

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric landscape. In the upper left, a bright, glowing light source, possibly a moon or a magical orb, casts a beam of light across a cloudy sky. Below, a river flows through a valley, reflecting the light. The terrain is hilly and forested. In the foreground, the back of a character wearing ornate, metallic plate armor is visible, looking out over the landscape. The armor is highly detailed, with various plates and rivets.

An
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NEXT

Novella

The Arch Mage

Part Two

Robert Lassen

**The
Arch Mage
Part Two**

An



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Robert Lassen

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MURDER



Pushing open the door, Coralen walked down the steps into the crowded tavern. The wall of noise didn't falter for a second, but a dozen pairs of eyes looked his way. A few showed recognition, of the meaning of the sigil if not the wearer himself. Most just burned with naked hunger at the wealth it might signify. This place was every inch the subterranean dirt hole he had been told to expect.

It was the perfect place to recruit an assassin.

The air hung thick with the mingling of tobacco and exotic herbs. Coils of blue smoke wafted through a weak shaft of light from a single grimy window high on the wall. Coralen edged between two groups of drinkers, suppressing his irritation that the crowd didn't part for him and coughing as one of them breathed pipe smoke into his face. To his right, a halfling girl clad only in smallclothes danced on a tabletop, her body writhing in the glow of wall-mounted torches while a group of dwarf miners howled and clapped their hands. A tall human, a soldier by the look of him, kicked the table and the dancer sprawled to the floor to hoots and cheers from onlookers. One of the dwarves squared up to the man's chest. The soldier looked down on him and laughed.

The glorious Combine of races, the voice mocked. Coralen felt his boots stick to the beer-soaked floor and pressed on. He ignored his disgust at the many to focus on finding the one he sought.

Four elves sat at a table, their playing cards neatly arranged amongst a thicket of empty flagons. Three wore the simple garb of farmers, drinking the day away while their crops choked in the sun-drained dust. The fourth's clothing was

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not all that different, but even out of uniform, Coralen would have recognized that broken-nose anywhere.

"Well, well," Streck said, a slight slurred edge to his words. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Coralen reached out, grabbed an empty chair and dragged it over to the table.

"And he's sitting down," Streck sighed. "Looks like the game's over, fellas." The three farmers looked Coralen up and down with narrowed eyes. "Well, go on then," Streck said, throwing his cards at them. "Begone."

Coralen shifted his seat to let them pass. One spat on the floor as he went by. "What distinguished friends you have," Coralen observed.

"You can go hang yourself too," Streck said. He rooted around for a mug with some beer left in it. Finding one at the third attempt, he took a swig. "One of those bastards just made off with thirty of my coins." The sergeant hefted his brew and drank again. His tired eyes looked Coralen over. "I'm amazed you got in here looking like that."

Coralen raised an eyebrow. "Have I failed to meet the local standards of attire?"

"Standards of attire," Streck muttered, staring at his beer. "With attire like that, the standard around here is for the locals to kill you and split anything of value between them. Including that fancy robe of yours."

Coralen smiled. "Do you honestly believe I couldn't destroy everyone in this room in a heartbeat?"

"I don't doubt it." Streck leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the table, dislodging several of the tankards. "But all that magic of yours won't save you if someone sneaks up and jabs a knife in your spine."

Coralen felt a tingling sensation between his shoulder blades and glanced behind him before he could stop himself. Streck laughed and slapped the table. "What do you want, my lord Arch Mage?"

"I want to talk. Somewhere private."

"Why?" Streck looked around at the loud-mouthed crowd.

“You think anyone here will be able to hear anything you say? Or care enough to try?”

There was sense in that, but this wasn't a normal conversation. Summoning Air, Coralen pushed out a thin bubble around them. “That's better.”

Streck's eyes widened as the cacophony of the bar dwindled to nothing. “Magic has its uses,” he admitted. “I still prefer swords, though. Well, my lord, you've got me alone at last. Mind telling me why you insist on spoiling my first week off in ten years?”

Coralen leaned forward and took a deep breath, grateful that his spell kept the stench of the unwashed throng from polluting his nostrils. He'd made his decision, and though there was little time for subtlety, he needed to remain insulated from a number of perilous truths. “What would you do if I told you Keramore's life was in danger?”

Streck snorted. “When is Keramore's life *not* in danger? Do you have any idea how hard I've had to work to keep him alive all these years?” He took another swig of beer. “The dragon isn't yet born who can take the prince down.”

“Not the dragons,” Coralen said. It infuriated him that he had to turn to Streck, even after long years of fighting alongside him. The sergeant never missed a chance to point out that while Coralen might be Keramore's best friend, the prince chose Streck to watch his back. There was no one else to trust now, though. Coralen looked down at scattered playing cards softening in a pool of brown liquid that might loosely be called beer. Orprest had played her own cards close to her chest. Any soldier in the army, even among the Teir'Dal, could be Koadal, ready to turn on Keramore at her word.

Any soldier but Streck.

“Listen well,” Coralen said, lowering his voice despite the protective Air. “Elements within the army plan to kill Keramore tonight, and his father and brother with him.”

“What?” Streck scoffed, but the sound died on his lips. “What elements?”

“There is a plot to put another on the throne,” Coralen said.

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“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Coralen lied, hoping his face gave nothing away. He felt his pulse quicken. If Streck pushed too hard for an answer, probed too close... steps would need to be taken. The truth would condemn Coralen as sure as it would Orprest, and he had come too far, given up too much, to allow that.

Streck watched him, his eyes unreadable. Finally he belched and staggered to his feet. “Well, either you’re as drunk as me, or you’re not making this up. Either way, you’re holding something back.”

“I’ve told you everything you need to know. Where are you going?”

“To piss. Then to gather my company,” Streck said. “We’ll march up the mountain and put a ring of steel around Keramore. You can tell him about the plot, he’ll have the leaders arrested, I’ll come back here and finish my drink.”

Coralen looked past Streck toward the entrance. Was it just his imagination, or did a lot of people seem to be looking their way? Streck’s three farming friends stared back at him, shifting their weight from foot to foot.

“No good,” he told Streck. “The plot runs too deep. If the truth got out, it would mean civil war.”

Streck spat. “You never make things easy, do you, mage? What would you have me do?”

“Send a runner with orders for your company to march into the hills and take up positions, out of sight. Your role will be to disarm the guards around the lodge. None of them can be trusted, but they won’t attack until they get the word.” It wasn’t his imagination, he realized. Five or six of the onlookers had definitely formed a semi-circle around them, still some distance away, but barring the way to the exit.

“Disarm the guards,” Streck repeated, his back to the threat. “Last I heard there were three companies of them, against my one. That won’t be easy.”

“I thought you Teir’Dal preferred it when the odds were against you,” Coralen sneered.

“Indeed,” Streck said. “I just thought you should know

that some of them might feel a little pain. What about us?"

