

ELIJAH'S FIRE



Deception lives disguised in smiles
From nobles, preachers, kings;
Disease in words, deception's snare
In choir robes it sings.

The cause, the cure, they come as twins
In voluntary breaths;
For one a theft, from one a gift,
Both suffocating deaths.

Will fires burn the sacrifice
To spread a cooling breeze?
Will death defeat another death
For those on bended knees?

And so the valiant march to war
Without a sword in hand;
Their weapon rests in silent sighs.
A prayer their only stand.

When sacrificed in blistered wind,
The cure is scattered yon.
Our faithful servants rise again;
Their night has reached its dawn.

And now they march with swords of light
To rescue from the mire,
Corralling misled lambs with love,
Rebuking wolves with fire.

Strip off your scarlet-tainted robes;
To truth forever kneel.
The cure must start with sharpened blades
To cut, then stitch and heal.

O God of truth, O Lord of fire,
Come purge polluted lands.
We plead for healing flames of truth;
We grasp your bleeding hands.





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CHAPTER

MOUNT ELIJAH

Matt sprawled in the mud next to Walter. Five armed prison guards surrounded him, one with a rifle pointed at his head. The other four shifted their aims wildly at dragons orbiting outside an encircling firestorm. Flames crackled. Steam billowed. Dragons and men screamed.

Walter belly crawled through the mire, whispering, “Get ready. I’m calling for backup through the tooth transmitter.”

“Go for it.” Matt looked for Lauren. In the center of the circle, she stood on top of a tank alongside Joran and Selah as they tried to create a protective sound barrier around themselves using Joran’s lyre. Another tank sat behind the first, abandoned.

“Makaidos!” Walter barked. “Give us some fire power.”

“Gladly.” A stream of orange shot from Makaidos and slammed into one of the surrounding soldiers. As flames engulfed his body, a volley of fireballs sizzled in. Two other soldiers dove out of the way and splashed into the mud.



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“Matt! Now!” Walter leaped to his feet and punched a soldier in the jaw, sending him flying backwards. Matt swept a leg under the last standing guard. He toppled, slammed his head against the empty tank, and fell limply over Matt’s legs.

While Walter ran toward the tank, Matt rolled the unconscious guard to the side and snatched up his rifle. Dripping muddy water, he stood in the hot quagmire and tried to orient himself while voices buzzed in his tooth.

“Thanks for waiting,” Walter said. “Let’s do it!”

“Matt didn’t come. He doesn’t know the barrier’s ready.”

Matt blinked. Lauren’s voice, but it was warped and fuzzy. He shook his head, slinging away muddy water and clearing his ears.

“Matt!” Walter called. “Did you hear Lauren? We’re all set! Get up here!”

“On my way.” Matt leaped toward the tank, but his foot snagged on something. He fell forward and slid through the muck.

A gun pressed against his head. “Don’t move,” a soldier called toward the tank, “or I’ll put a bullet through him!”

Walter’s voice returned to Matt’s jaw. “Keep holding it, Lauren. It might be Matt’s ticket back up here.”

Atop the tank, Lauren raised her arm. A rope dangled from her wrist. “I don’t think I could untie it if I wanted to.”

Matt followed the rope from Lauren’s wrist to his waist. They were still attached. The knot was too tight. This could be trouble.

“I will take him from here,” a woman hissed. Something jerked upward on Matt’s collar and hauled him to his feet. A dagger pressed against his throat. The woman called out, her arm wrapped tightly around his waist and her mouth next to his ear. “Give me Lauren. If you do, she and hero boy will both live. If you don’t, I will kill him immediately.”



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Matt tensed. Semiramis! He couldn't let this witch wannabe use him as bait to catch Lauren. "Wrap them in the barrier!" he shouted to Walter. "Don't trust a word she says!"

The rear tank submerged into the liquefying mud, creating a vacuum wind that sucked the surrounding men into a dark void where the tank once sat. The swirling suction pulled Matt and Semiramis toward the hole, but the rope tightened and kept them from falling in. As the ground dissolved all around, Semiramis hung on to Matt's waist, the dagger still at his throat, and shouted toward Walter and Lauren. "What is your answer?"

Walter made a twirling motion with his finger. "Joran, wrap Lauren and Selah and yourself up."

