

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a fantasy landscape. In the foreground, a river flows through a valley. In the distance, there are dark, jagged mountains. A bright, ethereal light source, possibly a moon or a magical well, is visible in the upper left sky, casting a beam of light down towards the river. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and greens.

An
EVERQUEST
NEXT

Novella

The Arch Mage

Part One

A close-up, low-angle shot of a knight's armor, specifically the helmet and shoulder guards. The armor is dark and metallic, with a red plume or banner attached to the helmet. The knight is looking towards the left, and the background is dark and indistinct.

Robert Lassen

The Arch Mage

Part One

An



Novella

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RESCUE



It always surprised Coralen Larkos that something as soul-crushingly stupid as a kobold could feel fear. The emotion that roiled in this particular kobold's eyes, leaving it shuddering with every hissed breath, had long since evolved into stark terror. Coralen chuckled despite their precarious position. Perhaps he was being too harsh. Would he have felt any different were it his throat that Keramore Thex pressed his dagger to?

"Something amusing you, Coralen?" Keramore held his voice to a ragged whisper, but it still seemed to roll down the roof slates into the empty streets below.

Almost empty, Coralen corrected himself.

From one of the half-dozen squares that dotted Bellridge, a peal of high-pitched laughter rang out, fading into a guttural whine before dissipating into the night air like the thin column of smoke that rose with it. Campfires. Keramore's Teir'Dal scouts had reported upwards of a thousand kobolds in the town. Judging by the scattered glowing flames and the number of patrols they'd passed, Coralen believed them. If any one of those patrols had looked up...

"Are you listening?" Keramore glared at him. "Can you start asking questions so we can get this over with?"

"Apologies, My Prince," Coralen said with a sardonic half-bow. Keramore grumbled something under his breath. Coralen ignored the remark and turned his attention to the creature. Flecks of spittle dotted its lizardine maw, glowing in the moonlight while its eyes darted wildly from side to side. The thing shivered, though the night temperatures had hardly dropped from the skin-blistering highs of the day. "Relax, my

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little friend," Coralen said. "You just tell us what we want to know, and we'll let you go. You understand?"

The kobold nodded, eyes flooding with simple gratitude. Coralen almost sighed. *Stupid indeed, to believe so obvious a lie.* "Where is Lady Orprest?"

The gratitude faded. "This one is not knowing," the creature hissed, dropping its voice at Coralen's sharp gesture. "This one is not knowing a lady."

Raising an eyebrow, Coralen looked up at his friend.

The price wore a puzzled frown.

Coralen sighed. "I think he needs a little persuasion, don't you?"

Keramore spat on the rooftop, then squeezed the dagger closer to the kobold's throat. The creature squealed as the edge slipped between scales, drawing a thin line of ichor that seeped onto the blade. A look of disgust crossed Keramore's handsome features. "Can't you just use magic?"

"I thought you ill fond of Compulsion." Coralen tilted back the kobold's jaw and inspected the wound. "Besides, isn't this much more fun?"

"Just make it quick, will you?" Keramore shook his head. "Another patrol could come along any moment."

"Fine," Coralen muttered. "You used to enjoy this sort of thing. You're getting old." He turned back to the kobold. "Female elf. You took her. Where?"

The kobold's eyes widened. "Yes, yes, this one is knowing *her*. In the big rock by the water that flows up." It pointed with one shaking claw toward the central square that broke the expanse of rooftops three hundred yards to the east.

Coralen stroked his chin. "Merchant's Square?"

"There's a spring-fed fountain there," Keramore said. "If the map was right, it sounds like she's in the Tradehall itself."

Nodding, Coralen grabbed the kobold by the jaw and stared into its eyes. "Is she alive?"

"Yes, yes," the kobold rasped eagerly. "Alive. No killing. Orders."

"Probably want to keep her as a bargaining chip,"

Keramore murmured, running his fingertips over his jaw. "They must know we have them surrounded."

"Maybe," Coralen said, "but kobolds don't think so far ahead. That sort of order means a drake." He wiped his hand on his robe. He loathed the feel of dragon scale, even the pitiful scales of the lesser kin. It seemed to cling to his skin, sullyng him with its residue. "Do you want to...?" He made a gesture with his hand.

The kobold looked puzzled. So did Keramore, still holding his blade to the creature's throat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Coralen shrugged, glancing at the cloudless void of the sky. Dawn was still a few hours off, but he wanted to be well clear of the town before the Teir'Dal attacked at first light. Bitter experience had taught him that battles were messy affairs, and best avoided. Legendary Arch Mage or not, his most powerful magic would matter little if he took a random spear or arrow in the back of the neck. "I mean," he said, trying to keep his patience, "do you want to get this done with?" He ran his fingertip across his throat.

From the look on Keramore's face, it took him a moment to realize what Coralen meant. *Oh, Keramore, Coralen thought. Even after years of death and mayhem, you still cling to antiquated notions of honor.*

The kobold made the connection quicker. With the strength of desperation, it wrenched free of Keramore's grasp and exploded forward, slamming into Coralen's hip and spinning him to the hard roof slates. The creature stumbled, and then set off at a sprint toward the nearest campfire, about two hundred yards away.

It made it less than three of those yards before Keramore's dagger took it between the shoulder blades.

Next time, use Fire, a low voice muttered from the back of Coralen's mind. *An Arch Mage should never pass up the chance to practice killing.*

The prince reached down and helped Coralen to his feet. "You said you were going to let it go."

With a low rasping sound, the twitching kobold slid down the

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rooftop, gathering pace before plummeting to the empty street below. Coralen flicked out a wisp of Air to mute its fall. Only the faint hiss of displaced dust betrayed its death to the night.

"There," Coralen said. "We let him go."

"That was one of my favorite daggers," Keramore growled, crouching while his eyes scanned the nearby avenues. Another round of raucous laughter split the night, but nothing approached their position.

"I'll buy you a new one," Coralen told him.

"It was a gift."

"Yes. From me." Coralen flashed the prince his best smile. "I'll get you one just like it. I'll even throw in an extra jewel or two for the hilt."

Keramore rose, his eyes still angry. "You know, someday you and I are going to have a long talk about morality."

"I can't wait," Coralen said. "Royal lectures are always such fun. Besides, what would you have done with him? Asked him nicely not to tell anybody about us?"

Keramore's mouth worked, his eyes showing their outrage while his words struggled to keep up. Then, without warning, he laughed.

Coralen winced at the sound. "Are you trying to get us caught?"

"You're a nasty bastard," Keramore said. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Yes, you do," Coralen said. "Because your father made me Arch Mage, because I've won you a hundred battles, and because I kill dragons better than anyone you know. Including you."

"Last I checked," Keramore said, the smile fading, "our tallies were near even."

"I humbly suggest you count again, My Prince," Coralen said. Keramore could be touchy about such things, he knew, but the fact remained that for all the prince's incredible talents with sword, bow, and his bare hands, he could not begin to wield the destructive power that Coralen did. Not even with all his Teir'Dal behind him. "Shall we go?"

Keramore nodded, taking the lead as they padded across

the slates toward the fire-lit façade of the Merchant's Tradehall. Coralen kept his eyes firmly on the prince's back, only glancing down at his footfall when he needed to. He did not much care for heights. He made a point of hiding his anxiety, but he'd seen the glint in Keramore's eyes when he suggested the two of them go in over the heads of the kobolds. Keramore knew. Even after so many years of friendship, it still amused the prince on occasion to make Coralen's life miserable.

"Let's make a wager," Keramore said without turning. His voice held a sulky edge. "I'll kill more kobolds than you tonight."

Coralen sighed. "You're not serious."

"Deadly serious," Keramore grated. "If you win, you don't have to buy me a new dagger."

"And if you win?"

"You buy me two." The prince stopped and knelt, the tiles ending abruptly beyond his kneecap. A narrow alley, half-blocked with detritus, bisected the rooftops.

"It will be a shame to see you walking around with an empty dagger sheath," Coralen said, trying to force levity into his voice. He swallowed. The gap between the buildings was barely more than four feet, but the drop? That was a lot longer. "Do we go down?"

Keramore grinned. "We go over. You want to jump first?"

"I'll leave that to you. After all, the bards don't sing songs about *my* bravery."

Keramore rose, took two steps back, and with almost no effort burst forward and leapt the gap. He landed lightly on the balls of his feet on the far side. Turning back, he brushed an errant lock of blonde hair from his face. "Your turn, my lord Arch Mage."

Coralen took a deep breath, walked back several paces, and ran forward. He knew the second he jumped that he had sprung too early. For a fraction of a moment panic threatened to overwhelm him. In desperation, he pushed out behind him with a wall of Air. His legs churned the air as the beckoning gloom of the alley threatened to pluck him from the sky.

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Then he was clear, and caught a glimpse of Keramore's amused face as he sailed past the prince and landed with a clatter five yards beyond him.

"Graceful," Keramore murmured. He did not offer to help this time. Instead, he tapped his fingers on his sword hilt until Coralen clambered to his feet and dusted himself off.

They picked their way more carefully now, as the chitter-chatter of kobolds rose from squares on both sides. To Coralen's relief, an unbroken sea of slate linked them to the battered grandeur of the Tradehall. It rose a full story above the other buildings of Bellridge, the expensive stone and exquisite craftwork telling of happier and more prosperous times. Only when they got closer could they see the empty window frames and the dragonfire scorches that blackened whole sections, telling of the fate of Bellridge and its fat, wealthy merchants. Over a year had passed since the Ring of Scale overran this area. The luckier residents had died quickly, killed in the hopeless battle to protect the town, but others had fallen back and made a final stand here.

How many of those fat merchants, cowering in the mocking opulence of their Tradehall, had lived long enough to meet the kobold or drake that ate them?

Keramore stopped and raised his hand. Edging forward, he pointed down into the courtyard below. Silhouetted against the glare of the campfire, several kobolds cavorted drunkenly about the flames and around a small fountain that struggled to pump out a feeble trickle of water. Dozens more slumbered, huddled in blankets on the cobblestones. Coralen resisted the urge to spit down on them. Only cold-blooded draconic scum could feel a chill in the midst of *this* summer.

Sweat ran down the back of his neck. He assured himself it was the heat causing it, nothing more.

"A frontal assault would seem ill advised," Coralen muttered. "If I recall, most merchant guilds liked to have a skylight on the roof. It gave them a spot of sunshine while they were counting their piles of coin."

"I've got bad news for you, then." Keramore squeezed

Coralen's shoulder and slipped back from the edge. "We're going higher."

They inched forward. The broad, comfortable roof gave way to a narrow archway between the square on their left and a wide street on their right, each a dizzying distance below. With feline grace, Keramore scampered across, neither hands nor feet making even a hint of a sound. Coralen forced his eyes to stay open as he crawled forward and straddled the archway. Amazed that the kobolds hadn't noticed his legs shaking in the air above them, he wondered if there would be enough left of him after the fall to make even a light snack for them.

Pathetic, the voice mocked. The greatest mage in the world sneaking around like a common rogue. Burn them. Burn them all!

Coralen's skin itched with the need to obey, except that to do so would mean the death of Lady Orprest if she was guarded.

When the bodies of her retinue had been found in a shallow grave a half-dozen leagues from Bellridge, most assumed her dead. Not Coralen. He knew her too well. As for Keramore, he'd sworn to rescue her or avenge her. A day later, scouts had seen her riding in the midst of a kobold raiding party.