"We'll take the leaders."

Streck raised his mug, tilting his head to squint at the contents with a look of mild disgust. "Who are their leaders? Who would dare?"

Coralen spared another glance for the crowd. A dozen more had joined the circling pack, whispering amongst their own. Perhaps half were elves, the other a motley mix of other races. He became very conscious of the robes he wore and the value of the silver sigil stitched into them, not to mention the weight of the purse they concealed. On his person hung more wealth than most of these farmers and brigands would see in a year. Their eyes burned with greed and desperation.

Letting the first tentative tendrils of power flow into him, he snapped his attention back to Streck. "Oldryn, Astor, and Herk are the three company commanders. Right now, they're all in the city. We have to ensure they remain that way."

Streck whistled. "I don't believe it. Oldryn was Teir'Dal before he lost his arm. Keramore treated him like a brother."

"Believe it." Coralen let the Air shield fade. It made little difference. The whole room had fallen into an expectant silence.

"I'm not sure what you hope to achieve," Streck said, frowning. "If we arrest them, the news will break and we'll still be looking at civil war."

A stream of drinkers clattered up the stairs, wanting to be gone before the bloodshed began. The rest, the more committed, were all on their feet now. The big human held a broken table leg in his thick grip as he leered at Coralen. The halfling dancer stood by his side with a drawn dagger that seemed far too big for her tiny hand. A dwarf broke a bottle over a table, swinging the lethal edge at waist height. Maybe thirty seconds more and they would find the courage to begin. Time to go.

He looked Streck in the eye. "I never said arrest."

Streck grinned as he put his mug down on the table. "You could at least have found me before I got drunk. Like I said,

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you never make it easy. Speaking of which, do you want to handle the thirty bastards behind me, or shall I?" The sergeant turned, belched again and drew his sword.

"Get them," one of the farmers growled, and the whole crowd lurched forward.

Summoning Air, Coralen recreated the bubble around them. The roars and yells of the crowd faded to nothing. He saw the confusion on Streck's face, and gave the sergeant a wink. Wrapping power around his boot, he stretched his foot outside of the bubble and tapped his toe on the ground. Gently. Once.

He didn't hear the thunderclap. He didn't need to.

In an instant, every glass in the room, every bottle outside the protective bubble, shattered into a thousand vicious fragments. Tables toppled, the crowd with them, the torches blinking out. The shockwave rippled across the room, visible only for the blink of an eye, but it left the detritus of its passing for all to see. Only when he was sure the last echoes had faded did Coralen let the bubble of Air dissipate into the smoke of the ruined bar.

A wall of sound hit him, a tidal wave of agonized moans and sobs.

"I never would've guessed you'd be useful in a tavern brawl," Streck said. He gave an appreciative nod as he raised his mug and downed its contents. Sheathing his sword, he walked across the room, every footfall bringing the crunch of glass. The whole floor glittered in the dim light from the high window. Coralen followed, taking care as he stepped over a dwarf lying in a groaning ball with blood oozing out of his ears into his beard.

One of the farmers got up onto all fours. A fountain of vomit exploded from his mouth, spattering over the trash-strewn floor. Streck kicked him in the gut, and the farmer collapsed face down.

"I'll have this back, then," Streck said, reaching into the farmer's jacket and pulling out a handful of shining coins, before kicking him again for good measure.

Coralen reached the bottom of the stairs. "Shall we go?"

Streck gave a curse, looking at his vomit-coated fingers, and reached down to wipe them on a twitching human's tunic. "I suppose we might as well get this done."

With an elaborate bow and flourish, he motioned from Coralen to the stairs. "Lead on, my lord Arch Mage."



TRUTH



“This used to be a river, you know,” Streck told Coralen, pulling the dagger free with a wet rasping sound. Oldryn sighed as the last breath of life slipped free of him. With a shove, Streck sent the body tumbling thirty feet down to the dry riverbed. The former Teir’Dal’s remaining arm snapped beneath the weight of his corpse with a crack that echoed off the underside of the bridge. “I’ve never known a summer like this,” Streck continued in a conversational tone as he wiped his knife on a soft cloth. He pointed the now clean blade at the body. “That makes three.”

Coralen crinkled his nose as he took the cloth from Streck. He dropped it on the ground and summoned Fire to destroy the evidence.

“Clever,” Streck said. “I still don’t understand why you needed me, not after what you did to Astor.”

“You don’t think anyone would be suspicious if three senior guard officers all burned to death in their beds on the same day?” Coralen scattered the ashes with his foot, and then set off over the bridge back toward Myris’Hul’s main avenue.

Streck hurried to keep up. “You don’t think anyone will be suspicious that two of them got knifed on the same day?”

“People get knifed all the time,” Coralen said. “They probably won’t find Herk for a week.” *They* had found him in an alley, leaving his favorite brothel with a smile on his face. The traitor was still there, crammed into a storm drain with a second smile, lower and bloodier. “The crucial thing is no one will suspect magic, which means they won’t suspect me.”

They walked up a flight of steps worn smooth by generations of Myris’Hul’s citizens and emerged onto the

main market street. Any other year, this whole area would have been crawling with merchants and shoppers scrambling to buy and sell fine dwarven tools or spices smuggled in from Faydwer. It was fortunate, Coralen thought, that the heat drove all but a handful of desperate sellers away, leaving the streets empty for their work.

"Lovely," Streck muttered. "So when the city watch puts this all together, I'll have the gallows to myself."

"No one is going to hang," Coralen told him. "We've made sure of that." After all, there was only one loose end to take care of.

You're a fool, the voice grated. You could have been king. It's not too late.

Coralen shoved the voice back into the dark recesses of his mind and looked over his shoulder at Streck. "Did you arrange horses?"

"Just ahead," Streck said. "If we ride hard, we'll be there before sunset."



Streck's choice in horses didn't disappoint. The animals shuddered and gasped under the pace, but they kept running. The orange ball of the sun still hung in the sky, its mass touching the highest of the peaks.

Coralen knew as soon as he saw the lodge that the meeting had already begun. The Thex banner flew atop the building, the multi-hued flag of the Combine alongside. He noted the two Teir'Dal standing on either side of the main doors and slowed his horse as he approached them. That was a good sign. The Teir'Dal controlled the building, but the lack of blood on the stones meant that no one had died. Yet.

Both warriors saluted as Coralen dismounted. He recognized the younger, a promising recruit with bulging eyes known to his fellows only as Toad. He returned the salute. "What's the situation?"

"Arch Mage. Sergeant," Toad added as Streck caught up.

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"We've disarmed most of the guards and have set sentries on the slopes in case we missed any. They seemed as surprised about our orders as we were, but none put up a fight." He grinned. "Guess they knew better than to mess with Teir'Dal."

"Good work," Coralen said. He turned to the sergeant. "Keep your commandos alert," he told him, ignoring the look on Streck's face at the suggestion that Teir'Dal might be anything other than alert. "I don't want any surprises. And post a dozen warriors to cover all the exits. No one goes in or out until I give the word. You understand?"

