stood a dozen paces away, trapped between narrow obsidian cliffs. He stumbled backward and turned as Elaryn drew a crescent knife from her belt. He ran, then seemed to remember his pistol between strides. He faltered while grabbing it from his holster and turned halfway around before a spinning blade slashed his throat.

The boy toppled and the pistol went off with a hissing snap. The lead ball hit the rocks and small

shards of black glass shattered down the cliffside with crystal pings.

Elaryn stepped closer. She cleared her mind and tried not to look away as the boy twitched in the sand. She was learning that people can bleed out far longer than she imagined. The stories always made death sound quick.

*Now for the hard part.* Elaryn scanned the rocks for a way up before spotting a narrow gap between the obsidian spikes. The rocks looked sharp, and for a moment she rubbed her palms together. Her black leather gloves were made for style and were ready to tear in a few spots. She'd have to risk it.

A loud shriek from behind settled the matter. She scooped up her knife and scrambled to the cliff, wiping Paltess's blood onto a spare cloth she tossed aside once the blade was clean. She put her back to the wall and checked the rear passage. Nothing. But if the raptors had found the first bodies, they'd be here soon enough.

Elaryn took one last look at Paltess, eyes glazed over and staring at her with blank accusation. *It had to be done.* She pushed back any remaining hesitation, slipped her knife into its black crescent scabbard, and reached up with her other hand for the nearest ledge. Sharp rock pressed into her

glove without piercing, and she risked more weight as she propped herself up with one foot on the other side of the gap. A few quick maneuvers and she was back on solid ground.

Dry heat and grey ash battered Elaryn from every direction. Outside the shelter of the cliffs, the air was thick with sickly orange smog painted by the sun's glare. She could make out rolling mounds of black and grey a few dozen paces ahead before the smog grew too thick to penetrate. She'd keep the sun to her back and press on.

An ear-splitting shriek sounded above and Elaryn rolled aside. She almost fell back down into the gap and braced herself in time to watch a raptor swoop down through the spot she'd been. Its grey reptilian wing clipped her cheek as it flew by, and the creature crashed into the rocks as it attempted to change course. Sharp talons lashed out and its neck lunged up like an eel before the monster fell over the edge, leaving a trail of black blood on the rocks.

She'd have to run for it. Her contact said she'd find the Zerakiim fortress close to the mountains, which had to be nearby. The smoke and ash from the volcanoes gave perfect cover, and few dared risk the raptors. She hoped her distraction bought her a little more time.

She hopped forward and broke into a careful jog, crushing obsidian underfoot and losing her balance every few steps. Sweat trickled down her neck and made her breast-strap tingle against her skin. Her black uniform absorbed all the heat in this desolate place, so each step felt like dragging a lit furnace up a mountainside. And the path ahead kept getting steeper.

She took cover under a large, jagged crag of black rock and tried to scope ahead. The sound of raptors feasting grew faint behind her, exultant shrieks and cries of pain carrying on the wind as they fought over the corpses of her former companions.

She coughed into her arm and felt tears welling in her eyes from the smoke. The smell of sulfur and rotting meat burned her nostrils.

A gust of hot air cleared the smog for just a moment, enough for her to make out a rising black wall where the mountain blocked her path. She caught a hint of green light and then another. *The signal.*

The smog closed in again and the mountain disappeared. The space between her and her destination looked smoother, like hot tar poured down the mountainside without being flattened. It was the closest to a road she could hope for here, though

she'd also be exposed. And raptors made their homes in mountain caves and craters – she was walking into a death trap.

*Now.* She pushed off with her gloved hands, feeling something sharp cut through into her palm. The pain skimmed off her consciousness – her focus was locked onto where she'd seen the green light. Her thighs burned from sudden exertion as she broke into a hard sprint. And good thing: shrieking cries from above rang out in a choir of death, each of her steps drowned out by the closing raptors. Her throat felt parched and her lungs burned, but she kept running.

She ducked and pivoted on instinct. Wind rushed past her right temple, catching up her tangled golden hair in the gust. Her ankle twisted over a fold in the rock beneath where one layer of volcanic fire had cooled over another. She pivoted back onto her path and cried out as a sharp talon caught her upper arm. The raptor swooped past her and spread its thin, grotesque wings.