"We can't leave Matt!" Lauren pulled the rope, but the vacuum held him in its grip. "I *won't* leave Matt!"

Like a powerful broom, the wind swept men, mud, and guns into the growing void, leaving only one tank, its riders, and Matt and Semiramis hovering inches over melting soil.

With violent flames spinning all around, Walter shouted at Lauren. "Do what I say! Now! I'll hang on to the rope."

"But—"

"No buts." Walter turned to Joran. "I'm counting on you to save Lauren and Selah. Like I said, wrap them and yourself in your barrier."

Joran responded, but the wind batted his words away.

"Of course not. I'm going to try to save Matt." Walter looked again at Semiramis. "Ease up on that dagger, and we'll talk. In the meantime, I'm going to protect the kids."

Still atop the tank, Joran held a rod in the air and began walking around Lauren. Then he and Selah crouched with her, as if inside an invisible tent.



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Walter grasped the rope with both hands and leaned back against the pull. "Why should I believe you'd let them live?"

"I have information to trade. I know Arramos's plans. It will prove that I am not in league with him and that I will not harm Matt or Lauren."

"Arramos? What are his plans?"

"Promise to give me Lauren, and I will tell you."

Matt shouted, "Don't do it! I'm not about to let anyone put Lauren in danger."

"You heard him," Walter said.

"Don't take me for a fool. They are minors, children of your best friend. The decision is yours, not Matt's."

Walter grimaced against the rope's pull. "There must be a reason you want Lauren so badly. I can't believe you're going to let yourself plunge into an unknown world."

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"I know what I'm doing. You have five seconds to decide." As the blade cut into Matt's throat, Semiramis spoke softly into his ear. "Give me Lauren, and I will help you save both Earth and Second Eden."

He growled, "I wouldn't trade her safety for your promises to save any world." Trying not to move a muscle, he whispered into the transmitter. "Lauren, the rope's still tied to my waist. You and Walter can reel me in. Don't worry about Semiramis cutting me. I've been trained to handle this. Just do something that'll distract her for a split second."

Lauren jumped up and shouted, "Semiramis!"

Semiramis flinched. Matt shoved her arm back, grabbed her dagger, and thrust an elbow into her ribs. The vacuum ripped her away.

Still clutching the dagger, Matt continued hanging by the rope in midair, the wind batting him around. Lauren and Walter pulled at the rope's opposite end, their faces taut.

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"It's slipping!" Walter called. "Hang on!"

Lauren leaned back, slowly sinking with the tank. "I am!"

Gasping for breath, Matt groped for something to grab, anything he could brace with to keep the pressure off Walter and Lauren. In seconds, everyone on the tank would be swallowed by the bubbling lava. They still had time to protect themselves in the barrier, but not if they kept trying to save him.

Matt waved both arms. "Let me go! Save yourselves!"

The tank eased lower. Hot gasses shot up from the melting metal. Her face twisting in pain, Lauren shouted, "Never! If you go, I'm going with you!"

Matt gazed at her. Such determination. Such love. She really would give her life to save him.

He glanced at the knot. The last time he dangled from a rope, a hate-filled foster sister stood at the other end, a prankster who wanted him to suffer. Lauren was the opposite of Darcy. She was light and love, everything a real sister ought to be. He couldn't let her die.

He set the dagger against the rope and whispered into the transmitter. "I love you, Lauren. It was great being your brother, even for just a little while."

He sliced through the rope. With a twang, the line snapped toward Lauren. Matt flew away and sailed through the air. With the dagger still in his grip, he forced his arms not to flail. He hurtled nearly parallel to an expanse of black rocks that lay a hundred feet below. Plumes of steam erupted from fissures, some rocketing high and brushing scalding white fingers against his skin. Crashing down there would either tear his body to pieces or boil his blood, maybe both.

A huge lake came into view, the shore not far away. His arms instinctively flapped, as if swimming toward the water. When his



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momentum eased, his angle bent toward the steaming rocks. Only seconds remained to impact.

With his chest toward the ground, he locked his arms against his sides, closed his eyes, and held his breath. He skidded across water for a split second, then plunged into its depths. Pain shot through his head—ripping, throbbing torture, like a full-body vise crushing his skull. Water gushed into his mouth. He swallowed to keep it from leaking into his lungs. It tasted earthy, yet fresh.