"No," Streck said with a shrug. "But it will be as you command."

Throwing open the doors, Coralen walked into the building and across the entrance hall. The servants had already lit candles in anticipation of the coming night. The flicker of their flames brought an image of Astor to his mind, the traitor shrieking as fiery death enveloped him. A simple spell, Coralen thought with a smile, yet so effective.

A Koada'Dal patriot, the voice corrected. And you murdered him. Who is the true traitor?

The smile died on his face as he hurried on.

Two more Teir'Dal stood guard at the entrance to the conference room. Coralen ignored them as he ignored the buzz of conversation from beyond the doors, and hurried on toward the steps that led to Orprest's chambers. Her door was locked. He barely slowed. A deft touch of power, and it swung open.

The main room stood empty. So did her bedchamber, though her familiar perfume hung heavy in the air. That left only the balcony.

Orprest leaned against the stone with her back to him, looking out over the lake, one slim hand raised against the setting sun. The other held a wine glass. As he stepped through the louvered doors onto the balcony, she turned to face him. Her black travelling cloak swung gently in the breeze.

"There you are," she said, lips parting to show brilliant white teeth in a warmer smile than he'd thought her capable of.

She could have been yours, the voice lamented. It all could have been yours.

"You've cut it a bit finer than I might like," Orprest said, taking a step forward. "But at least you're here now." She gestured towards the open space beneath the railing. "It seems a few of Keramore's Teir'Dal have made their way up here. I saw one just now, a loathsome fellow with a broken nose. I don't know when they arrived, but would you please get rid of them for me? We'll need them later, and it would be a shame if they got caught up in what is to come."

Coralen didn't move.

She looked puzzled, the imperious glow in her eyes fading. The sun dropped behind her, silhouetting her slim form, the failing light leaving her face cast in deep shadows. Darkness, he thought. It was always her true home.

Her eyes searched his. He returned her gaze without emotion, watching as her doubts grew and gathered strength. All her proud confidence drained away before him, replaced by despair.

"Coralen," she whispered, color draining from her cheeks. "What have you done?"

"It's over," Coralen said.

"No." She took a step back, pressing herself against the stone so that the glass in her hand rang out in a sharp note. "You can't stop it. One call from me and the massacre will begin."

"There's no one left to hear you."

Orprest closed her hands on the balcony, twisting to look for her guards, her face paling when she saw none. "I would have given you the throne," she murmured, as much to the breeze as to him.

"It wasn't yours to give, Orprest." Somehow, even now, he felt the need to comfort her, despite knowing what he must do. Whatever she might have lost here, her charm still worked. Like a snake, she would lure him in if he wasn't careful. He took a half step forward and froze as she raised one hand, still refusing to look at him.

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"Why?" The word hung in the air and faded to nothing. "You've betrayed everything you stand for."

"No," Coralen said, taking another step forward. "I will still see the elves triumphant. I will still work to ensure our proper glory. Death itself could not stop that." He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he knew he must do.

Stop, the voice pleaded. Don't do this. It's not too late!

"You worm," she sneered. Contempt rang in her words. It puzzled him that they carried no hint of fear. "I would have made you a king, yet you are not worthy to be a thrall." She raised her hand, her fingers curling into talons before relaxing into a dismissive wave. "Coward! How I will relish the look on your face at my trial when I name you for what you truly are." She laughed.

"There isn't going to be a trial," he said, and began to draw power.

For the first time, he saw fear flicker into her eyes. "What—? No!"

"I'm glad you chose to come to your balcony," he said. "I thought I would have to carry you here."

"Coralen, wait..."

"Such a tragedy," he said, reaching down, his hand closing on her wrist. He felt her stiffen as the flows of Air wrapped around her. "At the very moment the Combine welcomed the ogres to their ranks, our dear host chose to take in the view. Perhaps a bit too much wine made her clumsy." He squeezed her wrist. The glass fell onto a cushion of Air, and he placed it gently back on the railing. "I will honor your memory," he whispered into her ear.

She threw back her head and roared with sudden, insane laughter.

Coralen's eyes darted to the door. A single Teir'Dal drawn by the sound could ruin everything. He shoved a gag of Air into her mouth, but her eyes twinkled with mirth. No soldiers appeared to investigate, and he turned his attention back to her. "Something amuses?"

With a popping sound, the gag vanished. He let go of her

in surprise, then frowned. Her powers in magic had never been great, and though it was a simple enough thing to break Air, it irritated him that she had caught him off guard. He drew more power to replace the lost spell.

"You fool," she scoffed. The fear had gone from her eyes. In those dark orbs, he saw only madness. "Did you think I would trust you? Did you think I would tell you everything? I've known for years that you were becoming too close to that mongrel-loving whoreson Thex. You have stopped nothing!" She writhed in the coils of Air, twisting despite them until she faced the lake, its waters bathed by the dying sun into a deep red. "You are not my only ally," she whispered. "Nor even my strongest. *He comes.*"

"Who?" He grabbed her by the shoulders and twisted her to face him. "Who comes, Orprest?"

She drew deep and spat in his face.

Sudden fury bubbled in his gut and throat. He laced his words with Compulsion, piled on Pain. "Who comes?"

"Ithiosar," she screamed.

He let go of her as an icy chill fell over him. Orprest collapsed in a sobbing heap. "Ithiosar," he said, numb. "You've doomed your own people."

Interesting, the voice purred. *A worthy opponent at last.*

Orprest's sobs softened, became a smile. "I have doomed nothing. I have won the war. Ithiosar spoke to me, mind to mind across the voids of time and space. He invited me to meet with him."

Coralen's thoughts whirled, aghast at his own foolishness. "That's why you were in Bellridge. You weren't the kobolds' prisoner. You were their guest."

"I was Ithiosar's guest," she sneered, "until you and that idiot Thex almost ruined it." Her eyes glowed with pride and the madness of limitless ambition. "Ithiosar treated me with the respect the highest of the Koadal truly deserve. Respect you have forgotten. He understood. He made me an offer."

"And you trusted him," Coralen said, amazed at how calm he felt. The voice was right. For all his battles, for all

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his victories and dragon kills, he had never faced Ithiosar the Black. Just a glimpse across the melee on the day Kallisa died. Victory would make him more than just the greatest mage to rise since the loss of High Magic. No. The name of Coralen Larkos would ring in history forever, the greatest mage to step foot on Norrath.

He looked down at the smiling Orprest. "He will betray you."

"Like you?" She drew the chain from between her breasts and kissed the red ruby. "I think not. Ithiosar is content to rule Faydwer. Amaril will be mine. I will pay him tribute, of course. Live tribute, gifts of halflings and humans and all the other filth. And when my people are free of the taint of the lesser races and have grown strong again, it will be *I* who betrays *him*. The Koada'Dal will once again rule every vale and forest of Norrath."