Why she was so far from Myris'Hul in the first place was a question for another time. Should they find her in the Tradehall, Coralen half-expected her to be in a four-poster bed with freshly laundered sheets and a half-dozen kobolds as her personal servants. She could probably charm Ithiosar himself, if the Black ever let any elf live long enough for that.

Taking Keramore's outstretched hand for balance, Coralen shuffled the last few yards to safety. All business now, the prince found a foothold on the wall and climbed effortlessly up to the Tradehall roof. Coralen dabbed at the sweat on his brow and followed, his breath coming in sharp gasps.

Keramore, face cool and brow unsullied, crouched by the moon-bathed panes of the skylight and motioned him forward. He gave a nod and raised a thumb. *So Orprest is in the top room, is she?* That made sense to Coralen. It was the

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most secure place in the town. The room was likely too tall for her to escape, and who would be idiot enough to come over the rooftops to rescue her?

Keramore raised four fingers – a mere four kobolds guarding her. The news took Coralen a little aback. With all the Ring of Scale’s recent defeats at the hands of the Combine, he’d expected them to be a bit more wary. Especially with the Teir’Dal right on their heels. *Stupid creatures*, he reminded himself. At least there were no drakes. They had probably slipped out of the town before it was surrounded, leaving the kobolds to distract their pursuers. Perhaps they’d figured that leaving Orprest alive would prevent the Teir’Dal from hunting them down for vengeance. Or maybe, in their fear, they chose not to delay to finish her. After all, tens of thousands of their kin had already paid the price for underestimating the Teir’Dal.

With practiced grace, Keramore silently lifted the skylight open. The summer moon played on his norite blade as he slipped it free of its scabbard. His other hand drifted down to the sheath at his side, groping at air for a moment before it clenched into a fist. With one last angry glare at Coralen, he dropped feet-first through the skylight.

By the time Coralen scrambled to the edge and looked down, two kobolds lay dead in swiftly spreading pools of dark liquid. Before Coralen could get one leg over the sill, Keramore drove the point of his sword through the chest of the third, spun it free, and opened the neck of the fourth to the vertebrae. None made a sound as they died. None had even drawn a weapon.

Coralen smiled. The prince truly was an efficient killer. “My Prince,” he heard Orprest say as he backed carefully through the skylight, holding his weight on his elbows.

“My lady,” Keramore responded. “My heart leaps to see you safe.” Glancing down, Coralen saw them embrace.

“You are too kind, Keramore,” Lady Orprest D’Ferren said. Her long raven hair obscured her features, cascading down the back of her flowing dark-gray riding dress. “And it has been too long.”

Coralen's arms slipped. With a curse, he lost his grip on the frame of the skylight, seeming to hang in mid-air for a moment before slamming onto the wooden floor. He winced as he tumbled, sharp pain tearing through his knee.

Keramore half-hid a grin with his hand. "You remember Coralen Larkos?"

"Of course," Orprest said, smiling down at him. Her face, though handsome, was a little too angular, too carved from iron to be called pretty. The smile softened her features though, and the moonlight made her beautiful. "My lord Arch Mage. I had not expected to see you here."

"Nor I you, my lady," he said, standing up with difficulty and ignoring Keramore's chuckle. "You're a long way from Myris'Hul."

"A foolish whim," she said, a touch of color appearing on her alabaster cheeks. She looked past Coralen, toward Keramore.

Coralen had heard it said that the Lady Orprest had once been considered a suitable match for the young prince. That was a long time ago. Before the war. Before Keramore had met Neria. And before Lady Orprest headed south to marry Lord D'Ferren of Myris'Hul, becoming mayor of the city after his sudden death a few years later.

"I'd heard so much about how well the war was going," she continued, "that I decided to come and see. I'd hoped, Keramore, that once I caught up with your headquarters, you'd be able to give me a tour of the front line."

"You could have written me, Orprest," Keramore said, padding across to the closed door of the room and listening with one ear against it. "If I'd known of your interest, I'd have sent an escort."

She raised an eyebrow. "If you'd known, I'm assuming that same escort would have taken me home as soon as possible. Am I right?"

"Yes," Keramore said bluntly. "You're a diplomat, Lady Orprest. The Combine needs you now more than ever."

Orprest gave him a coquettish smile that made her seem

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more like a young farm girl than a noted politician. "Does this mean you accept my offer?"

"To host the conference? Yes. And thank you." Keramore frowned. "You would have known I'd accepted, if you had been in Myris'Hul when my messenger arrived. Instead, I learned that you were a captive of kobolds and had to undertake a rescue mission."

She lowered her eyes, the epitome of demure. "Again, my apologies, My Prince." *She's almost convincing, too,* Coralen thought as he watched her shift from foot to foot. *But the prince won't be fooled. He knows her as well as I. Almost.*

"Let us speak no more of it," Keramore said, affection flashing in his eyes. "What's important is you're safe now." He indicated the finely upholstered chair that stood against one wall, a pitcher of water on the table next to it. "I see they made you reasonably comfortable."

Orprest gave a shrug. "As you said, I'm a diplomat. But they're filthy creatures. I did not enjoy the effort it took to convince them to provide basic comforts. I presume your Teir'Dal are securing the city?"

"At dawn," Keramore said. "In the meantime, it's just me and the Arch Mage, here." The prince turned and winked Coralen. "That's five to nothing in my favor."

Coralen's eyes made an ostentatiously slow sweep of the room. "Four, by my tally."

"You're forgetting the one on the roof."

"Doesn't count," Coralen said. "We hadn't yet made the wager. Besides, he fell."

"With my dagger in his back." Keramore brushed his fingers against the empty sheath at his hip and turned to Orprest. "Forgive us. The Arch Mage and I have struck a somewhat childish wager, and it rather looks like I'm going to win. Isn't that right, Coralen?" He glanced back toward the door. "I doubt we'll see another kobold tonight. We'll sit tight and wait for the sun to come up. My Teir'Dal will retrieve us soon after."

Beyond the door, Coralen heard the sudden clatter of claws on wood. "Are you sure about that, My Prince?"

“Damn,” Keramore snarled. He wrenched his sword free and took three quick steps to the entranceway. Waiting until the noise of the approaching kobolds reached a crescendo, he ripped the door open. The lead kobold, surprised, stumbled into the room and collapsed face-first as the prince’s norite blade hacked into the back of his neck. Kicking the corpse aside, Keramore lunged and took the next kobold in the belly.

“Stay here,” Coralen told Orprest, pushing her back. Their eyes met. He saw no fear, just a hint of amusement dancing within. Another kobold dropped twitching to the floor, but three more pressed the prince back, his sword glittering in the moonlight as it parried and thrust.

Four more kobolds crowded through the doorway, turning hungry eyes toward Coralen. He raised his hands.

His first instinct was to call on Fire, but with the dry summer air and the moisture-starved furnishings, he dismissed the thought in an instant. Setting the house ablaze would help little. Instead, he used Ice. Grinning as water from the pitcher and the air coalesced into razor-sharp shards of frozen death, he punched them out toward the onrushing kobolds. With a whistling broken by the familiar sound of wet impact, the frozen needles sliced through kobold scale and flesh. Three died instantly, but there just wasn’t enough moisture in the summer night to finish the job. Instead, the fourth tumbled backwards yowling through the doorway with its claws held over blood-filled eyes. A simple push with Air and it tumbled backwards down the steps, skull bouncing from stone with each step until the sound of its snapping neck echoed up the staircase.

Coralen’s eyes fell onto the empty pitcher, glimmering in the moonlight. On an odd impulse, he touched the back of his own neck. It was bone dry. Starved for water, the spell had taken what it needed to complete the carnage.

With a roar, Keramore finished the last of his opponents. “Eleven to four,” he exulted. “What do you reckon to that, Coralen?” Without waiting for an answer, the prince slammed the door shut and dragged the heavy oak chair over to block

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it. "That should hold them for a few seconds, at least. We're going out through the skylight."

"Across the roofs?" Coralen felt the color drain from his face. His eyes darted for another way out, and settled on the mayor. "There's no way Orprest can make it. Not in that dress."

"It's no more impractical than your robes," she snapped, glaring at him.

Keramore dragged the table into the patch of moonlight beneath the skylight. "Up," he said, motioning sharply. "Before more come."

Climbing out proved harder work than getting in, though less painful on Coralen's knees. As Keramore slammed the skylight shut behind them, the squeal of the chair being forced across the stone floor filled the night until the roar of hundreds of angry kobolds drowned it out.

"Looks like we woke the whole city," Keramore grated. "So be it. I'll kill anything that tries to come through the skylight. Coralen, you watch for any of the bastards sneaking over the roof."

Taking a careful step toward the edge, Coralen peered over and down into the square. The view made his stomach turn, and not just the height. The whole open area seethed with kobolds, yelling and shrieking and fighting each other to be the next to storm into the building. Across the far side, several were scaling the elaborately fluted walls of the opposite building like spiders, aiming to reach the top and attack along the adjoining roofs. One lost its grip on the stone and fell squealing to the square below, its flailing claws dislodging another. Both crumpled on impact. The sound of their shattering bones was lost in the bloodlust of their comrades.

A brief wind flicked at Coralen's ear, accompanied by the buzz of some angry insect. On instinct, he used Air to knock aside a second arrow that would not have missed.

"This doesn't look good," Orprest murmured. Only a hint of a frown betrayed any concern.

It's time, the voice told him.

"It's time," Coralen agreed aloud. He took a deep, contented breath, sucking in the scent of the dead town of Bellridge and the draconic scum who had returned to haunt it once again. The stench of sulfur and bloodlust mingled with the more prosaic aromas of wood and stone. He let time slow, feeling the oppressive heat of this accursed endless summer seep into him, into the magic.

Then he raised one hand, and with a short chopping motion, he brought the Fire.

Liquid flame bubbled from his fingers and flooded into the square below. It joined and bred with the campfires, expanding them into wave after murderous wave of voracious energy that devoured flesh and scale and armor alike. Those kobolds nearest the campfires simply vanished, consumed in an instant. Others, less fortunate, screamed in unspeakable agony as the unquenchable flame stuck to their clothes and scales, or flowed through nostrils or throats to burn its way free from within. Like the tentacles of some monstrous octopod, fingers of flame slithered up the walls of the surrounding buildings and plucked the screaming climbers down to their deaths on the amorphous pyre below.

He was one with the Fire. He *was* the Fire. Ignoring his earlier concerns, Coralen sent thin ropes of flame snaking into the Tradehall itself, hunting down his enemies, feeding on their terror until the Fire reached the top room and feasted on the chair, the dead bodies and the table beneath the terrified huddle of kobolds trying desperately to clamber onto the roof.

With a gasp, Keramore fell back from the heat of the skylight's glass, his jaw hanging open, awe and horror competing in his shocked eyes.

"Impressive," Orprest said, in a whisper for Coralen's ears only. "Once again, you prove yourself worthy of our trust." Coralen looked back at her, and returned the smile he saw on her features by the fading glow of the smoldering corpses of two hundred kobolds.

"Damn it, Coralen," Keramore roared in an outraged voice. "That wasn't fair!"



HOPE



“The town is secure, sir,” the broken-nosed sergeant reported. “Lieutenant Marto’s company is wiping out the last pockets of resistance as we speak. Not one of them made it out of the town.”