Once his descent stopped, he opened his eyes. Dark water filled his vision, hot and stinging. Which way was up? It seemed impossible to tell.

While he slid the dagger safely behind his belt, he let out a bubble and watched it rise. With a two-armed flap and a vicious kick, he swam in that direction. The pressure eased, but his lungs ached for air. The water grew brighter, still scalding.

Soon, the surface appeared, blocked by floating horizontal cylinders that allowed light through undulating gaps. He pushed into a gap and broke through in the midst of a sea of floating logs, a hazy, moonlit sky above. He sucked in a deep breath. The air scraped his throat and burned his lungs. He coughed violently, but each draw of new air made it worse. Still hacking, he stripped off his jacket and held it over his nose and mouth while treading water with one arm. Now the spasms brought in cleaner air, though it was still tinged with a bitter bite.

He grabbed a log, then snapped his hand back. Sparks rose from the stripped bark, apparently a recent burn victim. He set his hand in the water to cool the sting. No real damage—probably just a bit red. Maybe he had hit one of these logs when he entered, explaining the head and body aches.

As his breathing slowed, he searched for the shoreline, but darkness and smoke veiled the view in every direction. A curtain



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of ash floated from the sky like dirty snow, adding to the haze. Was it dark during the battle at the prison? Every memory fogged, possibly a sign of a concussion. With his limbs aching, he wouldn't be able to tread water for much longer, and the fumes would do him in sooner or later. They were already causing dizziness.

He chose a log that had been completely stripped of all branches, slid his hand underneath, and turned it. As it rotated, it hissed, and vapor rose from the newly cooled sections. When the hissing stopped, he repeated the process with another stripped log, then another. After cooling five logs, he pushed them side by side, threw his jacket over them with the sleeves spread out, and hoisted himself on board, quickly hugging them together.

Bobbing with the logs, he grabbed a jacket sleeve, tossed it over his face, and hugged the logs again. As he breathed through the filter, he closed his eyes. Making plans now would be a lot easier—fewer worries about drowning. Obviously he was no longer anywhere near the prison, so yelling for help made no sense, and it would make things worse if the wrong people heard him.

The improvised raft's up and down drift added to the dizziness. It might be better to rest for a while longer until the feeling went away. Taking slow breaths through the sleeve, he let his body relax. Soon, an image came to mind, Lauren sitting in the co-pilot's seat of an airplane, the very same place he had sat when flying with Walter not long ago, though now their father was the pilot. The two were talking—garbled words, too warped to figure out, something about underborns, magnetic ore, and Apollo, but most of the conversation died in the buzz of the propeller.

After a while, Matt blinked his eyes open. Still bobbing, he pushed his face out from under his jacket. The sky was brighter now and the fumes less dense. A haze-coated sun hovered fairly



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close to the horizon, giving evidence that morning had broken not long ago. Sleep had helped. The dizziness had gone away.

Turning carefully, he searched for the shore across the log-cluttered lake. About a hundred yards away, the greenish-blue water met a field of dark ground where steam spewed in bursts from invisible holes. Beyond them, a volcano sent billowing clouds of gray into the sky, dotted with sparkling embers. From the volcano's decapitated top, lava oozed down every visible side, some of it hardening before it reached the bottom of the slope, as if trying to rebuild what the eruption had blown away.

He looked in the opposite direction. No sign of shore that way, just a sea of water, logs, and smoke.

Keeping the jacket over his mouth and an arm on one of the logs, Matt let himself into the water and paddled and kicked toward shore. As he progressed, the water grew hotter and hotter, likely affected by the superheated lava field. Soon it might be too hot to go on, but staying in the lake meant sure death. He couldn't swim forever.

After several minutes, he found traction on the lake bottom and trudged toward shore. Just a few steps ahead, a woman lay on her back in shallow water with her face barely above the surface. A coat of ash had covered her torso, making her look scorched, perhaps dead. Dressed in a camouflage uniform, she had to be Semiramis.

Matt sloshed to her and dropped to his knees at her side. Semiramis was breathing, but the fumes would probably finish her off soon.

He let his shoulders sag. Rescuing her might be stupid, but how could he leave a woman to die? It would be heartless. Besides, she might have some idea about where they were and how to escape. With the water seemingly ready to boil, too much time here would make them both part of this lava stew.