"You are truly insane," Coralen said. Deep in his mind, the voice laughed. *Yes, you are truly insane.*

"You will be my first tribute," she snarled.

Enough, he thought. Drawing in power, he pointed his finger down at her. To throw her from the balcony was not enough. Not now. The mystery of how Orprest vanished would be debated for decades. There would be nothing left for them to find. The power sang its pleasure to his soul, and he saw her eyes widen in terror.

"Coralen!"

Streck burst through the balcony doors, Toad at his heel.

Coralen groaned at the agony of letting the power dissipate. "What?"

"You need to see this," Streck said. "Now."

"Stay with her," Coralen snapped at Toad. "Do not let her leave this balcony until I return. If she calls out for help, strike her till she can't speak." Barging past the stunned Teir'Dal, he followed Streck through the mayor's chambers.

The sergeant bounded down the stairs three at a time before plunging down a corridor. Coralen caught up to him as they emerged from a side door into the twilight. Streck

dropped to one knee, yanking Coralen down next to him. "There!" He pointed toward the mass of rocks rising from the valley floor, clustered around a tall spire of granite that jutted starkly into the evening sky.

"I see nothing," Coralen said. "Except a big rock, and lots of little ones."

"Wait," Streck murmured.

Part of the big rock detached itself and crept across the skyline before disappearing into the shadows.

"A cat?"

Streck gave him a look.

"Damn." Coralen rose to his feet.

"The scouts report dozens of them, and that's not the worst of it. They're on both sides of the valley. It's only a matter of time before they close the road to Myris'Hul, if they haven't already."

Stretching his arms above his head, Coralen heard his knuckles crack. He rolled his head from side to side, feeling the tension in his neck and shoulders. Ignoring the expression on Streck's face, he looked back at the lake and the last rays of the sun. The water still glowed red, but Coralen couldn't tell if it looked more like fire, or blood.

Ithiosar hadn't come alone.

This complicates things.



STAND



The swinging door almost knocked Coralen down. He jumped back out of the way, then sidestepped to block the path of the four emerging ogres.

The female called Akani glared down at him. "Out of the way, little elf."

Ignoring the foulness of her breath on his face, Coralen leaned to look past her. It took one glance at Keramore's crestfallen face to know exactly what had happened.

The ogres had said no. And now they were leaving.

Akani put one hand on Coralen's shoulder. Though she barely squeezed, the power in her grip promised crushed bone and mangled muscle if she willed it. If he let her. Swallowing the bile that rose into his throat at the filth of her touch, Coralen looked straight at the glowering Brozka. "If you leave now," he said, "you'll miss your chance at glory."

The warchief blinked as Coralen slipped free of Akani's grip and pushed between them into the conference hall. "You are betrayed, My King!"

The king stood, confused, his trembling hand snaking out to Erador for support. Keramore stared the length of the table. "What madness is this, Coralen?"

"Traitors have summoned your enemies, Your Majesty," Coralen said, ignoring his friend. "The hills above us crawl with dragonspawn, and Ithiosar himself rides the wind to destroy us."

The room exploded into pandemonium. Bodyguards drew weapons, an elf courtier began to keel hysterically, and a fat dwarf diplomat collapsed in a dead faint, his head bouncing off the table with a thud. Erador blanched, and it seemed his

father held him up as much as the other way around. Even Keramore wore a stunned expression.

Coralen chanced a glance behind him. Brozka stood in the doorway, his face inscrutable as always. One huge hand reached up to stroke his chin. He hadn't left yet. For once, Coralen decided, having the ogres around might be a good thing.

"Tell me everything," Keramore said, but his words drowned in the tumult of forty panicked voices.

You could have been King, the voice said. Now act like one.

"Silence!" The magic Coralen wove into his voice shook the room. All noise dwindled, save for the sound of the terrified elf courtier collapsing to join the unconscious dwarf. "You will all gather your people and make for the doors," Coralen said. "I have eighty Teir'Dal waiting to escort you to safety. Twenty will stay with me to hold off the Ring of Scale, buying you time to escape." He paused, looking around at the dumbstruck faces. "I'll face Ithiosar myself."

"I will stand with you," Keramore said.

"No, you won't." Coralen saw the prince's eyes widen with surprise.

"You forget your place, Coralen," Keramore growled.

"No, My Prince," Coralen said, his voice soft, as if they were alone in the room instead of being watched by terrified eyes, "it is you who forget. Look around you. In this room sit the leaders of the Combine and the hopes for our future. If the dragons overrun us, the Combine dies here. Tonight." *It dies with you*, he didn't need to add. "Your duty is to them and your people, not to this battle."

"I do not belong to your Combine," a voice behind him rumbled. Brozka squeezed his fists tight until they popped. "And my duty is to battle. I stay."

"And I," Akani growled.

"Fine," Coralen said. "You can keep the phyxians off my back."

"I doubt my death would gain the dragons much," the gnome leader said in a high, melodious voice, "but my

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bodyguards are the finest fighters in Norrath." Ignoring Brozka's amused snort, she bowed to Keramore. "They will stand with your mage. I place my safety in the hands of your Teir'Dal."

One by one, the other leaders voiced their agreement. The bodyguards smiled. An armored kerran with a huge scimitar slung behind his back clapped a dwarf warrior on the shoulder, almost knocking him over. The dwarf grinned back, and shook hands with the halfling next to him.

Coralen watched the play of struggling emotions on Keramore's face, the way the prince's eyes darted to his father while his hand rested on his sword. "Don't worry, My Prince," Coralen told him. "They are bound to try to stop you on the road. You will have your fight."

Keramore nodded. "Very well," he said, the words wrenched from his lips. "But if we set out now, Ithiosar can avoid you and catch us on the open hillside."

"So you wait," Coralen told him. "Ithiosar comes. When he arrives, I will distract him. By the time he realizes you're gone, it will be too late." He felt a surge of impatience. He knew now that every fight, from the smallest skirmish to clashing battlefronts that sprawled further than the eye could see, had all been to prepare him for this. Six dragons. Hundreds of drakes and phyxians. Thousands of wyverns, and tens of thousands of kobolds. All to get him ready for this. "The black beast will know who is the hunted when I burn his eyes out and leave him to die with my name on his lips."

Keramore shrugged. "It's a good plan," he said. "I'll brief my Teir'Dal, and get everyone formed up ready to move." He walked toward the door where Brozka stood, hefting a ridiculously oversized axe. "It's not too late, Brozka," Keramore told him.

The ogre said nothing. The axe shaft bounced into his palm with a meaty thud.

Keramore turned. "Oh, and Coralen?"

"Yes, My Prince?"

"We'll discuss your insubordination later."

Coralen nodded grimly. "May we both live so long, My Prince."