“Thanks, Sergeant Streck,” Keramore said, leaning back against the dirt of the hillside. “Is Lady Orprest ready to leave? Are you?”

Streck nodded, a frown creasing his battered features. “I’ll make sure she gets home without any further problems, boss, don’t worry.”

“I won’t,” Keramore said. “That’s why I put you in charge. She’s important to me, Streck, and to us all.” He rubbed at the dark circles under his eyes, a visible reminder of a night spent fighting rather than resting. “Just see her safely to Myris’Hul and hand out leave passes to your escort team. Have a few drinks—you deserve it. The rest of the brigade will be only a few days’ march behind you.”

Streck nodded. “We’ll try to save some ale for you, sir.”

“And well done,” Keramore added. “I’ll promote you to officer once I arrive in the city.”

“Not a chance,” Streck growled.

Coralen smiled. It was an old joke, yet it never grew tired. Promotions had come thick and fast for the Teir’Dal, not least because the mortality rate was so high that new officers were always needed. Coralen did not know a single elf with even half the scars that Streck carried on his muscled frame. Maybe a dozen of the Teir’Dal he’d met on that first, desperate mission to Lucinia still breathed the air of Norrath, and all were now senior officers. Except Streck. He could have been a general,

but he'd refused a dozen times or more until Keramore had given up and let him remain a sergeant. And the constant shadow guarding the prince's back.

Life without ambition, the voice sneered, is not life at all.

Streck's eyes caught Coralen's, and the sergeant's expression darkened. He must have seen the smile. Years of fighting alongside one another, and they still couldn't hold a civil conversation. Coralen had always put it down to the sergeant's jealousy. After all, when you had a mage of Coralen's power to protect the prince, what need of a single warrior, even one as deadly as Streck? Still, an extra sword could always be useful.

Saluting, Streck spun on his heel and picked his way through the sand and rocks, down the low hillside toward the sprawling Combine camp.

Turning his head to look at Coralen, Keramore pointed with one calloused finger. "How's the knee?"

"Perfect," Coralen told him. "I had one of the healers see to it."

Keramore whistled. "You trusted a lesser mage? You're mellowing with age. How is the new Guildhall?"

Coralen shrugged. "The building is complete. There's no shortage of volunteers."

"But a shortage of good ones?"

Dabbing at the dust-streaked sweat on his face, Coralen nodded.

"You know," Keramore said, "you demand impossible standards of them. Not every mage can learn as quickly as you."

"They'd better," Coralen snapped. "If they don't, they die. The dragons aren't going to give them much more time to study."

Keramore slid his sword free of its scabbard and drew a sharpening stone from his pocket. "Then we'll just have to keep winning the old way, won't we?" He began to run the stone along the blade's edge with short, efficient strokes. "You mentioned at least one that you thought had potential. Merion?"

"Yes." Coralen nodded, and let his gaze drift across the tents

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of the camp, watching the banners of half a dozen kingdoms flutter in the breeze, each representing an elite regiment. "Yes, he's good. He reminds me of myself, sometimes."

Keramore snorted. "That's a cruel thing to say."

Coralen didn't reply, although he lost the fight to keep the smile from his face. In a way, Keramore was right. Merion had a joy in his eyes and soul that Coralen had never possessed. The feelings of bitterness and ambition that had driven Coralen to the position of Arch Mage seemed entirely absent in the young mage. But the ability to learn, to master complex magics? The desire to wield ever greater forces, and to seek out the most dangerous opponents and challenges? Merion shared that. And such power, too. It had taken Coralen twenty years of study to perfect some of the techniques that Merion had picked up in less than eighteen months.

He has a great teacher, the voice said. Watch the boy carefully. He could be a great asset...or a dangerous rival.

Perhaps sensing the sudden tension in his friend, Keramore rose to his feet and sheathed his sword. "Let's go down. I want to check on preparations. It's four days' march to Myris'Hul, and we don't want to be late."

Dusting off his robes, Coralen followed. The early morning sun already held a brutal edge, and by noon it would be unbearable. Even the Teir'Dal weren't masochistic enough to march in the full heat of the day. The brigade would set off in the late afternoon and travel well into the night. Four days and nights to Orprest's city and the waiting Guildhall. "I'd like to spend some time with the students when I get back," he told Keramore. "They will be in need of my tutelage."

Keramore shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you'll be with me for at least the first few days. After that, I'll try to grant you some leave. But I need you at the conference."

Coralen felt a sour taste in his mouth, and tried to hide it with a nod.

The prince sighed as he returned the salutes of four passing human soldiers. "We've been through this, Coralen. We need the ogres."

“Do we?” Coralen made a sweeping gesture with his hand, indicating the mass of elite soldiery all around them. “We’re winning without them.”

“We’re holding our own,” Keramore said. “A few victorious battles do not mean the war is won. The Ring of Scale may be weary of the conflict, but that doesn’t mean they won’t renew their efforts in the future. Without the ogres, we don’t have the strength to push north.”

“I know, I know,” Coralen said. “I’ve heard the speech. Liberate northern Amaril, reclaim Faydwer, seek peace.” For all Keramore’s genius as a warrior, Coralen had never understood why he was so blind to the situation. They had slaughtered the Ring of Scale by the thousands. Coralen’s magic and elven norite had done that, not the lesser races. At best, they had soaked up some kobold arrows and dragonfire, but Keramore insisted on seeing them as valued allies. “You already spend more of your time placating our so-called allies than leading our own troops. Besides, what good will I do at the conference? You know I have trouble keeping my opinions guarded.”

“Aye,” Keramore growled with a grim nod, “I know it. But you’ll be on your best behavior this time. Consider it an order.”

“Yes, My Prince,” Coralen muttered, feeling his mood darkening.

They entered one of the shadowed alleys between tents, and a group of halfling scouts parted to let them pass. Keramore gave them a curt nod, then turned back to Coralen. His face softened. “You do understand, don’t you? If you’re not there, everyone will know why. You’re the Arch Mage who never lost a battle.” A grin split his features, and he reached out to clap Coralen on the shoulder. “You tell me so yourself, twenty times a day. Much as I hate to admit it, if the ogres join us, it will be in large part because of your victories.”

It will be all because of your victories, the voice sneered inside Coralen’s head.

“Perhaps, Keramore,” he said. “Though I think my

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reputation would have proved more valuable as a member of the delegation to Odus. Has there been any word from our envoy?"

"Not yet, and I remain doubtful," Keramore said, the amusement fading from his face. "The Erudites have made their feelings plain in the past. I doubt they'll help us now that we're winning, just as they wouldn't provide us refuge when all hope seemed lost. I'm afraid their magic will continue to elude us." A flicker of sadness and doubt passed over Keramore's face. Coralen knew the reason. The prince's own visit to Erudin after the retreat from Faydwer had been one of the greatest failures of his glorious career. The Erudites had feigned compassion, let him beg for their help, then turned him out in the night like a vagrant.

"I might have convinced them to join us," Coralen said. "I can be most persuasive." What a challenge that would be! His mastery of destructive spells against the subtler mental magic of the Erudites. The human sorcerers would soon learn why elves had been known throughout history as the true masters of magic.

"That's all I need," Keramore said, rolling his eyes. "A war between the Erudites and the Combine. The Ring of Scale would be overjoyed. They'd have little left to do but mop up whatever few winning survivors remained."

"Still, if there's even a chance that they retain the secrets of High Magic, my journey would be a risk worth taking. A diplomatic envoy could not assess this truth, but I can." A hint of bitterness crept into Coralen's voice at the thought of a rival who might still possess a weapon denied him by the Ashfall.

"No, Coralen, your talents are needed here. Together we head to Myris'Hul, we meet with the ogres, and then we march on the north, with them by our side."

"You hope," Coralen murmured.

Keramore didn't respond. He just stared with tired blue eyes for a moment, before drawing back the flap of the command tent and slipping inside.

The interior of the large tent would have seemed stifling in any other summer. Compared to being outside in the ravaging sunlight, it felt almost cool. An illusion, Coralen knew. Sweat-soaked officers and sergeants bustled about, carrying maps and handfuls of parchment. Keramore stood still for a few moments, surveying the room before a sergeant noticed his presence and called the tent to attention.

"At ease," Keramore said. "Where's Lieutenant T'Vyl?"

A skinny young officer volunteered to find her and ran from the tent, while a sergeant passed each of the visitors a pewter cup of water. Coralen sipped his, pleasantly surprised to find that it was mostly clean, and lukewarm at worst. With a whisper and a twitch of the finger, he added a touch of Ice to it. Without asking, he did the same for Keramore.

The tent flap swung open again, and the skinny officer returned. Behind him trailed a slender, beautiful elf, even younger than her escort and perhaps six inches taller. Coralen felt his heart catch in his throat, then sink back into a mire of sullen resentment. He preferred not to face a woman who had rejected him, especially one who had laughed in his face. T'Vyl met his eyes for a moment, then looked away with a slight curl of her full lips.

"Lanys," Keramore said, brushing water from his mouth. "Are the Teir'Dal ready to lead us to Myris'Hul?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, her voice throaty yet melodic. "We depart in five hours. You will do us the honor of riding with your warriors in the vanguard?"

"Sadly, no," he said. "I must ride with the Arch Mage and our allied commanders. We have much to discuss."

Coralen saw the brief shadow of dismay that passed over the lieutenant's face. Such a reaction, he wondered. She must truly be ambitious, for his company to mean that much to her. Unless...

"That is unfortunate, My Prince," T'Vyl said softly. "Your soldiers always appreciate your presence."

He sipped his ice-cold water, using the mug to hide his amusement. *Silly girl*, he thought. *She's in love with him*. The

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thought cheered him more than he'd expected. Of course, that would explain why she had rebuffed his own advances. She already had her eyes on the prince. *Her loss*, the voice said. That wasn't why he smiled, though. Coralen had never known anyone so hopelessly devoted to his wife as Keramore. If this Lanys dreamed of prying him away from Neria, she would find only humiliation and broken-hearted pain awaiting her.

"Noted, lieutenant," Keramore said. "I'll try to spend more time with them once the conference is over. That will be all."

T'Vyl saluted quickly and spun on her heel, perhaps hoping to escape the tent before her blushing became obvious to all. If so, she failed. Coralen watched her go with admiring eyes.

"Leave her the uniform, Coralen," Keramore said in a dry voice. "Teir'Dal prefer to fight with their clothes on."

"I don't know what you mean," Coralen said, feigning indifference.

Keramore downed his water and crossed the room to his lightweight desk, Coralen trailing in his wake. "I've told you many times you should take another wife," the prince said, "but one word of advice. Don't look for one within the Teir'Dal. I fear you will find them all too dangerous, even for your tastes."

"Indeed," Coralen said. *The idiot girl can rot*, the voice raged. *And when you truly reach the rank you deserve, you will make her pay*. He shook his head to clear the angry buzzing, and looked down in disgust at the water. Something much stronger seemed appropriate.

"Never mind," Keramore said. "I've got something to cheer you up. We just won a victory, and we rescued Mayor D'Ferren. In a few days' time we will make a triumphant entrance in the city she governs. And I know how much you love crowds cheering your name."



CELEBRATION



The appeal of adoring crowds, Coralen found, soon wore off once they shifted their devotion to another. Not so long ago, cheers for Keramore or any elf other than himself would have annoyed him. Today he would welcome them. Anything would be better than this.