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Holding his breath, he dropped the jacket and stripped off his shirt, leaving only a thin black T-shirt. After wiping away some of the ash from Semiramis's lips and eyelids, he laid the outer shirt over her mouth and nose. She coughed and shook her head, but Matt kept the wet filter in place.

"Stay calm. I'm trying to save your life." He set the jacket over his mouth again, muffling his words. "Not that you deserve it."

"Help me ..." Opening her eyes, she held the shirt over her mouth. "Help me sit."

Matt set a hand behind her back and pushed her to a sitting position. She coughed several times, sucking air between coughs.

While he waited, blood trickled from his dagger wound down to his chest. Pain blurred his vision. The entire world spun one way, then another, as if riding on a yoyo. His danger alarm simmered in his stomach, like a stewing pot on low heat. Maybe it was just the volcano ... and maybe not.

Matt climbed to his feet and stood in calf-deep water, fighting to keep his balance. He panted through the jacket. Smoke veiled the area, a gray shroud that spun in the swirling air. Cooling breezes cut through his saturated clothes, but his dragon-endowed body heat pushed back the chill.

As the mind fog dissolved, the scene clarified. Between his vantage point and the volcano lay an expanse of lava rock, bare and steaming. Far to the right within the expanse, fallen trees stripped of all greenery lay in burning heaps, some covered with boulders. It seemed that the volcano had blown its top and sent a storm of stones in every direction, knocking down trees before sending a cascade of lava to burn them.

The volcano continued spewing smoke and ash, and the breeze stirred the drizzling gray flakes into tighter swirls, making the lava field look like a post-apocalyptic movie set. What was this place?



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On a Pacific-rim island? That seemed impossible. Just moments ago he battled prison guards in Arizona.

He set a finger on his jaw and listened. No chatter from Lauren, Walter, or anyone else. He ran his tongue across the tooth transmitter. It was still there. Maybe the impact and hot water ruined it, or else he had flown too far, but weren't the transmitters supposed to work from miles and miles away?

Semiramis's spasms finally settled. "Help me," she said, lifting a hand.

After Matt helped her stand and steady herself, he looked her over. Rips in her camo uniform exposed gory scratches on her shoulders and arms, though her dripping hair partially covered some of the wounds. Maybe she slammed into shallow water and scraped herself on the lakebed.

Still holding the jacket over his nose and mouth, he set his free hand on the dagger's hilt. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

As she scanned the devastation, her eyes widened. "Arramos! That cunning serpent!"

"Arramos? You mentioned that name to Walter."

"He is a dragon, Satan himself. I knew he had plans for destruction, but this?" She shook her head. "I am appalled at his malice, though by now I shouldn't be surprised."

A stiff wind from the lake pushed the fumes toward the volcano, cleansing the immediate area. Matt lowered his jacket and breathed freely. Although still carrying a burning flavor, the air seemed safe. "What do you mean?"

She slid her filter down, draped it over her shoulder, and sniffed. Apparently satisfied that the air was safe, she lifted her tresses, revealing a deep gouge in her other shoulder. "I will trade information for your healing touch. I know you healed your mother with skin-to-skin contact."



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Matt concealed a cringe. Touching this woman might feel like licking a toad, but the information could be worth it. Using the dagger, he sliced away part of her filter, dipped the rag in the water, and dabbed the shoulder wound. "I might be crazy to help you, but go ahead and talk. I'll see what I can do with this cut."

"Healing is in your heart, not just your hands." Her smile seemed almost genuine. "It is who you are."

"Fine. Whatever." After wiping away ashen grime, he massaged the wound with a bare fingertip. "Just tell me what you know."

"First ..." She winced at the pressure. "First, you must understand that the enemy we're dealing with is as old as the Earth itself. His schemes run far deeper than you can imagine, and his goals are not what you might expect."

Using the rag again, he swabbed the wound. Although the pressure raised some blood, the cut appeared to be sealing. "Well, I thought maybe his goals were falling apart. At least it looked like Lauren was protected from the lava in time, and the dragons were winning the battle."

Semiramis half closed an eye. "Did you really think winning that pathetic battle was the goal? Was Arramos really concerned about keeping Bonnie in prison? Oh, yes, Satan was curious about her genetics, so he arranged laboratory experiments to investigate, though he likely understood more about her components than any mortal could ever discover." She laughed. "You must admit that is a humorous proposition."