Keramore winked and ghosted from the room, bellowing orders to his warriors, leaving Coralen standing in the midst of a dozen terrified diplomats and two dozen jubilant bodyguards.

Akani approached him, an odd expression on her face. "You speak well, little elf," she said. "This is the best time. Building the appetite."

"I'm not sure," Coralen said, looking around him at the happy faces. "Everyone seems in an awful hurry to die."

"But first we kill," Akani said, licking her lips.

First we kill, the voice agreed, pleasure dripping from every word.

"Let's go," Coralen said.

Leaving the politicians to gather in the entrance hall with their newly briefed Teir'Dal escorts, Coralen led the ragtag band of warriors out into the night. The air still pulsed with heat, though the last light of the sun had vanished. Somewhere upstairs, Orprest remained under guard. He wondered what was going through her mind now, as the sounds of imminent battle rattled through her precious lake house. He pushed the thought aside. Once the battle ended and the prying eyes of the leaders had vanished, he would take care of her. No one would know a thing. Poor Orprest, another casualty of the war.

Streck, still in his bar clothes, met him with a group of his black-clad Teir'Dal behind him. He scratched at his broken-nose. "Sounds like you've found us a proper fight."

"I'm afraid so. Did you have any problems getting twenty volunteers?"

Streck coughed. "Are you joking? I had a hard time ordering eighty to leave."

They live for this, Coralen realized. The Teir'Dal were insane to the last elf. Death was the only cure for that. How many would receive that treatment tonight? "Alright," he said, squatting on the rocky ground, "gather round."

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He saw a few questioning looks passing between the Teir'Dal and the others, but from their faces he could tell not one of them wanted to be anywhere else. "You all know the plan," he said. "We lay low until Ithiosar arrives. When he does, your job is to keep those draconic bastards off me. If you give me the time, I will take care of Ithiosar. Leave him to me, understand?" They nodded. He pointed a finger at Brozka. "That includes you, warchief. The dragon is mine."

"Whatever you say, spellflinger," Brozka chuckled. Behind him, Akani and her two fellow ogres frowned, but stayed quiet.

Coralen took a calming breath. "Remember, we are not here to win medals, although," he added, "I'm sure we will." A few grinned at that. Most seemed just impatient to get to the fight. "If we do our duty, Prince Keramore will lead the others to safety. Don't squander your lives foolishly. Once the fight is on, be loud. We're here to distract, not to win."

Akani growled with displeasure, until a look from Brozka silenced her.

"Every minute we hold," Coralen told them, "is another minute for our leaders to get away. We're buying time for the Combine, and for our future." He didn't even believe in the Combine, and yet that didn't matter. Right now, with bloodlust and the urgent need to feel power coursing through him, he would have fought for any cause. What was keeping Ithiosar? "Does everyone understand?"

"Time," Streck said, nodding.

"Time," a dozen voices echoed.

He looked at their faces, and for a moment wished he had Keramore's gift for rhetoric. Keramore would have told the warriors how proud he was of each and every one of them—and he would have meant it. Their chests would swell with love and pride, and they would go gladly to the fight, dying with a song in their hearts.

But he was Coralen Larkos, and they would follow him for a different reason. "I am the Arch Mage who has never lost a battle." He let his gaze pass over the gathering. "And I do not expect to break my streak today."

He realized he was smiling, and every face among them returned his grin. Maybe he couldn't make them proud, but what did it matter? He had enough pride for them all, and he didn't want their love. *You will lead them to slaughter and let them drink their fill*, the voice cackled. *What finer fate could they ask for?*

He rose to his feet. "Time to go."



TIME



Waiting was, Coralen knew from the memory of too many long nights, more trying than the battle itself.

Left unchecked, without the release of combat, stress built up in the body. The obvious sensations of dry throats and full bladders could soon give way to a more subtle, deadly affliction. He'd seen good warriors shaking like leaves. Elves who had fought a score of battles with honor refuse to advance, their eyes staring into the infinite distance yet never seeing past the struggle within their own souls. He imagined it must be even worse for the lesser races, lacking the stouthearted courage of pure elven stock, though Coralen had never sought them out to ask.

He doubted any of the volunteers here tonight, though, would let their vigil in the darkness overwhelm them. If anything, their problem would be impatience, perhaps leading to a fatal slip. Seldom had he seen so much deadly intent, so much mad-eyed malice.

Coralen's keen elven eyes picked out the occasional silhouette of a Combine warrior among the trees. Thirty paces to his left, pressed so close to a tree trunk that he'd almost become part of it, a halfling gazed without blinking down the sights of his crossbow. Across the open ground that stretched before the huge lightless windows below the house's balcony, a leather-clad gnome caressed the blade of his dagger with short, agile fingers. The faint rasp of the gnome's breathing was almost the only sound, save for the occasional rattle of claw on stone. A chill ran up Coralen's spine at the reminder that the draconic creatures infested both sides of the valley.

Far away, toward the end of the lake, he saw a large shadow

descend into the valley. He smiled. The waiting was torture, but Ithiosar the Black at least had the common courtesy not to keep them waiting too long.

Keeping low over the water, the creature approached with a speed that belied its size. The thing moved more like a wyvern than a dragon, agile and lightning quick. Coralen caught himself before he could give a nod of approval. *Be careful*, he admonished himself. *Don't take him lightly. Ithiosar has killed a dozen of your best mages. You have never faced a dragon quite like him.*

He flexed his fingers, relishing the expectant tingle of magic aching to be freed.

But he has never faced a mage like Coralen Larkos.

With a sudden upwards swerve, the creature slowed to a hover just short of the shore, fifty yards from the balcony. The rhythmic beating of his vast wings churned the shallow water to froth.

Kneeling next to Coralen, obscured in the shadowed undergrowth of the slope above the house, Streck stirred, the movement barely perceptible. "Why doesn't he attack?" The Teir'Dal's mouth didn't move at all.

Coralen remained silent. It disturbed him that the unflappable Streck had spoken at all. Looking at Ithiosar, though, he understood. The beast radiated power—and the promise of bloody death. If his black armored hide showed the slightest nick or scar from a decade of warfare, the darkness hid it. Like Coralen, Ithiosar had never been defeated. *That, at least, will change tonight.*

But for whom? The voice was almost a purr.

The slow beating of wings continued, the dragon maintaining his hover above the water's edge. What was Ithiosar waiting for?

Keeping his eyes on the dragon, Coralen made a gesture.

Don't do it, the voice warned. *If this deception works, the dragon will leave – before you can kill him. Do not deprive yourself of glory.*

He ignored the thought. Others would probably have

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agreed with the voice, especially the ogres, but Coralen knew he owed it to his friend to try. He could kill Ithiosar and still lose Keramore to the fighting. It was a long shot, but if this plan worked, they would all live to fight another day.

The tendrils of his mind reached out and found their target.

With a graceful motion, Orprest pushed open the doors and walked out onto the balcony. Only her eyes betrayed Compulsion. "Great Ithiosar," she said, bowing.