He rested his elbows on the balcony railing, the heat of the sun-baked stone seeping through his robes, and fought the urge to spit on the heads of the fools below.

"They make an impressive sight, even you must admit," Lady Orprest D'Ferren noted, emerging from the shadows of the building. "But then, crowds are always easily impressed." She motioned toward the armored column marching down the center of the street, the rattle of their heavy boots on cobblestones audible even above the adulation of the throng. "How do you suppose they can stand to wear all that steel in this heat?"

"Ogres," Coralen muttered, squinting as the merciless sun flashed off the burnished, yard-wide breastplate of their leader. Even the smallest of their number towered over the welcoming crowd. The warrior at their head was taller still. *Ogres tend to tower over everyone, Coralen mused, except when it comes to intellect.* "The brutes are too stupid to recognize the heat as an enemy. Unless it managed to pick up an axe and challenge them to a melee, that is."

Orprest laughed, the sound a delightful tinkle. "Spoken like a true Koadal. I have missed you, Coralen." She ran a hand through her long black hair, slim fingers brushing against the faint traces of gray at her temples. How was it, Coralen wondered, that not a single trace of sweat glistened

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on her face, while his robes clung to him and each breath drew a fresh draught of cauterizing heat into his lungs? "Come inside," she added. "It was your turn to be cheered yesterday. Let the ogres have their moment of triumph, and the crowd their moment of hope."

Coralen followed her into the room, pausing to let his eyes adjust to the relative darkness and shivering with the sudden drop in temperature. An illusion, he knew. Nowhere was truly cool this summer. Orprest slid gracefully onto one of the comfortable divans, straightening her elegant white dress. She motioned for Coralen to sit opposite her. Two servants stepped forward with large fans. Orprest dismissed them with a swift gesture. Dismay filled Coralen as they withdrew, his dreams of cooler air departing with them.

With the servants gone, Orprest reached out for one of the two glasses from the low table between them. "Will you take wine? It's perfectly chilled. A little trick you taught me yourself, if I recall."

Coralen nodded. "You've come a long way since then, Orprest."

"Mayor of Myris'Hul, you mean?" She shook her head. "It's awfully boring, you know. I spend most of my days trying to massage the egos of a dozen councilors, each with their own ambitions." She took a sip from her goblet. "I wouldn't mind so much if any of them had an ambition worth pursuing, mind you. But they're all so pathetic, it almost brings me to tears."

"I didn't mean mayor," Coralen said. He raised his glass to his lips and sipped, half draining it before he could stop himself. "It's been a long time since I tasted wine this good," he sighed.

"And likely to be longer still until you do again," Orprest said. "The vineyard is long since turned to ash, the grapes gone to line the bellies of kobolds. Tell me, my friend, what news from the front? What little I managed to see of it didn't really tell a story, other than that kobolds are no match for Teir'Dal. Or you. Are we really winning?"

Coralen placed his glass back on the table. "Winning is perhaps too strong a word, but the tide has certainly turned.

Our so-called allies have proved predictably contemptible," he added, pausing as Keramore's words rang anew in his ears, "but the elven divisions are battle-hardened, and Keramore Thex leads with great skill."

"There are those who would put the change in our fortunes down to a certain Arch Mage," Orprest said, taking another sip of wine.

"Perhaps," Coralen said, grinning. "I'm far too modest to suggest that."

The mayor gave a most unladylike snort, and dabbed at her wine-flecked lips. "Modest," she chuckled. "Between you and Keramore, our people have truly found our heroes. One might believe we didn't need the ogres—or the other races, for that matter."

"And yet here they are." Coralen leaned forward. "Why did you offer to host the conference, Orprest? There are many places it could have been held, and Bastion's walls could easily have accommodated the retinues without you having to shelter them in your city."

"I'm surprised at you. Surely you haven't forgotten my summerhouse? The cool mountain air, the first glow of dawn over the lake? You must remember."

"I remember that you said none but Koadal would ever enter," he snapped.

"Manners," she said. Her voice carried the chill of the wine, yet her eyes burned into him. "You may have the ear of young Thex, but don't forget who your true masters are."

He inclined his head. "Please forgive me, my lady."

For a moment, she continued to stare. Coralen swallowed, recalling a dozen secret meetings, remembering what she had ordered done to the aging courtier who had succumbed to doubt and threatened to betray their society to the Thex monarchy. The night watch found the body a week later, but no one recognized it as Lord Castilone. No one recognized it as an elf at all.

"I can't stay cross with you," Orprest giggled. "Let us say the heat dazed you for a moment. Shall we be friends again?"

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"I'll always be your friend, Orprest," Coralen said, drawing a deep breath. He looked at his wine and wished he could have something stronger. Outside, the buzz of the crowd mingled with the footfalls of the ogre horde that sullied the pretty avenues of Myris'Hul with their clumsy tread.

"And besides," she said, her voice descending into ice again, "where better to keep watch on them? If King Thex insists on addressing the vermin, I'd rather know what is said." She turned her head toward the balcony as another roar of approval rose from the crowd. "Listen to them. Do they forget they are elves? They debase themselves, soil the memories and legacies of their forebears. And yet *we* are the ones ostracized? Once we Koadal knew our place, and the places of those beneath us. But since the fall of Takish'Hiz and the rise of the Combine, we few loyalists must remain hidden away like thieves."

She stepped closer to him, her hand reaching out to lay cool fingers on his sun-warmed cheek. "Oh, Coralen," she said, her eyes bright with wonder, "would that I could have brought you before the Emperor's Court. Miragul would have been so fond of you. He'd have made you one of his glorious Keepers, no doubt."

Images of the destiny that might have been tumbled through Coralen's mind. An honored position within the Keepers of the Art. The respect of Emperor Miragul. The adoration of the citizens of Takish'Hiz. And above all else, the power of High Magic at his command. Instead, he was forced to settle for being the greatest mage of his generation—a generation lesser than the one that came before it.

He looked at Orprest and watched as the emotion faded from her eyes. Her fingers strayed to the silver chain at her throat, and then moved again to flick a single errant hair back into place. She raised her glass, her voice fervent and resolute. "But enough of this sulking. Where times have changed, they may yet change again."

She is magnificent, a steel-edged voice in Coralen's head murmured. And she will lead you to greatness. He raised his own glass.

With a knock, a servant entered and curtsayed. "Your carriage is ready, my lady."

Orprest gave the servant a grateful smile and rose to her feet. "Shall we go then, Coralen? I would hate to keep our guests waiting for the opening ceremonies. After all, we've gone to so much trouble to invite them."

Coralen paused to refill his glass from the earthenware jug on the table, and then followed the mayor out of the room and down a wide, winding staircase to the grand entrance. Orprest strode across the hallway, shoes ringing upon the tiles, and Coralen found himself hurrying to keep up. He'd forgotten how tall she was. A surprising detail to forget, given how she used her physical presence as yet another tool to intimidate friend and foe alike.

A flustered footman held open the carriage door for her. Over the servant's shoulder, Coralen caught a glimpse of six horses waiting at the front of the carriage with a patience that the sweat-drenched driver holding their reins clearly lacked. The footman gave a quick bow and retreated as Coralen climbed into the sticky furnace-like interior of the carriage for the journey into the hills.

At a cry from the driver, the carriage lurched forward. Orprest yawned, stretching slim arms above her head. The motion lifted the necklace she wore. The ruby ring at the end of it swung free for the first time, the red of the stone vivid against the white of her dress. The subtle tang of her expensive perfume hung in the air.

"I offered wagons to take the ogres up to the meeting, but they refused," she said, her fingers brushing lightly against the ring in time to the rocking of the carriage. "I suppose after marching all the way from Toskirakk and crossing the strait, a mere hill doesn't bother them. No doubt we'll pass them on the road." As if that thought stirred her into action, she reached out and pulled curtains across both windows. The light inside the carriage dwindled, the sun reduced to a dim glow through the cloth.

Coralen reached into his robes and withdrew a ruby ring

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of his own, slipping it onto his finger. Orprest nodded. "It suits you," she said. "The day will come when we can wear our symbol openly, when we no longer need to conceal who we truly are."

He wiped a fresh flood of sweat from his face. "How long will it take to reach the lake house?"

"Not long. The road is very steep. It's hard on the horses, but much easier on us, and the air will be cooler and healthier before you know it. Speaking of which, how is the king's health?"

"He's old."

She raised an eyebrow. "Old enough that he might die soon?"

"Not soon enough."

"Coralen," she chided, "be kind. He is the king, after all. It is not his fault that age has left him so pitifully weak. What of Erador? Will he make a suitable monarch?"

Coralen grimaced. "Erador?" Just speaking the name sent bile roiling in his stomach. "He'll be good at making treaties," he sneered. "He'll be so good he'll probably surrender all of Rathetyr to bring the ogres into the Combine, and sign Faydwer over to the dwarves and gnomes before we've even retaken it. If only Keramore had been born first I might have some hope for better days." As always, that thought brought mixed emotions. With Keramore's skill on the battlefield and his own magic, they could end this war with true victory, not the wretched compromise that Erador dreamed of where elves stood shoulder to cursed shoulder with creatures unfit to breathe the same air.

But even if it were Keramore on the throne, a Thex would still be giving orders to his Arch Mage.

Aware of his clenched fist, Coralen forced the muscles to relax. "Erador will just bring more of the same."

"Do you honestly think Keramore would make things better?" Orprest pulled her curtain aside and motioned to the stragglers making their way down the cobbled streets beyond the dusty window, the crowds long since fallen silent. "I

didn't see him out there, demanding the ogres leave my city. As I understand it, Keramore has pushed harder than any for the brutes to be included."

Coralen sipped at his wine. If anything, the drink seemed colder now. Orprest had truly come a long way since they had first met, and not just with her use of magic. She was a chameleon, able to charm anyone she wanted, from the sons of kings to the rudest common soldier. She was more beautiful than ever. Her smooth face betrayed almost no sign of her age, and yet he knew the beauty concealed her one true form. Beneath it all, she was as cold-blooded and vicious as any dragon, and more dangerous than most.

"Keramore believes," Coralen began, picking his words with care, "the ogres will add strength on the battlefield. He may be right. They have a certain crude effectiveness and a willingness to die in battle which borders on enthusiasm."

"Well, we would not want to subdue such enthusiasm," Orprest said, her eyes lingering on the city she controlled. She turned back to him with what seemed a physical effort. "And when the fighting has ended? What would he have them do then?"

Coralen glanced away. He knew what she was getting at, but could not hold back the need to defend his friend. "Keramore believes the Combine is the future, both for the war and beyond."

"That's because he is a Thex," she said. "I know you love him, Coralen. Your loyalty is to be admired. But don't forget you owe loyalty to another master."

"I won't forget," he replied, tight-lipped. "But it's the truth. Keramore would make a good king."

"But not a great one." Orprest pulled the curtain closed again. "Don't you think our people deserve a great king? Erador will not be one. Neither will Keramore, even supposing he took the throne."

"Keramore is the best hope we have," Coralen protested.

"Really? Can you think of none beyond the Thex family?"

Cold hit him like a blow. It didn't matter that he knew it

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was only in his mind. Shifting in his seat, he suppressed a shiver. "What are you suggesting?"