A musket shot popped out from behind the creature and it dropped dead in a twisted heap. Elaryn caught sight of thin gunpowder smoke trailing up from a slit in the rock wall ahead. Another shot rang out, then another. Two more raptors fell out of the smog, the second nearly toppling Elaryn

mid-stride. She caught her balance and bolted for her rescuers, then veered right to where the green light flashed again.

She was close enough to see the door now, black metal concealed in the rock wall. Five, maybe six musket barrels stuck out from slits on either side, hardly enough to protect her from a raptor swarm. Two more shots cracked in the air. She crashed into the door. It didn't open.

"Let me in!" She pounded on the cold metal with her fist. A sharp chill passed up through her arm, down her spine and up into her head. The abrupt wave of energy, freezing cold and electrifying, caught her off guard and she stumbled back.

All at once, the doors began to open, two men shrouded in black cowls stepped out, and a host of raptor cries filled the sky as several of the monsters swooped in for the kill.

Neither figure looked at Elaryn. The man on the left clasped a polished wooden pistol in both hands, took aim, fired, and let the smoking pistol fall to his feet. His hand flicked down to his side and drew a second pistol.

A raptor fell beside Elaryn with an awful splat. She had to shuffle and roll to avoid its dying attempts to catch her flesh in its jaws. Musket shots and

another crack from the shrouded man's pistol drowned out the wheezing shrieks from the raptor as black blood trickled from its mouth before it finally grew still.

"Move!" said the man on the right. He kept his eye on the sky and flicked an ornate black and silver rod he'd pulled from his belt. Hints of blue and red glimmered from the rod's end and shot out as the rod grew longer. The flickering light climbed up and left a fierce black blade in its wake.

Elaryn didn't wait to see more. She scurried into the gap between the two men and through the metal doors, only then turning to watch the man grip his sword in both hands and fell two descending raptors with ease. The other figure retrieved his first pistol from the ground and both men stepped back into the doorway. Darkness closed in as the doors sealed behind them.

A soft hum filled the closed space, and dim light began to appear from small circles in the ceiling above. Several shrouded men withdrew their muskets from the slots in the wall and pulled down metal panels to block the gaps with a sharp click. Elaryn turned to see over a dozen men and women in black watching her.

No one moved. The large oval enclosure, now illuminated, felt warm and inviting, with a swirling, cherry-brown floor that reminded Elaryn of polished wood. She might have been inside her father's lakeview lodge instead of trapped inside a volcano with trained killers. Beneath their calm composure she could sense in each figure the coiled tension of masters of death ready to strike in an instant. And she felt at home.

"You made it."

The man with the strange sword flicked his wrist and droplets of black blood fell to the ground. His blade had vanished, and he slipped the metal rod into a notch on his belt while pulling back his hood.

"Mekkos! How?" asked Elaryn.

"How did I reach the mountains before you? I left a week ago," he said, the hint of a smirk in the corner of his mouth. "A Selvan noble recruit was news I thought best to report in person."

"Impressive work reaching the enclave," said the other man, still holding a pistol by his side.

Elaryn didn't respond. She was still getting her bearings, and making it here had come at a heavy cost, one she imagined would take years to understand.

“Drink this.”

A tall, imposing man she hadn't noticed in the crowd stood next to her. He held up a crystal vial that caught and refracted the dim light into tiny rainbows.

“Already?” asked Mekkos, clearly startled.

“You've chosen well, Mekkos,” replied the man. “And our new recruit has proven her resolve sooner than most ever have to.”

“What is it?” asked Elaryn.

“A final test,” said the man. “You know what we face better than most. You're either with us or against us, here and now.”

Elaryn stood a little taller. *Whatever it takes.* She reached out, pulled the crystal stopper from the vial, and poured a viscous black liquid into her mouth.

She only caught the metallic taste of blood as she swallowed. She broke into a coughing fit. Her throat burned. A chilling numbness climbed from her throat into her face and head, then down her spine into her limbs. She fell to her knees but kept herself upright. The room spun. Then it seemed to expand and contract, the figures around her

appearing near and far as though pulled on waves in a storm.

An abrupt jolt brought everything crashing back in. And suddenly the world was still – more still than she'd ever felt it. Elaryn felt a plunging calm in her gut, her shoulders relaxing, her mind pulled from her head toward her stomach. The room and its inhabitants were drawn into the sensation, like she was seeing them all at once. Time stopped.

The man held out his hand.

“Welcome to the Zerakiim.”