"Where is he?" The dragon's voice, deeper than thunder, sent shuddering echoes from the hillsides. "You promised me Thex."

"You shall have him," Orprest said. Coralen held his breath, willing Toad to stay out of sight in the building behind her. He could feel her fighting the Compulsion, but she had no chance. If she survived the night, he relished the thought of seeing just how much damage her resistance to the spell had inflicted on her mind. "I regret, though," Orprest continued, her voice betraying no hint of her inner struggle, "that the prince and the others returned to the city early."

"Is that so?" Ithiosar's own voice was as flat as the lake, and as deep.

"I tried to delay them," Orprest said, her hands open in supplication, "but with the failure of their talks with the ogres, they saw no reason to remain. They plan to return tomorrow night, though. Our plan can still work."

"My minions will confirm your story," Ithiosar said, turning his huge head from left to right. With a chorus of raucous shrieks, a dozen wyverns took to the air from the ridgelines above.

"They're coming," Streck whispered, his knuckles whitening on his sword hilt. Coralen stifled a curse, and turned back to Orprest.

"That is not necessary, my lord," Orprest stammered, sweat pouring down her cheeks now. "If we meet again tomorrow night, I will—"

"Do you think me foolish enough to believe a dal?" Ithiosar asked. His thick, dry lips pulled back to free axe-blade teeth

born for butchery. "Let me show you the perils of trusting your enemy."

With a sharp spike of pain, Coralen's psychic link with Orprest tore free of his grasp the instant the acid engulfed her. He dismissed the pain and the brief pang of regret before her agonized shrieks had faded from his ears. Rising, he drew on the power and sent twin bolts of Lightning ripping through the hot night air toward the creature's chest. Eyes still on the carnage he had brought to the balcony, Ithiosar could not possibly react.

Yet somehow those massive eyes flickered toward the onrushing light, and the creature hurled its bulk to one side. The Lightning flashed by, punching a smoking half-moon through the top edge of his right wing.

Ithiosar stared in outrage for a moment, then turned to face Coralen. "I knew I smelt power. The witch had a little, but you... Your fate shall be the same as hers." A dark crimson tongue snaked out from Ithiosar's maw and flicked the air. "But I shall savor it so much more."

Taking a deep breath and averting his eyes from the corrosion of carrion on the balcony, Coralen picked his way down the slope. Streck followed, looking back in wary vigilance toward the circling wyverns.

"Just two?" Ithiosar sounded amused.

Coralen shrugged. "One would be enough for the likes of you, Ithiosar."

"You've heard of me," the dragon purred. "How nice. And you must be the legendary Coralen Larkos."

The sudden surge of pride shocked Coralen. Somewhere deep inside him the voice preened. Sliding down the last of the loose stone, ready to raise a shield of Air at any moment, he crossed the open ground until he faced the dragon. Every muscle in his body trembled with the effort of holding the power he had drawn. He pointed a finger at the wyverns and the growing number of dark shapes edging their way down the hillside. "Do you plan to challenge me yourself? Or are you going to let your whelps gain all the glory?"

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Ithiosar smiled, if the twisted expression could be called that. "Close combat is a luxury," he said. "Do you see any marks on me?"

"Just that nice new one on your wing."

"Indeed," the dragon growled, the smile winking into nothing. "And I owe you a debt for that. It would give me some satisfaction to repay you myself." For an instant, the beating wings seemed to go still, so that the dragon hung motionless in the air. The smile returned. "But why lower myself to so menial a task?"

The valley filled with the roar of the deadliest dragon known to elfkind. Hundreds of draconic throats answered it.

Coralen wove power through his vocal cords. "Now!"

Like shadows come to life, the Combine forces rose from the rocks and undergrowth at his thunderous command. Coralen caught a glimpse of a halfling sending a norite-tipped bolt scything through a wyvern's ribcage, and a kerran opening a drake from snout to groin with a single backhand slash. Then Coralen met Ithiosar's eyes.

"Come and die, mage," the beast roared.

Coralen dashed forward, hurling Fire. Wings beating with frantic strength, Ithiosar lunged upwards, the flames dissipating in his wake. Rolling over, belly to the sky, the beast plunged back down. Coralen dove to the side, Air flashing out to turn Ithiosar's acid breath aside, and landed heavily upon the gravel. A hasty bolt of Lightning sent Ithiosar shearing away, hissing as thin tendrils of smoke rose from scales scorched by a glancing blow.

Scrabbling to his feet, Coralen saw a flicker of movement as a drake lunged, only to collapse writhing on the rocks as Streck disemboweled it. The Teir'Dal grabbed Coralen's arm to steady him. "You alright?"

Coralen nodded. Across the open ground, he saw Akani's axe meet a phyxian on the upswing, the draconic creature flung backward through the air with its skull crushed to unrecognizable paste. A Teir'Dal killed two drakes in as many seconds, then collapsed beneath a geyser of blood as a third

ripped his head from his shoulders. A wyvern swooped down to attack a gnome, only to crash in a whirl of useless flapping as the gnome straddled its neck and drove her bone-hilted dagger into its eye socket.

Where is Ithiosar?

Three phyxians padded across the open ground, spreading out to encircle Coralen and Streck. The sergeant met the lunge of the first with his sword, driving the blade to its hilt in the creature's neck. Coralen destroyed the second with a concentrated blast of Fire, then hurriedly switched to Air as he felt a sudden downdraft plaster his hair to his neck. Eyes on the wingspan above him, he only half-saw the third phyxian lunge at Streck and take him to the ground, the sergeant's hand flailing for the hilt of the sword still lodged in the first phyxian's throat.

Snarling, the phyxian sought to fix its jaws on Streck's throat, but they clamped instead on the Teir'Dal's forearm. With a yell that was half-pain, half-anger, the sergeant draw a long dagger from a sheath at his side. A rapid series of loud pops echoed through the darkness as the blade plunged again and again between the creature's ribs.

The shadow above wasn't Ithiosar, just another circling wyvern. Biting down his disappointment, Coralen obliterated the thing at the same moment that the phyxian fell silent with a convulsive shudder, its dead weight straddling Streck.

The sergeant's muffled voice emerged from beneath the carcass. "Seems I could use a hand."

Turning his attention to the sergeant, Coralen rolled the blood-drenched meat aside with an Air-enhanced shove and helped Streck up. The Teir'Dal's left arm hung mangled, blood dripping onto the rock. A slight tightening of the jaw was the only sign that Streck felt any pain. "What now, Arch Mage? You killed Ithiosar yet?"

"Give me time," Coralen snapped. He looked down the length of the lake to where something wheeled and hovered. The night rang with the clatter of metal on scale and the bellows of rage and agony. "The thing knows it has to face me sooner or later."

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Streck grimaced. "Can we make it sooner?"