Matt stopped the massage. "Get to the point. I'm not in a laughing mood."

"Very well." While Matt continued sealing the cut, Semiramis spread her arm toward the volcano. "Take in the lovely scenery while I explain."

"And skip the theatrics, too."



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Semiramis crossed her arms and smirked. “Well, well. Testy, aren’t we?”

He jabbed a finger at her. “Just can it! I’m not a stupid kid who can’t recognize manipulation. My sister used to ...” He bit his lip. That was revealing too much.

“Ah!” Semiramis nodded slowly. “I understand now. A man who has been stabbed with a blade of treachery is the quickest to recognize its glimmer, especially when it is wielded by a woman. I will remember this sensitivity and avoid rubbing salt in the wound.”

Matt looked away, grumbling, “You sound like the villain in a bad novel I read last week.”

“You’re a reader? I thought you were a fighter, the macho type who reads only the sports page.”

Matt forced himself to stay calm. Too many of his barracks mates were exactly as she described, giving everyone in his company a bad reputation. No sense arguing about it now, though. “You’d be surprised.”

“I’ll take your word for it and move along.” Semiramis cleared her throat. “Elam was worried that Tamiel was using your mother as bait to capture Lauren so he could harness her ability to find the purity ovulum. Then, when you saw that the prison was anticipating an attack from Second Eden, you decided that the entire plot was to kill Elam, Sapphira, and the dragons. Am I correct?”

“Well ... yeah.” He rubbed the edge of the cut, stopping a trickle of blood. “It seemed pretty obvious.”

She stared straight into his eyes. “We checked on you, Matt. You have been trained in military combat strategy, and you excelled in war simulations. Tell me, why might an enemy intentionally draw as many of its opponents’ troops and weapons to a battlefield?”



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Looking past her, Matt imagined a similar scenario in the academy's war games. His team sent scouts in the opposite direction that their unit actually marched. The diversion worked perfectly, leaving the opposition's base open. "So the enemy could attack a place that's left unguarded."

"Exactly. Second Eden sent most of its finest warriors, dragons and humans alike, to do battle at a remote prison in northern Arizona. Of course, we had to set up an advanced weapons system in order to make it look like our reason to draw them there was to destroy them, but Arramos is not so foolish as to think the greatest dragons would be so easily defeated. He *is* a dragon. He knows their power. If we had defeated them, all the better, but I'm sure you wondered why our defenses were so ill prepared. For example, the laser battery was never fully manned. Did you seriously think that removing the control gloves could stop one of my son's weapons? Not only that, the guards who fought within the ring of fire were poorly trained, and the reinforcements were delayed."

"I thought the problems were because the blizzard—"

"The blizzard?" As dark flakes collected on her head, her voice grew animated. "Honestly, Matt, do you think that bad weather could foil the plans of Satan? Haven't you heard that he is the prince of the power of the air? The blizzard was a ruse. The weather conditions masked the poor preparation and incompetence of the prison personnel. If not for the blizzard, a wise general like Elam would have seen right through the façade. In fact, I think he was suspicious. I wouldn't be surprised at all if he and the dragons are even now hurrying away to Second Eden, assuming they have secured their victory."

Matt replayed the events in his mind. It did seem as if the dragons and their company routed their more modern opponents easily, maybe too easily. And if the reinforcements were so late in



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coming, maybe never even arriving at all, could Captain Boone have known all along? Might his friendliness have been part of the ploy? “Okay. I grant your point.”

“So you must have concluded that Arramos’s real target was Second Eden, a direct assault.”

“Makes sense. But why? And how?”

She bent her brow, surveying the devastation again. “This I don’t know. Arramos knows I hate him, so he never divulged his ultimate plan or motivation. I suspected the diversion, but, of course, I couldn’t tell Elam.”

“You played along so you could get Lauren.”

Semiramis replied in a lilting singsong. “Tis true. I admit to coveting Lauren’s gift.”

Matt growled. “I should have left you to boil.”

“And then you would be lost here.” Semiramis patted his cheek. “Oh, Matt, you are such a heroic young man. You did the right thing, and you need not worry about your sister. Although I care nothing for Elam or the dragons, I will protect Lauren to the death. She is essential for my plan to restore myself and my son. Just trust me.”

