



THE DUNGEONS
DEPTHS
OF MADNESS
Erik Scott de Bie



PROLOGUE

When Galandra fell, a spear piercing her throat, Arandon knew they would all die.

His arms had never felt so tired. The warrior swept at the onslaught as ineffectually as a child bats at a swarm of gnats, his axe cutting back and forth as fast as he could swing it. The steel knocked a spear aside, then buried itself in a lizardman's chest. Arandon let go and snatched a pair of handaxes from his belt just in time to trap a hurled spear between them. He twisted and the shaft spun through the air, driving back a dozen of the creatures.

More took their places.

Scores upon scores of the things poured out of openings all around the black chamber. Their crimson eyes gleamed, as did the obsidian that tipped their weapons. Cords of muscle, serrate scale ridges, and clawed wings spoke of a heritage far removed from the human realms. Caustic green foam dripped from their fangs.

Galandra screamed, then gurgled. Arandon looked just in time to see the priestess fall. Her shield dropped to her side, letting half a dozen spears jab into her body, piercing her crimson mail. Quelin leaped to her defense, his hammer smashing back and forth, but it was too late.

Arandon cursed. "Do something, Davoren!"

An arc of flame cut in front of him, searing scales and flesh to cinders. The warlock was helping, he supposed, but it wasn't

enough. The chains of flame had kept them alive thus far, wedging the horde against the walls, but without healing magic. . . .

Arandon felt eyes watching him, but he knew no one was there.

“Lass?” he asked over his shoulder, not sparing the heartbeat it would take to look. A spear hit solidly and shattered on his buckler, numbing his arm.

The reply came in the form of an inhuman screech. Two lizardmen sank to the ground, clutching their throats. Arandon heard a contemptuous scoff meant for him. Despite his desperation, he smiled.

Five paces away, Telketh hacked with his sword, the blows driven home by raw strength. Arandon’s axes skipped and slid off the lizardmen’s slimy hides more often than they bit, but Quelin swung his hammer to good effect, dashing brains across the floor with every swipe.

“Forward!” Telketh shouted. Spears glanced off his shining armor, but he strode on, fearless. Arandon cut faster, courage burning in him.

Quelin smashed yet another lizardman, stepped forward to bat aside a spear that nearly struck Telketh’s shoulder, and stepped back hard on a runic marking. A column of entropic energy flowed up and engulfed half the paladin’s body, which writhed into dozens of forms at once. A heartbeat later, the man’s scream became an agonized whistle, then a whining moan, then a wet gurgle as he fell, a quivering mass of flesh.

Arandon’s heart sank. Now they were four: a sword, an axe, a caster, and a liar.

The scaly fiends were pushing them back toward a wall of black stone. The four fought hard, but without a priest or paladin, they were dead. He felt that invisible gaze again, focusing on him. Was he next?

“What’s watching us?” he shouted as he hacked.

“Impossible,” their captain said, fingering her sapphire amulet.

Then the lizardmen hesitated. Arandon and Telketh cut down two more. The lizardmen fell back, spears ready, and the four didn’t pursue. Davoren let the fires die.

They heard a devil's bemused chuckle.

"What . . . ?" Arandon started.

"It comes," Davoren said wryly.

A great roar ripped through the cavern, and all eyes turned to its source.

The creature that loomed out of the shadows stood twice as tall as even the hulking Telketh. It sprouted limbs of mad distortion—one arm long and gangly, the other thick and clawed, while one leg pulsed with wiry muscle and the other stomped like a boulder. It ran at Twilight, who stared, shocked. The lizardmen fled down dark passages.

"Twilight!" Arandon stumbled. He looked to his bitter rival, standing at her side. "Telketh, aid her!"

Telketh leveled his sword. "Lass!" He shoved her aside, just in time for the huge claws to close around him and snap him into several pieces, giant sword and all.

With an avenging cry, Arandon threw himself at the creature's thicker leg, but his axes shattered against the mottled scales. The beast clubbed Arandon aside with Telketh's ragged torso. His body slammed against the wall like a discarded bone, and everything went red.

He'd lost his limbs; whether they were attached or not, he could not feel them. Blood dribbled down his chin. Spears punctured his body. He thought he saw fire. He heard the screams of the dying and the jeers of the living.

A shadow flickered across his vision. A familiar face looked into his with bright eyes that seemed white in the dimming light. He prayed that his lover, at least, might escape.

"Go," he tried to say. Nothing.

She understood.

Arandon watched the elf vanish into the shadows and rebuked himself. If anyone survived, it would be *her*.

Tymora, I'm coming, he thought.

Then a pair of eyes opened before him in his mind—cold eyes devoid of humanity or passion.

No, a quiet voice said in his head. *No, you aren't.*

Arandon tried to scream.