She yawned again and looked back at him. Her face showed no embarrassment or defensiveness. Her eyes showed no emotion at all. "I'm not suggesting anything, Coralen. But we both serve a higher cause than the Thex monarchy, and nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of that." She rolled her ring between finger and thumb, looking through the golden band as sunlight glittered from the ruby, turning it a brighter, arterial red. "Not even Prince Keramore."



WELCOME



“My lords and ladies, words cannot express how much you honor me with your presence. Welcome.” Orprest spread her arms wide, a gesture as munificent as the smile on her face. “Welcome to my home.”

You have to hand it to Orprest, Coralen mused as she made her way among the various delegations. He knew how much it pained her to bow her head to an ogre warchief, or to let her fingers rest warmly on the arm or shoulder of a dwarf ambassador. Yet her smile could not have seemed more genuine.

“I know you will all enjoy your stay,” she announced. The turquoise folds of her gown trembled in the cool breeze coming off the lake. “It delights my soul to have you here, and to be able to show you these beautiful mountains, so far from the heat of the valley. Three full companies of my finest soldiers stand guard, and within these walls, no harm can come to any of us. Anything you desire, you need only ask and my servants will see to it.”

Coralen had seen Orprest do this before, charm an entire room and make every one of them feel like they alone were the object of her attention. Every other time they had all been elves, not a jumbled crowd of lesser races.

It made no difference. He could see she entranced them, too. It was magic, but a magic all her own. He could not have done it.

Nor should you have to, the voice grated. *Keramore is a fool to think this will work.*

Coralen ignored the thoughts. That was all they were, he told himself. Part of him worried that with each passing day the voice became stronger, more distinct. But it rarely said anything that did not make sense. Today was no exception.

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He leaned back against the sun-warmed oak paneling of the wall, watching Orprest weave her spell. It had been a clever move by Keramore to let her charm them, while the prince himself paced up and down in the adjoining conference chamber, probably practicing his speech.

The kerran ambassador laughed as Orprest murmured something to him, and Coralen wondered how long it would take her to have the feline creature eating from her hand like a house pet. Ghosting gracefully between bustling servants, she moved on, toasting the ruddy-faced leader of the dwarf delegation. Her crystal wine glass rang like a bell as it met his heavy steel tankard, and he beamed behind his beer-flecked beard. Some shared joke made a gnome titter behind her tiny hand. Even the halfling representatives showed a conspicuous glow in their cheeks when Orprest approached. The gray-haired human commander gave an odd twitch in the knee, as if the old fool planned to drop down and propose marriage to the mayor there and then. It didn't matter whether the target of her charms was a senior diplomat or one of the three or four lesser functionaries each had brought with them.

Only the ogre leader seemed impervious. His armor replaced with a sleeveless leather jerkin that highlighted the colossal girth of his arms, he ignored her as he ignored all others. His eyes remained fixed on the double doors that led to the conference chamber.

Orprest must have sensed it too. She raised her hand, and the room descended into an expectant hush. "Honored guests, I can think of nothing better than to spend the day in your company, letting your warmth banish the shadow of the horrible war that has caused us so much hurt." A murmur of agreement passed through the room, a dozen heads bobbing in unison. "But, alas," she said, with a melodious sigh, "we must attend to our business. If you would, please follow me." Passing her wine glass to a servant, she turned, pausing long enough to give Coralen a smile that made his heart lurch in his chest despite all he knew of her true self. As the crowd parted ahead of her, Orprest strode across the room and flung open the double doors.

Coralen followed at the rear of the group, hanging back as Orprest showed each attendee to their designated seat at the long oak table. Even though he'd seen the seating plan before, it still bothered Coralen that the Thex King had not taken his rightful place at the head of the table, instead bowing to Erador's suggestion that none should be seen as greater than any other. It was as foolish as Erador's insistence that all the chairs be exactly the same, despite the size disparities between the races. The elder prince's constant political meddling infuriated him, and others beside. All knew that the elven king was the true power in the Combine, much as Erador might try to conceal it. Except that was not true, Coralen realized. Keramore was the real power.

And you, the voice said. You are every bit his equal. Keramore knows that, deep down. And if he doesn't, perhaps he shall have to be shown.

Nodding despite himself, Coralen took his position next to Keramore's empty seat. Orprest slipped into the chair on the other side of him, and with that signal, the assembled dignitaries took their seats. Coralen heard creaking wood as the giant kerran opposite him squeezed into place, while next to him the gnome sat with her chin barely higher than the tabletop. Coralen doubted her feet came close to touching the floor.

Not everyone sat. Along the walls on both sides, bodyguards stood in silence. Each delegation had brought their allotted five into Orprest's lakeside manor, though far more soldiers waited in their respective camps around Myris'Hul. It was remarkable, Coralen decided, how despite all their vast differences in height, weight, skin and clothing, every one of the bodyguards could have been carved from the same brutal, cold-eyed stone. Each let his eyes flicker over the room, constantly vigilant. Each remained utterly still, yet poised to spring into action. Each of them, even the ogres, could have been Sergeant Streck. Perhaps especially the ogres.

Only one other remained standing with the bodyguards. With a nod to his father, Keramore stepped to the front of the room.

The long years of battle had not been easy on the prince,

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and yet Coralen still saw in him the same qualities of deadly grace and subtle power that had always burned within. If age and scars had wearied him, it did not show. Perhaps he didn't smile so often, except when he thought of Neria, but then the war had stripped the soft edges from them all. In Keramore's case, they had turned an already dangerous warrior into an almost-perfect killer. Coralen glanced at the line of bodyguards and pitied any of them who ever had cause to draw blade against the prince.

"My Lady Mayor," Keramore began, bowing his head, "I thank you for your hospitality. You have brought us all together at last. Our Combine has achieved much in the short time we have been striving as one, but until we truly represent all free races we shall never be as strong as we can be."

He took a step forward, edging towards the head of the table. "Where once we stood alone on the brink of annihilation, we now stand together. Our peoples have lost much to the draconic hordes. For some," he paused, gazing at the gnome and dwarf delegates, "it was our homes. For others, it was pride and freedom. I..."

His words trailed off. Coralen saw his hand clench tight, and knew he was thinking of the fallen Teir'Dal. The prince felt every loss as if they were his own sons and daughters.

"My people have lost much as well," Keramore continued, his voice strengthening again. "But for the first time in years, I believe the worst is behind us. Across the entire front line, our warriors – kerran, dwarf, halfling, gnome, human – have fought the Ring of Scale to a standstill. In the west, we have begun to advance. Our losses have been terrible but so have theirs, and the enemy no longer has vast numbers to call upon." He stretched out one open hand toward the table, seeming to take in the whole of the room with a single motion.

Coralen felt the familiar urge to stand alongside his friend. He had seen Keramore inspire warriors to acts of suicidal valor or impossible fortitude with no more than a simple word or gesture. In a few moments more, he would have the whole Combine begging him to lead them to victory.

"When the heat of summer begins to fade," Keramore continued, hand closing into a fist, "with the might of Toskirakk alongside us, we may well be strong enough to take the offensive for the first time, and to drive the Ring of Scale out of Amaril. After that, the Seraphs willing, we shall cross the seas to liberate Faydwer. Together, we can achieve so much."

"Under your father's leadership, you mean." The words silenced the room, their sound a bass growl. The ogre leader leaned forward, one long clawed finger pointing at the king's chest. "We have known elf leadership before."

King Arandhon Thex opened his mouth to respond, but then paused, and looked instead to his youngest son. Coralen felt the sour taste of disgust in his mouth. The old liege proved Orprest right yet again with another moment of sickening weakness.

"The Combine is an alliance of equals, Brozka," Keramore said, his voice even.

The ogre laughed. Coralen felt the table shudder. "My people do not live long," Brozka said. "The lure of the warfield is too strong for our souls to resist. But we still remember our history. I remember."

You remember, the voice sneered. Do you remember your rightful place? Mark it well, ogre. The day will come when all shall be restored, and you will know again the value of maintaining your silence in the presence of your betters!

Coralen felt the warning touch of Orprest's hand on his thigh. Taking a breath, he forced the anger from his face. Sometimes these little flashes caught him off guard. Would the day come when the voice would control him, not the other way around? *No*, he assured himself, the voice wasn't real. It was just stress and exhaustion confusing his mind. With most eyes still on the ogre leader, he knew he'd been lucky enough to get away with it this time. A quick glance at the admonishment in Orprest's eyes, though, reminded him of the need to learn more of her skill at concealing feelings.

"Keramore, may I?" Erador rose and took Keramore's

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place. Coralen watched his friend step back, his eyes still on Brozka.

"The Takish Empire is no more," Erador began, his voice soothing. "There is no doubting that the past has been fraught with troubles, between all of our kingdoms. My people have made mistakes, done terrible things, but the past is behind us. We have offered the hand of friendship to all, and the Combine has flourished through our shared purpose. I beg of you, warchief, do not sacrifice your kin's future because of my kin's past."

Pathetic, Coralen thought. *Once again, Erador debases himself before the beasts.* He looked past the simpering half-smile on the elder prince's face. Behind Erador, Keramore stood watching. His gaze swept from elf to ogre. His face might have been carved from the walls of Bastion itself.

Coralen followed the prince's sightline toward the ogre. The creature had the temerity to look back at him, before it turned again to its wordless, thoughtless contemplation of Erador. Aware of the mayor next to him, he drew a deep breath and kept his own face calm. Better to force his contempt down, let it writhe in sickening spirals in his gut, than to draw her disapproval by letting his thoughts show.

"Keramore," the ogre said, drawing the word out, "well I know you. You are strong. You kill dragons well. Tell me, what would *you* do? Ally your tribe with a prince who makes excuses for his own people's legacy? Or a king too weak to speak for himself?"

"You go too far, warchief," Keramore said in a low voice. The mingled line of bodyguards along the chamber wall shifted in uneasy unison. The prince's voice carried an edge as sharp and deadly as any of their blades. "I have ever been your ally, Brozka. From the day I led you from the burning city of Tahrin, through each day I fought beside you on the battle fields of Faydwer. All the way to fulfilling my promise of seeing you to Toskirakk. Do not kill these talks with harsh words before they even begin."

"My lords," Orprest said, rising. "I fear the summer heat

is becoming too much to bear. Perhaps we should take a few moments to rest in the cool air outside?"

None paid her any heed.

"Ally," the ogre muttered. "You show us your weakness, and yet flaunt your contempt."

"There is no contempt," Erador said, hurriedly. "The entire Combine respects your strength."

"Our strength. That is truth. But you do not respect our traditions, our history. Other races may not see your lies, but we do. In the end, you still believe in domination over all." The ogre turned away and stared across the table. "Is that not right, spellflinger?"

For a half-second, the hiss of sharply drawn breath confused Coralen. Three dozen eyes bored into him.

"I..." he began, looking up at Orprest for support. Her eyes burned with cold fury, and he swallowed as he realized it was not meant for the ogre. "I don't know what you mean," he stammered. The words sounded feeble even to his own ears.

"I can assure you," Erador blurted, "the Arch Mage thinks no such thoughts."

"Can no one here speak for themselves?" The ogre warchief smashed a huge fist down on the table. Orprest squeaked in alarm. Several bodyguards reached for their weapons. An ogre bodyguard growled, loosening a huge sword in its sheath, but the warchief raised the same hand, open now, and the creature stopped in its tracks.