Matt looked her in the eye. With auburn hair and angular features, she appeared to be an older version of Darcy. “I’d just as soon trust a drunken Nazi.”

“And you complain about my theatrics.” Semiramis let out a humming laugh. “It’s a good thing you’re stuck with me. It’s the only way you’ll learn to trust me.”

“Stuck with you? Why?”

“Because we’re here.” She extended a hand toward the volcano. “We are in Second Eden.”

Matt let his gaze shift from the smoking mountain to the burning stacks of debris in the deforested landscape. “I got the



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impression Second Eden was like a paradise. This place is ... well ... a disaster zone.”

“It looks very little like it did before, but this is why I am sure of where we are.” She intertwined her fingers. “I am completely solid. On Earth I was immaterial until a portal to Second Eden opened, and now that they are all likely closed again, I am still solid, proving that we stand in Second Eden, such as it is.” She nodded toward the volcano. “That is Mount Elijah. Although it has blown off its cone, I recognize the shape of its slopes. Elam imprisoned me in this region for more than fifteen years, so I know it well. I felt many tremors during the latter part of my captivity, giving me reason to believe that Mount Elijah would soon awaken from its dormancy. There is a superstition regarding what causes it to erupt. I shudder to think that someone might have fallen in.”

“It erupts if someone falls in?”

“As I said, it’s a superstition, but the image is chilling all the same.”

Matt shivered in spite of the rising heat. During the battle, many guards were swept into the crater, but that couldn’t really trigger an eruption. “So you want revenge against Elam for imprisoning you. That’s why you allied yourself with Arramos.”

“My disdain for Elam doesn’t compare with my hatred for Arramos. The self-important serpent brutally tortured my son and permanently maimed him, and I will do anything to kill that beast. That’s why I long to be restored. In my present state, I have little power, but if I were to become what I once was, I could do battle with him.” Looking again at the volcano, she let her shoulders sag. “I thought I knew what he was up to, but his plans were more diabolical than I realized. He didn’t mean to conquer Second Eden with Earth’s military; he meant to destroy it.”



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Matt blinked at the falling ash. "So, if Arramos is powerful enough to make a blizzard, why did he have to draw Elam and the dragons to the prison? If he made this volcano explode, why didn't he do it while everyone was in Second Eden and kill them all in one stroke?"

"You ask good questions, and I have already pondered them myself. Although Arramos has great power in your world, he has little to no influence in Second Eden. My guess is that he used someone here to gain access to the volcano, and he or she could not get that access until the warriors were gone."

Matt nodded. An inside job. But who among the Second Edeners would be that treacherous? And who could cause a volcano to explode? If Semiramis had been in Second Eden, she would have been the obvious choice, but she was on Earth the whole time.

His muscle aches eased, and the sting from the cut in his throat lessened, though it throbbed enough to bring fresh reminders of this witch's malevolence. Using her to figure out what was going on would be nauseating, but there seemed to be no choice. Maybe playing along would cause her to spill more information, though trying to beat her at her own game could be risky.

Semiramis touched the gash on her shoulder. "I feel much better. Your healing powers are remarkable."

"That's good. ... I suppose."

She slid her hand into his. Her touch seemed electric, but he forced himself not to jerk away. "Matt, we need to work together. Will you decide to trust me?"

"Well ... " Pretending to be her friend would be like holding hands with a demoness, but it might be worth it. He returned the grasp, refusing to cringe. "I guess we won't survive any other way, will we?"



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Her smile thinned into a barely visible line. "I see that your training included pragmatism. We do what we must to survive. And don't worry about my desire to find Lauren. As I said, it's in my best interests to protect her."

"At this point, I don't have much choice."

"Well, let me provide you with a piece of information that might make it an easier choice." She compressed his hand. "I assume you know about Tamiel."

"I do. What about him?"

"He is Arramos's number one henchman. Because of his alliance with the devil, Tamiel is powerful, cruel, and murderous. Yet, he has one weakness, and I will tell you about it to enhance your trust in me."

"So I can use the weakness against him?"

"No, Matt, not at all. I am telling you so that you will be sure to *prevent* that weakness from being exploited."

Squinting, Matt shook his head. "Now you're not making any sense."