Coralen used Lightning to fry a drake skulking down the hillside. "Come on," he told Streck. "You need healing."

"I'm fine," the sergeant protested, but didn't resist as Coralen helped him across the open ground to the wall beneath the shadow of the balcony. "I need another sword," Streck grumbled. "That phyxian ate mine."

Coralen looked out across the battlefield. He counted at least forty draconic creatures huddled on the ground, unmoving. He didn't try to count the Combine dead. "There are plenty of swords out there waiting," he said, feeling more regret than he'd expected.

Streck sighed. Moisture hung in the corners of his eyes. "Think we've done enough?"

Coralen watched Ithiosar hovering out of range. At this distance he couldn't tell, but somehow he was sure the dragon was staring right back at him. "Keramore knew to set out down the valley as soon as the distraction began. I'm sure he had to kill one or two of the bastards, but Ithiosar's still here," he said, pointing out over the lake, "which means he didn't see Keramore leave. We've won the prince some time, and we'll win him some more."

"Good," Streck said. "Another one he can owe me. Let's get me a new weapon. I want to try one of those halfling crossbows."

Coralen reached out to help Streck. A shadow loomed over them, darker than the night. Even as he looked up, he knew it was too late.

The force of the drake's tail slamming into his chest sent him spinning through the air, most of the breath gone from his lungs. Hitting the ground took care of the rest. He half-rose, gasping, as the drake closed on him. His mind fumbled for magic, but found nothing but a mire of confusion and disarray. *Not enough time*, he thought with regret as the creature slithered toward him, maw opening and claws flashing.

There was a blur of movement as Streck barreled into

Coralen, knocking him to the ground. The drake brushed the sergeant aside, then turned its head to watch as Streck bounced off the wall of the lodge with a sound like snapped wood.

The fool has given you an opportunity, the voice said. Make the most of it.

The drake's eyes widened with fear as Coralen sent wave after wave of Affliction roiling over the creature. He watched it rot from the inside, brains dissolving to ooze from its ear holes in a torrent of stinking filth.

The drake convulsed once. Hatred consumed Coralen. He spat on the corpse, part of him regretting that he couldn't bring it back to kill it again.

A low moan wrenched him back to the present.

Streck took a shuddering breath as Coralen knelt beside him. "Damnable thing knocked the wind out of me," he rasped. "I'll be fine. Just need a moment."

Coralen nodded, trying not to look down. One glance at the ruptured clothing and exposed ribs had been enough.

The sergeant's fingers closed on his. "Keramore will make it, won't he?"

Coralen smiled. "He'll make it. He's Teir'Dal. It'll take more than the Ring of Scale to finish the likes of us."

Streck coughed, bloody mist hanging in the air. "I suppose Keramore will try to promote me again. I'll never let him. You know why? Because I'm a damned good sergeant."

"You are," Coralen murmured, squeezing fingers slick with blood. "You've done him proud." Overhead, a wyvern tried to flap away. One of its wings trailed blood and streamers of shredded flesh. Something silver arced out of the night and sent the beast tumbling downward.

Streck took several shallow, bubbling breaths. "I'm ready," he gasped. "Help me up on three? One..."

Reaching out, Coralen palmed the sergeant's eyes closed, wishing there was time to bury him. A simple cairn to keep the carrion birds away, and to honor a warrior who had stood with him through a decade of relentless battles. A

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fellow dal who had paid the ultimate price to buy him just a few seconds.

But he couldn't. Not now. Ithiosar approached.

Rising, Coralen obliterated five phyxians in a maelstrom of Fire, and walked out to meet the Black.



NEMESIS



The night's peace was a distant memory. Screams and growls and the clash of blades on scales overwhelmed Coralen's ears. The glow of burning corpses rent the darkness, the hissing and popping of flame-engulfed flesh adding to the din.

Coralen pushed the sounds away until the night fell silent but for the hammering of his heart and the voice of Ithiosar.

"You have talent," the dragon rasped. "More talent than any I have seen since Tahrin. You impress me, Coralen Larkos."

"I'm honored." With slow, wary steps, Coralen moved to the center of the open ground, keeping the power lingering at the tips of his fingers and trying not to think of Streck's blood drying on his hands.

"If you leave now," Ithiosar said, "I may let you live a little longer."

Coralen shook his head. He could sense the tension in the beast. Perhaps the Black had expected an easy fight. Either way, the dragon had not planned for this. "How fares your wing?"

Ithiosar growled. A thin tendril of smoke still rose from the wound. "I will not make my offer again."

Coralen smiled. "I'm not asking—"

Acid exploded from the dragon's throat, blotting out the night sky in an instant. Coralen flung up his arm, his hasty shield of Air turning away most of the caustic fluid. The sheer weight of the attack hurled him back toward the building, the ground around him hissing as gobbets of acid ate away the stones.

Above him, the curtain of smoke and displaced dust parted. Deep within his armored skull, Ithiosar's eyes burned

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with triumph. The look turned to disbelief when Coralen brought up his hand and hurled Lightning into the creature's chest. Ithiosar roared and took flight again, the air trembling as the tree-thick tail swung like a whip. Coralen scrambled for the safety of the looming lodge walls as the rocks behind him exploded into hundreds of razor-sharp fragments. Searing pain ripped across the back of his neck, followed by a sensation of wetness from a dozen tiny wounds.

"Marked you," Ithiosar chuckled. "Where do you run to?"

Using Air as a battering ram to clear the way, Coralen dove through a shattered window and rolled across the floor. He tried to rise, gasping at the sudden pain in his ribs. The ceiling disappeared above a broiling cloud of fumes, the window obliterated. Pressing his belly to the cold tiles, he crawled across the room to the inner door, pulled himself up and chanced a look back at the melting window.

A single huge eye returned his stare.

Coralen stumbled into the next hallway. The doors to the conference room hung from their hinges. A Teir'Dal had made a stand here, perhaps hoping to hold off his attackers. What was left of him lay blood-soaked on the floor, while a phyxian worried at his throat. The club-like head of the creature rose at Coralen's approach, a mangled mass of flesh and black cloth hanging from its jaws.

Wincing, Coralen leaned down and lifted a broken shaft of wood from the floor. A small shove of Air was enough to send it whistling across the room. The makeshift bolt disappeared into the phyxian's chest with a wet sucking sound, emerging from the other side to splinter against the far wall. The phyxian's eyes jerked wide before it collapsed across its victim. Toad's half-chewed head lolled to the side, bulging eyes glittering like glass.

Coralen put one hand on the wall to steady himself. Coughing, he looked down to see flecks of pink blood on his sleeve. Pain tore through his chest and ribs. Something was broken inside, and the effort of the simple Air spell surprised him.

The battle sapped you, the voice said. You should have left your underlings to dispatch the dragonkin while you saved yourself for Ithiosar.

It was right, not that it helped. His only consolation was that Ithiosar must be suffering too.