"I see it in his eyes," Brozka whispered. "As I saw it in the eyes of the elf who opened the throat of my mentor back in Tahrin."

He's smarter than he looks, the voice murmured, somewhere safe in the back of Coralen's skull. *Hardly difficult.*

"Prince Erador is right, warchief," Coralen said carefully. "There is no contempt. The Combine serves all races. I serve the Combine."

The ogre didn't blink. "For now."

"Brozka," Keramore said. "Coralen speaks the truth. No one in this room is more loyal to the Combine. Without his magic, the war would have been lost long ago."

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"Magic," the warchief growled. "A coward's weapon. What has dal magic done for the world? Enslave it. And now that it is gone, you cannot even protect yourselves." Rising, looming over the table, the ogre looked down at Orprest. "My warriors are tired from the journey. We will rest now. Have your servants bring us wine."

Without waiting for a response from the mayor, Brozka turned and strode from the room, his lieutenants and bodyguards in his wake. Those sitting in his path pulled their chairs closer to the table to give him room. Without effort, the ogre leader shoved the heavy oak doors wide open, and the entire group disappeared from sight before they could swing closed again.

Somehow, the slam of the doors sounded like a bell, tolling for the Combine.

The room exploded into noise. A dozen voices competed to be heard. One of the kerrans snarled a curse at the stubbornness of ogres, and a gnome muttered something about not needing the bullying brutes anyway. The dwarves began to talk among themselves in low voices, the anxiety plain on their bearded faces.

The halfling ambassador slumped back in his chair, his face white with shock. Coralen knew exactly how he felt.

"Orprest," Keramore said, "would you mind showing everyone out to the main room? Maybe arrange some more refreshments. I need to speak with my father and brother."

"Of course, My Prince," Orprest said, with a dainty curtsy and a smile that faded when the action of turning brought her face to face with Coralen. He began to speak, but she shook her head. Walking around him, she gently ushered the assembled dignitaries out, soothing taut nerves with charm and distraction until the doors swung gently closed behind her.

The king and his sons stood at the head of the table. Coralen moved to join them.

"You too, Coralen," Keramore said. He nodded toward the door.

Coralen turned, confused. "What?"

"Keramore," the king said, "don't you think my Arch Mage should be here for this discussion?"

"I think he's done enough damage, father," Keramore said. "This is Thex business now."

"I didn't—" Coralen fell silent at the look in his friend's ice-cold blue eyes. Anger mingled with disappointment, overlaid with accusation.

The king shrugged. "Thank you, Coralen, that will be all."

Coralen bowed, his mind numb. "Your Majesty," he said. "My Princes." None of the three paid him any heed. He spun and walked toward the doors, drawing a sliver of power from his surroundings and forming tendrils of air that he pushed ahead of him. The doors swung open and he strode through, enjoying the exercise of power. Even such a small use of magic filled him with a gentle glow of happiness. He let the spell fade with reluctance. The doors closed with a low click.

The glow flickered, and in its place came vibrant, pulsing rage.

He stormed across the crowded anteroom, shoving his way between two dwarfs and ignoring their angry mutters. Who did these Thexes think they were? They said it themselves. He was loyal. Without his magic, the war would have been lost.

He heard Orprest call his name. He ignored her, ignored everything but the incandescent ball of anger that made the summer heat seem like winter's heart.

He plunged into the corridor leading to the stables. A servant girl gave a terrified cry and leapt back out of his way, spilling the tray of crystal goblets she carried. They shattered over the floor. Coralen only half-noticed the crunch of glass beneath his boots. His magic had saved the precious Thex monarchy a dozen times, and yet they had the temerity to treat him like this? As if it was somehow his fault the stupid thuggish beast had spat on their offer. He expected it of the old fool and his spineless fop of a son. But Keramore was his friend!

Princes don't have friends, the voice said. They have enemies, and they have servants. Which one are you?



STUDIES



Coralen's hopes that the ride would calm his anger faded as soon as the heat oozed its way back into his lungs and skin.

The cobblestones of Myris'Hul clattered beneath the horse's hooves as he entered the city. The cool air of the mountains seemed a distant memory. The animal shuddered with thirst and exertion but did not slacken its pace, perhaps sensing her rider's mood.

A few hardy souls glanced up from the roadside as he cantered past. Their faces showed their surprise at the sweat-soaked figure who chose to go abroad in the mid-afternoon sun. A group of children recognized him and gave a high-pitched cheer for their legendary Arch Mage, their young minds still pliant enough to adore him despite the dust that coated his face and robes. Mostly the streets were empty. The good citizens of Myris'Hul remained in the shade of their whitewashed homes to wait out the punishing heat.

Shade. It sounded so good. Coralen sighed with gratitude as he rode into the darkness beneath the stone archway. He pretended not to notice the flecks of moisture that flew from his fingers as he returned the salute of the two guards. Letting the horse slow to a grateful walk, he passed into the courtyard beyond the arch and let his eyes drink in his surroundings.

It would never rival the magnificence of the Keepers' Tower in Takish'Hiz, just as Myris'Hul could never hope to compete with the beauty of Tahrin. Coralen didn't care. To his eyes, the new Guildhall Arcana was still a place of wonder. Some of that, he knew, was because this Guildhall was his. Orprest had provided the buildings, an old barracks, and Keramore had provided the artists and crafters who had softened its

warlike exterior with fountains and murals. The thumping heart of the new Guildhall, though, was magic itself, and that belonged to Coralen.

While a cluster of dal archers lounged against an ivy-clad wall, a group of students sat in a loose semi-circle on the grass square that dominated the courtyard. They wore light-gray summer tunics as befitted students, their hue stark against the lush green of the grass. That sight alone filled Coralen with gentle pride. Brutal drought had long since destroyed all greenery for miles around Myris'Hul. Even the trees around Orprest's mountain retreat fought a losing battle against a slow, parched death. Here though, the grass radiated health. It reminded Coralen of his childhood, of years spent roaming the forests and plains that surrounded his tiny village, a thousand leagues and sixty years north. He shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the dark thoughts of what little must remain of his home now, and turned his attention to the group.

He recognized the tutor, standing amid the circle in a dark brown tunic with the sunlight glinting off the silver sigil that marked him as a full member of the Guild of Mages. Terriss was a decent mage, and one of the better tutors in the new Guildhall, but Coralen barely paid him a moment's attention. One of the students, a slim boyish figure with tousled hair, had jumped to his feet at the sight of Coralen.

Ignoring the admonishment of his tutor, the youngster ran across the grass and stopped in front of Coralen, bowing. "My lord Arch Mage," he said, grinning. "I thought you gone for the week." He paused. "Isn't this Prince Keramore's horse?"

"He didn't need it today, Merion," Coralen said, dismounting and handing the reins of the panting mare to a page.

Merion raised an eyebrow. "The poor thing looks like she has been ridden hard. I take it the meeting didn't go well?"

"I don't wish to discuss it," Coralen snapped, then instantly regretted his tone. "It has been a trying day. I would prefer to forget the politics of the Combine for a time."

"Well," Merion said, "you've come to the right place." He

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glanced over his shoulder toward the advancing Terriss. "I think I may have fallen into trouble, my lord," he added.

"Arch Mage," Terriss said with a bow. "As always, you honor us with your presence. Merion, I don't recall you asking to be excused."

"Sorry, sir," Merion said with a respectful nod.

"My fault, Terriss," Coralen said, waving the tutor's complaint away, gratified that the mage took the hint. "What are you teaching them today?"

"Basic use of Air for shielding," Terriss said. "I've been having the archers fire an arrow at me, and deflecting it away."

Coralen stifled a curse. Terriss wasn't a poor teacher, but he was cautious. The horizon held more battles, years of bloody war, and the students needed more than simple protective spells if they were to survive. Besides, dragons didn't use arrows. Kobolds did, but if these students reached the standards Coralen demanded, they would treat such things as insects and slaughter them in droves.

Somewhere inside him, the voice chuckled at the memory of Bellridge and the sizzling and popping of burning kobolds.

"Why don't you let me give a demonstration?" Without waiting for an answer, Coralen walked past Terriss and out onto the grass, an amused Merion in his wake. The students rose to attention as he approached, but Coralen motioned them to sit and turned his gaze on the archers. They scrambled to their feet as they realized who he was. "Draw your bows," he told them. "On the count of three, I want you each to fire an arrow at my heart."

Shifting with unease, their eyes flicked in unison to Terriss. "My lord Arch Mage," one stammered, "we have been firing a single arrow at a time. If you fail to turn all four away..."

Coralen's eyes narrowed. "Doubt yourself, Terriss," he said coldly, watching the color drain from the lesser mage's face. "Do not dare to doubt me." Dismissing the teacher with a curt gesture, he winked at Merion. "Count for me, boy. Archers, on three."

"One," Merion said. With a flurry of nervous glances, the

archers raised their bows and notched an arrow each.

"Two." The creak of bowstrings filled the deathly silence of the courtyard, and Coralen drew power, nearly gasping at the joy of it.

"Three."

So simple a thing, Coralen thought, to turn an arrow from its path. So saddening, that the likes of Terriss could only manage one or two at a time. To shatter the arrow in mid-flight was beyond most, but it could afford little satisfaction to an Arch Mage who had fought and killed numberless enemies. Nor would it help keep alive the trainees who watched open-mouthed as the arrows sliced through the dry air toward him. No, they deserved something more spectacular.

Meeting them with tendrils of Air, Coralen plucked the four arrows from their path, turned them mid-flight, and sent them hurtling back towards the archers. With a simultaneous crack, all four slammed into the wall an inch above their firers' heads. The speed of the Air-enhanced impact shattered the wood of the shafts to fragments, leaving only the metal of the tips, driven deep into the stone.

One of the archers gave a shocked curse, the sound lost in a cheer and frantic applause from the students.

"A shield can save you, for a while," Coralen told them, "but battles are won with weapons."

"Very impressive, My Lord," Terriss said, his face pale.

"Can I try?"

"What?" Coralen heard Terriss echo his words as they both turned to Merion.

"Can I try to do what you just did?" Merion motioned towards the archers, two of whom were examining the embedded arrowheads with open mouths.

"No," Terriss said firmly.

Opening his mouth to agree, Coralen paused. For some reason, the thought of Merion trying and failing, of four arrows punching into his thin chest, brought the sour tang of nausea to his throat. Something stopped him from simply dismissing the boy. *He could be a valuable ally. If he is strong enough.*

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Coralen swallowed. He didn't know if that last thought was him, or the voice. "Let him try, Terriss," he croaked.

"Sir," Terriss said, "he is just a student. He is not strong enough."

"If he isn't," Coralen snapped, "then the dragons will kill him. Might as well save time on training him." He turned to Merion. "Are you sure?"

The youngster nodded, already moving backward to the same spot that Coralen had stood on. "Can you count for me, my lord?"

Coralen laughed. In so many ways, Merion mirrored himself in his younger days. There was the same cockiness bordering on arrogance. The same belief in his abilities. But there were also differences. Where he had worn his bitterness with pride and reveled in his outsider status, Merion simply radiated happiness and a desire to help.

Coralen nodded. "One...two..." Merion grinned and pushed his chest out toward the four drawn bows.

Forcing back a final doubt, Coralen drew a deep breath. "Three."