"Am I not?" Semiramis released his hand and grasped his chin. Her expression suddenly shifted to a serious aspect. "Matt Bannister, hear me now. The real reason I am telling you this is because I want Lauren kept alive. Since my motivations are selfish, maybe you will believe me. If Lauren touches Tamiel with skin-to-skin contact, he and she will both die." She let go of his chin. "That is his only weakness, and they both know about it."

Matt studied Semiramis's eyes. She definitely seemed sincere, and the selfish motivation agreed with known facts. Yet, why hadn't Lauren mentioned Tamiel's weakness?

"Okay. Telling me that does help." He began marching in place in the water. With the heat scalding his skin, they had to get moving. "What do we do now?"



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Semiramis turned her head slowly, scanning the lava field. “We have to find shelter where we can talk safely. Another shift in the wind, and we’ll be dead. We’re lucky to be alive as it is.”

“Where do you propose that we go?”

She pointed toward the volcano. “The Valley of Shadows lies well to the left of the mountain. It is encircled by highlands, which should have protected it from lava and flying rocks and perhaps even the poisonous fumes. If this lake is merely an expansion of the river that once flowed into that valley, we could follow the current downstream and find safety. Even if the volcano’s fumes are there, the valley has Keelvar leaves, which provide a natural filter.”

Matt fixed his gaze on her and tried to mimic her sincere expression. It seemed that they hoped to deceive each other, and they both saw through the veils. It would be almost impossible to out-con this con woman, especially while trusting her guidance. Yet, enemy combatants could work together for a while to save themselves, even if they planned to kill each other later.

He nodded. “Lead the way.”

“Very well.” She picked up his shirt from her shoulder. “And thank you for this. You could have suffocated me with it.”

Several sarcastic replies shot through Matt’s mind, but he let them fade. With another nod, he said, “I hope I made the right choice.”

Smiling, she walked parallel to the shore in knee-deep water. “You won’t regret this, Matt. Your trust, as fragile as it is, in spite of all that I have done to you, proves your character as a noble warrior who would never hold a grudge against a defeated enemy, especially when we have a common enemy, the enemy of all souls, the devil himself.”

As Matt walked next to her in the hot water, he pushed aside logs along the way. Her boot-licking praise seemed calculated to



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drip like acid, like a mocking parrot daring him to call her bluff. Still, he couldn't stand around and wait for a deadly cloud to finish him off. Finding this sheltered valley was probably his only option.

Soon, the shoreline bent to the right. The lake narrowed into a wide river, and a logjam between two piles of boulders blocked the flow. Semiramis stopped at the jam. Matt joined her, and both stood in thigh-deep water, hotter than before. On the other side of the jam, a stream of lava trickled down the channel where water once ran, an extension of a wider lava flow on higher ground that originated at the volcano.

"A dead end?" Matt asked.

"Maybe." Semiramis looked at the steaming ground. "Most of the lava went south and west. We were heading east, and now we're turning southward. The river used to flow through this channel, and it spilled into the valley. But the ground is too hot to walk on. We'll have to find another way."

"How far is the valley from here?"

"On foot? An hour, maybe."

Matt smacked his lips. More bitterness. The fumes were returning. "We might be dead in an hour."

"Do you have a suggestion?"

Matt nudged a log with his foot. "Let's clear the jam and follow the river. We could even ride a log and get there faster."

Semiramis shook her head. "Dangerous. Very dangerous."

"No more dangerous than standing out here."

She set the shirt over her mouth. "Agreed. It's getting worse."

Matt handed Semiramis his jacket, climbed over the pile, and looked for a key log, one that would loosen the rest if removed. He walked part way down the opposite side and, balancing near the superheated riverbed, pushed his shoulder against a likely candidate.



FROM THE MOUTH OF ELIJAH

As the log shifted, the entire pile vibrated. Water spilled through widening gaps and into the channel. With a loud sizzle, steam shot up from the contact points—water striking lava, creating an instant boil.

Something metallic glimmered in one of the gaps. Matt reached in and pulled out a spyglass, the kind that expands and collapses like an accordion. He climbed over the pile to the lake side and showed it to Semiramis. “No rust. Someone dropped it recently.”

“I recognize this.” She rubbed a finger along an etching on one side. “This is Hebrew. It says, ‘Enoch.’”

“Enoch?” He stared at the odd lettering. “Do you know someone named Enoch?”

“I do, but this was passed down from him to someone else, likely a victim of Mount Elijah.”