It was over so fast, it took him a moment to realize what had happened. Merion still stood, his eyes glowing. The echo of the thunderclap faded away into the cloudless sky. The four archers lay on the ground. One by one, they rose with reluctance to dust themselves off and stare at the four craters in the wall.

Coralen whistled. Merion had caught the arrows, just as he had, and had turned them back on the archers. This time, though, there was something more. The boy had melded Air with Fire, lighting the arrows and sending them streaking through the air to explode against the stone.

Terriss blinked. "How?"

"I saw the Arch Mage do something similar once," Merion said. "It seemed simple enough."

"Terriss," Coralen said, "give the students a water break, then get back to teaching. Merion, you come with me."

The youngster paled, running to keep up with Coralen as he strode away. "Am I in trouble, my lord?"

"Fetch my horse," Coralen shouted to a groom. "And bring me a drink. I ride in five minutes." He turned back to Merion. "Who taught you that?"

Merion trembled. "You did, my lord. I saw you demonstrate it for the Combine council."

"That was months ago," Coralen said. "And you must have been a hundred yards away. You learned it from that?"

Merion nodded. "I see the workings of magic, sir," he mumbled, staring at his feet and shifting from one to the other. "Learning comes easy to me."

"Relax," Coralen said. "You're not in trouble. Can you teach others?"

"Teach?" The word emerged as a whisper. Merion's eyes grew wide as he slowly nodded his head. "I think so. I help some of the others with their lessons from time to time. They don't always listen." He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. "Most of them think I'm a bit full of myself."

"They'll listen now. Terriss!"

The tutor ran over to join them. "Sir?"

"Merion is going to take over lessons for a while," Coralen said. "Find him a brown tunic and a sigil." Ignoring the mage's reaction, he clapped his hand on Merion's shoulder. "Teach them the most advanced skills you know. Killing techniques. Lightning, Fire, Affliction, Ice. You are familiar with all of those?"

Merion nodded. "All except Affliction."

"We'll leave that for now." Coralen glanced over and saw the groom emerging with his horse and a skin of water. "Work fast. Push them hard. You have four days. By then the conference will be finished. I'll be going back to the war, and you'll be coming with me."

Merion raised an impudent eyebrow. "May I ask what I'll be doing, sir?"

Coralen grabbed the water skin and took a deep swig, pouring the rest over his head. Dusty sweat ran down his neck, the chill of the water delightful against his sun-roasted skin. He swung himself onto the mare's back. "You're going to be my apprentice."

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"Interesting," the youngster murmured. "I've never been an apprentice."

"And I've never had one," Coralen barked. "Pray you don't disappoint me!"

Leaving Merion and the dumbfounded Terriss behind, the Arch Mage galloped from the courtyard, happier than he'd been in years.



Keramore met him at the entrance to the lodge, the dying sun at his back. "So that's what happened to my horse."

"I felt the need for air," Coralen said, dismounting.

"So, it seems, does my horse." Keramore reached out and lovingly stroking the panting mare's snout. "You should not have left so."

Coralen nodded. "As I said, I needed—"

Keramore held up a hand. "And I should not have spoken to you so. I'm sorry."

That took Coralen by surprise. He could have counted on one hand the number of times Keramore had apologized for anything. At the prince's request, he followed him into the east wing of the sprawling stone lodge. Keramore led him into a small candle-lit drawing room, where a jug of cold water sat on a table with three glasses. Two had been used.

"This conference is of great import to me," Keramore said, motioning for Coralen to sit. "I know you don't agree, but we need the ogres, now more than ever."

"Why so?"

Keramore sighed. "Orprest just left. Our envoys have returned from the realm of Odus. The Erudites still refuse to offer us their help. They will not join the Combine, and they will not offer sanctuary to any who fight for it."

Coralen spat a curse. "Humans," he said. "Their usefulness is overrated."

Keramore poured water into the unused glass and pushed

it across the table to Coralen. "Surely even you cannot suggest that their magic is weak?"

"For defense, it is unrivalled," Coralen admitted. "Even at the apex of its power, the Empire would have struggled to subdue them. We were lucky they bent the knee willingly, though I still ponder why. As for weapons of attack, the Erudites are lacking. Only in psionic powers are they almost unrivalled."

Keramore leaned back in his own chair, exhausted. "Almost?"

"I don't believe in false modesty," Coralen said. "War leaves no time for it." He drained his glass in one gulp.

"I witnessed the Keeper of Minds demonstrate his skill once," Keramore told him. "Had you seen what I did, I don't think you'd be so quick to belittle his efficacy."

Coralen bristled. "We'll never know, will we? Alkabor Arad's corpse lies rotting beneath the Ashfang, alongside every other mage supposed to be my better."

"Regardless," Keramore said, "without the Erudites, we need Toskirakk. The ogres don't respect us, and we cannot afford to lose their might too."

"They respect you," Coralen said. "They respect strength. We apologize again and again for the Empire's deeds, but the ogres don't want apologies. They want to hear what we can do for them now."

"You're right, of course," Keramore said, running his hand through blond hair. "But Erador wants a peace built on friendship and unity, not on strength of arms. And my father is too tired of watching his people die to disagree."

"The dragons respect strength too," Coralen murmured, refilling his glass. "And they will never accept an apology for what occurred in Tagnik Vukar, no matter how many times your brother offers it."

They sat in silence. Somewhere beyond the windows, hidden in the mountain defiles, a wolf howled.

Coralen sipped water and looked down at the third, empty glass. Orprest had made her feelings about Erador and the

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king well known. He only wished she didn't feel something of the same for Keramore. "My Prince..." he began.

"We've been friends too long for that," Keramore interrupted. "When you say *My Prince*, I know something is amiss. What troubles you?"

"What would you do if you were king?" Coralen caught himself leaning forward, and draped an elbow over his seat arm, feigning nonchalance.

Keramore rubbed his eyes. "I won't be king, Coralen," he said. "Erador will make a fine monarch once he stops thinking so much and begins to trust himself."

"You are next in line for the throne. Suppose something happens to him?"

"It won't," Keramore said. "Regardless, I wouldn't want to be king. I'm a soldier. That's what I do. If I had to sit through all the ceremonies and meetings my father endures, I'd open a vein. I'd see you on the throne before I took it for myself."

"Such a gracious prince," Coralen said in a dry voice. "To bestow upon me the honor of opening a vein in your stead."

Keramore laughed, and for a moment the long years of war seemed to melt away. Coralen thought back to that first night they had met, in the prince's tent outside Stonepier. How he'd hated him then! That hatred had turned to friendship, then brotherhood. They'd fought side by side a hundred times. They'd both fallen for Neria, and it hadn't hurt their friendship even when she chose to marry Keramore over him. Back then, Keramore was more full of life than anyone Coralen had ever known. Yet somewhere among the hard marching and constant retreats, something had fled the prince. Some spark of enjoyment lost to the blood-drenched soil, the immortality of youth replaced by a burning need to save his people, to save Neria. Even at the cost of himself.

And for this their friendship had suffered. Earlier that day, when Coralen rode away from the meeting, he'd thought their friendship broken forever. Now, sitting there, listening to the wolf and watching the candlelight sparkle in Keramore's blue eyes, Coralen knew it lived still, and would bond them until

the day they died. Which he knew would probably be the same day, making some stupidly noble final stand.

If only Keramore could forget his obsession with the lesser races. But he wouldn't, not until the damned ogres joined the damned Combine.

Coralen leaned forward. Perhaps there was a way to make it happen after all.

"Keramore," he said, "do you recall the terms of Erudin's fealty to the Empire?"

"Hmm?" Keramore's eyes flicked open. He had been dozing in his seat. "Can't we talk about it tomorrow?"

"The Erudites agreed to allow Takish troops to be garrisoned outside the city," Coralen continued ignoring the Prince's request. "And those troops only ever had glowing reports to send home. Miragul discovered that the Erudites practically wrote the reports themselves, and then used their powers to implant the idea into our soldiers' heads. Essentially, they thought the idea was their own, and no amount of questioning could change their minds. In a very real sense, the idea *became* their own."

Keramore yawned. "It's too late for a history lesson, Coralen. I know all this. What's your point?"

Coralen looked into his friend's eyes. When he spoke, he did so with great deliberateness. "Erudite psionic magic is not dissimilar to Compulsion."

Keramore stiffened. "I pray you're not suggesting what I think you are."

"You know how strong I am," Coralen said. Something told him to stop before it was too late. It wasn't the voice. He ignored it. "Compulsion works best on weak minds. Call a meeting with Brozka. Let me talk to him. By the time we're done, he will believe in his soul that joining the Combine has always been his intention, and that he should pledge his loyalty to you. He will do whatever you ask of him."

Keramore sat bolt upright, staring at Coralen while his mouth worked silently. Then, with sudden speed, he stood and hurled his water glass against the wall. "Damn it, Coralen!

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How many times must we go through this? Why can't you see?"

Coralen flinched. "What I see is a chance to join the ogres to our cause, to make the Combine complete. How can this be a bad thing?"

"By using Compulsion, that's how!" Keramore's eyes blazed down at him. "It's a spell that sickens me to my core, that goes against everything I stand for. Would you make tyrants of us once again? This is exactly the reason the other races don't trust us!"

The words reverberated around the small room, and Coralen twisted in his seat, eyes darting with anxiety toward the door. "Keep your voice down," he muttered. Somewhere in this building lay the leaders and ambassadors of half a dozen races, not to mention their deadly bodyguards. If Keramore wanted to destroy the Combine he had created, all he needed to do was keep shouting.

The prince's chest heaved, his cheeks flushed. Coralen had never seen him lose control so completely. "I think you should go now," he said, his face showing the strain of keeping his voice low. "Don't do a thing. Leave the ogres to me."

Coralen rose. "I think you're making a mistake."

"Leave!" Keramore roared.

Bowing, Coralen backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. From beyond the wood, he heard the sound of more splintering glass. Stepping back, he realized his hands trembled. Tiredness crashed over him in a wave, and he turned to stumble to his own bedroom.

And found himself face to face with Orprest. She didn't speak. Her face showed no emotion. She turned and walked away, up the stairs towards her own chambers.

But not before the look in her pale eyes sent a stake of pure fear lancing through Coralen's heart.



HONESTY



This time, Keramore wasted no effort on honeyed words.

"You all know me," he began, standing at the head of the conference table, hands on hips and jaw thrust out as if in challenge. "At first, I fought alone. But that road leads inevitably to defeat. With my Teir'Dal, I became strong – but not as strong as the dragons. I gathered magic to stand by me," he nodded to Coralen, "and together we killed a lot of draconic scum. Yet still we were forced to retreat."

Coralen looked around the room. King Thex and Prince Erador sat together next to Keramore, the father's lined face glowing with pride while the son's pale features showed only anxiety. The kerran ambassador watched with feline eyes that radiated respect. An expression that Coralen saw mirrored on a dozen other faces, for all that their features and hues differed. Only Brozka and his lieutenants seemed indifferent.

"The dwarves joined us first," Keramore continued, "then the gnomes. They put aside their differences and took up a common fight. With them by my side, I killed even more dragons, and the tide began to turn. When humans, halflings, and mighty kerrans threw their weight into the fray, I learned it was possible to match the Ring of Scale blow for blow. We ceased our endless retreat and sent the bastards screaming into Anashti's halls. But we still can't win the war."

He fell silent. Every one of the two dozen seated around the table seemed to be leaning forward. All except Brozka, who returned Keramore's stare with an inscrutable expression.

"Understand this, Brozka," Keramore said in a voice that shuddered with repressed anger. "We may not win the war without you, but your people will *die* without us. The dragons

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will pick on the isolated, the stragglers, the lonely. This is their way. Will your pride and bitterness condemn your people to stand alone, to die alone? Or will you accept the hand of friendship from those who would fight by your side?"

The silence in the room was palpable, the deathly quiet that came with collectively held breath. All eyes fixed on Brozka.

Was that the slightest shift forward in his seat?

"We go to war," Keramore said grimly. "Will you miss out on all that glory?"

The corners of the ogre's mouth twitched in something close to a smile, the lips peeling back to reveal thick, battered teeth. The ogre to Brozka's left, a huge scarred female, leaned in close and whispered something in the warchief's ear. For the first time Coralen could recall, Brozka blinked.

"Keramore," the warchief rumbled, "I have never forgotten fighting alongside you in Tahrin. Neither, it seems, has Akani." He smiled fondly at the ogress, and then looked back at the prince. "It would be good to kill dragons with you again, but I must do what is best for my people. I will think on your offer."

"Don't think too long," Keramore said as the ogre rose to his feet. "Every day we spend talking is another day for the Ring of Scale to gather its strength."

"They will need it," Akani grunted.

Brozka nodded. "You will have your answer by sunset tomorrow."



"Come, Coralen," Orprest said, holding open the door to her carriage. "We will journey back into the city together."

Coralen looked over his shoulder toward the stables, holding up one hand to protect his eyes from the harsh glare of the early afternoon sun. "Thank you, but I told Keramore I would ride with him."

She shook her head almost sadly. "Get in," she said.

With one last glance back, Coralen climbed the steps into the dark interior. Orprest settled back into her seat and banged her pale palm against the wood of the roof. The carriage jolted forward, the hooves of the six horses kicking up clouds of dust that obscured the lodge from view.

"A masterful performance," Orprest said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"They haven't agreed to join yet."

"They will," Orprest said. There was no joy in her voice. "Keramore will complete his precious Combine, and our proud race will take another step on the road to ruin."

Coralen felt sweat running down his spine, and knew it was nothing to do with the heat. "We can yet win the war," he said. "With the ogres alongside us—"

Orprest cut him off. "What good will it do us if we lose the peace?"

"The ogres will not last long," Coralen said. The carriage shook as it passed through a rock-strewn defile, the road here barely deserving the name. Some part of him wanted to open the door and jump out. "They will demand the honor of leading every attack, and they will be slaughtered within ten battles. They will take many dragons with them, though. When the war is won, it will not be too late to take back the power that is rightfully ours."

"Will it not?" Orprest drew the ruby ring from between her breasts, caressing it with a slim finger. "I will not take that risk."

They rode in silence, Orprest staring out the window as the mountain pass began to widen and parched scrublands filled the vista. Watery heat haze cloaked the valley floor, parting just enough to reveal the skeletal bleached outer walls of Myris'Hul. They rippled in the illusory damp of the haze. *A drowned city*, Coralen thought. *Drowned by years of blood.*

"I would have made a formidable queen," Orprest murmured, almost to herself.

"Yes," Coralen said in all honesty. "You would."

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"My family name has as much right to the throne as the Thex. In the wake of the Ashfall, many might even have welcomed such a change. But the army would never have stood for it," she said, without any indication that she had heard him. "They're too blinded by tradition. They cling to their allegiance to the Thex line, for all its failings and defeats." She gazed deep into the heart of the ruby. "Most of all, the army wants a hero. I am not that."

Coralen kept silent. When Orprest was like this, nothing he could say could possibly bring any good. His hopes that his silence would shield him fell apart the instant she looked at him.

"You," she said. "You're a hero."

He bowed his head, confused. "I've done what I can."

"The army worships you. They worship your strength. The Guildhall is yours to the final breath of the last mage." Her eyes bored into him, her mouth slightly parted in anticipation.

And yet he didn't have the slightest clue what she wanted of him.

She smiled. "You would make a great king, Coralen."

He laughed, but the sound died on his lips when he saw her face. "I don't understand. Erador—"

"Prince Erador will soon be dead."

The words left her lips as a murmur, yet seemed to echo from the valley walls.

He opened his mouth to respond. She cut him off. "His father and brother with him." Settling comfortably in her seat, she flicked a lock of hair from her face. "It has been arranged."

Coralen fell back in his own seat, stunned. He saw the calm on her face and thought he must have misheard, except that every word still rang in his ears like shattering glass. His throat felt dry, his chest tight enough to crush his ribs. What was she saying?

You fool, the voice muttered. *Did you truly not see this coming?*

"Oh, Coralen," Orprest giggled. "You look so dour. Don't worry, I won't ask you to become involved. You must keep your hands clean, of course."

"No," he whispered. He knew the voice was right, and yet his mind reeled, desperate for an escape. Biding their time and waiting for their chance was one thing. But killing the king and his sons? "Tell me you're not serious, Orprest." He heard the taint of begging in his words and didn't care. "The army will never stand for it."

"Did you think you were the only Koadal sympathizer in the army?" Mocking amusement laced her words. "My dear Coralen, our strength is measured in the hundreds. Thousands more would join if they could." She leaned forward, the ruby ring swinging in front of her chest as she grabbed his hands. "They will join us once you sit on the throne. Why do you think I insisted on providing my own companies for the security of the conference? The three senior commanders are all Koadal. Tomorrow night, when the foul beasts give their word, so shall I give mine."

Coralen tried to pull away, but her nails dug painfully into his hands. He couldn't pull his eyes from her beautiful face, or the magnificent passion that burned around her like a halo. *This is what we've been working for*, the voice purred.

"On my word," Orprest sang, "the building will be burned to the ground, everyone within it slaughtered except for you and me and a handful of my more loyal servants. We'll blame the dragons, of course. Who else could have done such a thing? Tears will fall down our cheeks, and the army will share our grief, but they will know that a new leader must be chosen. Who else, but the Arch Mage who has never lost a battle? Who else, but King Coralen Larkos?"

Coralen scarcely noticed that the dust of the plain had given way to cobbled streets. He tasted the hot filth of vomit in his throat. And yet his heart thumped with excitement. *King!* Nausea and joy whirled in a vicious melee within his skull. He could not believe this was happening, any of it.

"And perhaps," Orprest said, releasing his hands to place hers on his thighs, "one day I may consent to be your queen. After all, I would hate you to forget where the real power lies." Lifting herself up, she kissed him on the forehead, her

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lips cold and dry against his skin. "Together, we will lead our people back to their true place, and condemn the lesser races to theirs."

The carriage slowed to a halt. It took Coralen a few seconds to see through the shock, and to realize they stood outside the Guildhall of the Mages.

Sliding her hands from him with infinite slowness, Orprest leaned across him and opened the door. "Sleep well, my hero," she murmured. "Tomorrow you take the throne."



MIDNIGHT



The room had once belonged to a general. Now it belonged to an Arch Mage. Tomorrow it would belong to a king.

And there the future king lay, staring at the ceiling.

It was odd, Coralen thought, that he had ordered the ceiling painted and yet could not remember what it represented. The sigil of the Guild stood stark, proud, and obvious in the center. But what of the swirling colors? Magic, perhaps, but right now he saw only a maelstrom of confusion.

Tomorrow, the voice whispered.

This was what he had worked for all these years. An Arch Mage earned respect. A king commanded it. No one would miss Erador or his father. They had neither the energy nor the stomach to win the struggle that lay ahead. Nor to claim the prize that lay at the end of it.

For more than ten years he had been fighting. More than a decade of killing. It had cost him his wife—his sweet, laughing Kallisa—in the early days of the war. He could still see her lying there in the mud. Her dead hand resting on the scales of the smoke-blackened wyvern. Her blood drying on its claws. Her golden hair turned bronze by the puddle that formed around her open throat.

It had cost him his son. Kallor was still alive, at least as far as Coralen knew. But their bond had drained away with his mother's lifeblood. To his surprise, an image of Merion's face flashed before him. He rubbed at his eyes, and let them drift back to blind contemplation of the ceiling.

It had cost him his faith in the dal race. How it had hurt, to watch the slow corruption of his beliefs, of everything *they* believed in! How quickly Keramore had turned his back on

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the glorious heritage of his people, and allied himself to those who were no better than animals!

How many times had Keramore saved his life during that decade?

How many times have you saved his? The voice spat the thought at him. And yet, does he view you as an equal? No. The rules. The business. They will never give you their true respect. You must take it from them.

Coralen rolled from the bed and walked to the window. Pushing aside the curtains, he looked over the sleeping city. The setting of the sun brought scant relief from the stultifying heat, and yet he shivered. *Perhaps, he thought, I am falling sick.*

He watched a night bird flap its laborious way across the front of the low moon, and knew that whatever cold he felt came from deep within.

Orprest was right. He would make a great king. With his mastery of magic bonded to the authority of the throne, he would end this war in a year. The other races would serve a purpose, of course. They would be his sword, swung again and again until the blade shattered, to be cast aside and forgotten. The Teir'Dal would be his royal guard. Like Miragul, he would be monarch and Arch Mage in one. He would remind the people of the glory of their past, fill them with a fervor that would drive them to an even more glorious future. No more retreats. Just victory and dominion.

"He's your best friend," Coralen said, surprising himself with the words. His only friend, he admitted to himself. He picked up a wine bottle from the table and put it to his lips. It was empty, just like the other three. He spat a curse and let the bottle slide from his fingers. It tumbled and shattered on the stone floor.

Orprest was right about something else, too. The army worshipped their Arch Mage. They knew that if Coralen Larkos stood alongside them in battle, victory was assured. Other units might lose elsewhere, and so the retreat continued, but where the silver sigil banner of the Arch Mage flew, the dragons would always fail. They worshipped him for the hope he gave them, hope that they might survive one more day.

They worship you, the voice sneered. But they love Keramore. Even as you fight for him, he casts his spite in your face. When the crown is on your head, then they will love you.

He stumbled away from the window and collapsed onto the bed. The image on the ceiling seemed to stare back at him. The sigil shimmered in the moonlight, the colors whirling with the room itself. The colors represented magic, he was sure of it.

Blue for Ice, red for Fire. He understood that. He understood Affliction, Lightning, Air. Above all, he understood Compulsion.

He understood what he had to do.

Take the throne. Win the war. Resurrect the Empire. A thousand generations would remember his name. He would be the greatest ruler who ever lived. Greater than Valinor. Greater than Miragul.

And all it would take was the death of his only friend.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



British author Robert Lassen created his first fictional dragon at the age of eight. It was the start of a life-long love of writing fiction, and the genesis of an unwavering dream to earn his living as a novelist. Putting it all temporarily on hold in order to serve his country, Lassen joined the Royal Air Force in 2002. Eleven years and two wars later, he blended his military experience with his love of dark fantasy in his debut novel, *Wrathful Skies* - the first in a trilogy set during the dark depths of the Second World War, when the end truly justified the means and no weapon was beyond consideration, no matter how sinister.

Lassen lives in England with his Californian wife and their two children, and loves every minute he spends facing once again the dragons of his youth on behalf of Sony Online Entertainment.

Keep up to date with what he is doing on his office website, www.robertlassen.com.