“Maybe the person who made it erupt? Arramos’s conspirator?”

“Not likely. The owner of this spyglass has no such power.” She looked out over the lake. “I wonder if she survived.”

Matt coughed. The choking fumes were getting thicker by the second. “Well, *we* won’t survive if I don’t get these logs unjammed.”

Semiramis took the spyglass. “Be careful.”

“Just find a log cool enough to ride on and get ready.” He climbed over the pile again and studied the key log, still jammed tightly. Could he get it out and escape the rush? Maybe. There was only one way to find out.

He grabbed the log and gave it another hard shove. The pile trembled. A new fountain of water sprang from a gap, then another. More sizzling erupted in the channel, and fresh steam rocketed into the sky. Several logs moved, and the fountains expanded into torrents.



MOUNT ELIJAH

Matt scrambled up the logs, but he slipped on the wet, shifting debris. The pile swelled and groaned. More water spewed. The dam was about to burst.

He leaped and reached for a protruding log, but it swung away. Something grabbed his wrist and pulled. His entire body flew up and over the top of the pile.

“Hang on!” Semiramis shouted.

Matt found himself straddling a log with Semiramis’s arms embracing his waist from behind. The dam burst wide open. Water cascaded into the channel. Like an arrow shot from a bow, Matt and Semiramis catapulted into the river’s wild flow. He grabbed the log with both hands and held his breath. Semiramis’s strong arms nearly crushed his ribs. As they rushed downstream, white vapor shot through huge bubbles on the river’s surface, as if a hundred mouths opened at the same time to belch steam.

The log bounced and rocked. Hot water sloshed and splashed over their bodies, but at least the steamy ride cleared the air. They could breathe easily again.

After a few minutes, the bounces settled, and the water cooled, though vapor continued to rise from the surface, creating thick fog. When Semiramis’s grip relaxed, Matt looked back. She was now wearing his jacket, and the end of the spyglass protruded from a pocket.

He relaxed his muscles. “Thanks for saving me.”

“My pleasure, Matt.” She laid her head on his back. “Perhaps you will soon decide to trust me.”

Matt cringed. This manipulator knew her craft. He couldn’t escape from her embrace, and she knew it.

“Drink water while you can,” she said as she slid the spyglass into his lap. “It’s cool enough to refresh your body. We don’t know when we’ll have another opportunity to hydrate.”



FROM THE MOUTH OF ELIJAH

“Good point.” After pushing one end of the spyglass into his pocket, Matt dipped a cupped hand into the flow and drank, repeating the process several times. Semiramis did the same, glancing at him now and then with a smile. Again, everything seemed calculated, vicious. The look was probably meant to mock rather than to gain favor.

Soon, the current accelerated. Soupy fog flew past their faces, keeping their skin moist and preventing a view beyond the next few yards.

A flapping sound penetrated the veil of mist, like someone shaking a blanket.

“A dragon.” Semiramis said.

“A dragon? How can you tell?”

“Trust me. I have heard enough dragon wings to know.” She swiveled her head this way and that, as if following the flight of an erratic fly. “It might be Arramos.”

“Do you think he saw us?”

“I doubt it, but we should take cover. Be ready to jump to the side.”

Matt tried to stare through the mist to find a place to leap, but it was no use. The cloud was just too thick. “Isn’t the ground still too hot to walk on?”

“Maybe, but this river dives into the valley in a treacherous plunge. I’m not sure which danger is greater.”

Matt looked straight ahead, but the fog blocked that direction as well. “How far of a drop is it?”

“Far enough to worry about. I don’t remember how deep it is where the water falls. If it is deep enough, we might survive.”

Matt let his fingers drag in the water. “Most of the logs went ahead us, and some are still behind us. We might get sandwiched between them and—”



MOUNT ELIJAH

Their log dropped from underneath their legs. They flew into open air, then plunged through the fog. Still hanging on to Matt, Semiramis screamed. Matt flailed his arms, trying to shift into a feet-first entry.

The flapping sound returned. Something sharp dug into Matt's shoulders and yanked upward. Pain ripped down his spine, and Semiramis's weight pulling on his back added to the torture.

He looked up. A huge body hovered overhead, and the tips of dragon wings came into view at each side in a rhythmic beat.

He gulped. *Arramos!*