Think, he told himself. Fight smart.

He let the fight so far play back through his mind. Fire had little effect on this dragon. He doubted Ice would fare much better. Lightning hurt Ithiosar, but hadn't stopped him. Affliction was too slow—Coralen would be dead before it took effect. That left Compulsion, but unless he could slow Ithiosar, distract him somehow, Compulsion would fail.

The building shook as something heavy struck one of the outer walls. A deep rumble echoed through the manor. Coralen couldn't make out the words, but their menace needed no detail.

He crept up the stairs. The building shook again, the thud of impact followed by the rattle of crumbling stone. A few more of those and Ithiosar would be inside, ready to melt his victim to nothing. The rumbling sound followed once more, this time sounding like laughter.

Fight smart.

Holding the rail tight to keep from faltering, Coralen reached the top of the stairs and stumbled across to Orprest's chambers. He looked upon the ruin of what had once been her. The shapeless mass on the balcony still smoked and bubbled as the last drops of acid did their work.

With a shocking crash, the front half of the balcony collapsed as the wall supporting it broke open. Orprest's remnants trickled away in a cloud of dust.

"I'm coming for you, Coralen Larkos!" Ithiosar's roar of triumph filled the walls, ear-splitting in its volume, shaking the floor beneath Coralen's feet and rattling up the staircase. He knew liquid death would be seconds behind it.

He rose, took two steps forward, and jumped.

His ankle snapped as he hit the ground. He barely noticed. His eyes stayed on the building, on the mass of tail that

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protruded from the gaping hole in the front wall. His ears listened to the splintering as Ithiosar hunted him through the gutted interior of the building, picking out the sound of the dragon drawing in breath with racking snorts as he sniffed the air for its enemy.

Air.

Coralen reached out with mind and spirit, hoping this would work, praying it could work. He sought out each and every pocket of air within the building, feeling the latent power within them. Then, with a convulsive shrug, he gathered all that air and drew it to him in a single instant.

The influx of power wrenched a scream of joy from his lips.

With a thunderclap, Orprest's lakeside palace collapsed in on itself, countless tons of masonry dropping onto the dragon. The huge tail twitched once, then fell limp.

Coralen slumped to the ground, staring at the shattered rubble. His ears rang from the violence of the lodge's devastation. Second by second, they cleared. The battle continued out among the rocks and trees. Neither side had found victory. From the sound of it, few remained alive to seek it.

A dwarf emerged from the trees. His left arm hung useless and mangled at his side, his right still clutching a gore-encrusted hammer. A gaping rent in his steel helmet exposed hair, scalp and something that glistened in the light of the rising moon.

"My lord Arch Mage," the dwarf said, bowing. "You have won a great victory."

"Not quite." Coralen pointed out into the night, where several shapes lurked in the shadows. "We're not out of this yet."

The dwarf raised a puzzled eyebrow. "I did not expect to be," he said. "We have won the time for our leaders to escape. That is all the victory we could desire."

"Speak for yourself," Coralen murmured. He, at least, planned to be around to receive the credit he was due.

"He lives, my lord," the dwarf said, kicking Ithiosar's tail.

The thick-scaled cylinder twitched. Behind them, a groan escaped the rubble.

"Well, dwarf," Coralen said, ignoring the look he received, "care to help me remedy that?"

Resting one hand on the dwarf's shoulder, his pain overcoming his disgust at the contact, Coralen limped over to the rubble. Together, they scrambled across the broken masonry, Coralen wincing whenever his weight shifted to his damaged ankle. The stone lay thickly clustered, but here and there random chance had left open gaps where the tiled floor lay exposed to the night. It took Coralen a few moments to realize the boulder he had been about to climb was not rock.

Ithiosar looked up at him, blood-flecked eye glowing with agony and rage. The rubble shook as the dragon tried to wriggle free, but Coralen motioned for it to be silent. "Stay," he said, lacing the words with Compulsion.

Ithiosar blinked and lay still. The rage in the eye faded. Fear slipped in to replace it.

"Move aside, Arch Mage," the dwarf said, hefting his warhammer in his good hand.

"Wait," Coralen said. "I want him to savor the fear. I want him to beg for mercy." He knelt down, one hand clutching his ribs, and placed his fingers on the armored scales of the huge head. They felt warm. "Beg."

"Never." No deep booming voice this time, no rumble of distant thunder. Just the tired crackle of a cold breeze playing over dead leaves.

Coralen drew power and began to form Compulsion, then stopped. A plea brought about by such means would bring no satisfaction. He grinned. Better to watch Ithiosar wallow in the horror of the moment, terror clawing at the depths of his soul. The Erudites had mastered many applications of psionics, including the ability to enhance fear. If they could do it, why not Coralen Larkos?

"Now?" The dwarf hefted his hammer, scowling.

Ignoring him, Coralen reached out and entered the mind of the dragon.

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A sea of emotions met him, jumbled and wild. Flashing images tumbled over each other. The pure pleasure of the hunt. The thrill of soaring high above the world, so close to the stars. The burning hatred of mortals. The joy of the kill. Each without form or structure, childlike in its totality. He pushed on, his mind wading deeper into Ithiosar's. It felt like pushing aside cobwebs, but without the sensation of physical touch, just the knowledge that within the heart of all this lay Ithiosar's darkest secrets. He could feel the dragon resisting, trying to keep him out, but he plunged on.

All resistance shattered, and he knew that he had reached the very center. The darkest secret. The hidden truth.

"It cannot be..."

With a terrified cry, Coralen ripped his mind away and stumbled back down the rubble, falling. The dwarf gave him a quizzical look, then disappeared in a shower of blood as the dragon exploded from the ruins.

One wing flapping weakly, lurching through the sky, Ithiosar fled toward the distant moonrise. It did not look back at Coralen, who shuddered with terror upon the broken stone.



"You are cold, spellflinger?"

Coralen brushed dust and congealed blood from his eyes, took the outstretched hand, and let the ogre help him to his feet. Shivering, he nodded, trying to keep the wrenching pain in his ribs and ankle from his face. "And tired," he said. He rested his weight against an outcrop of stone that had once been a wall. The night pulsed with the warmth of summer, but it would take more than that to drive the chill from his soul.

"No surprise," Brozka said. "I salute your fight. I never saw a dragon flee. A shame it survived. I fear he will not choose to face you again, and you will be cheated of honor." The warchief smiled. "Though what is a little more honor, with so much already won?"

Coralen bent over and spat a thin trickle of blood to the rock. How little the ogre knew. The thought of never facing Ithiosar again did not displease him at all. He wondered if he would be so fortunate.

Raising his head, he saw that a circle of Combine warriors had formed around him. Akani stood with her back to him, her arms and shoulders caked in blood, at least some of it hers. Two of the Teir'Dal bowed their heads respectfully, each bleeding from a dozen wounds. A halfling doffed her cap to him and slipped a bolt into her crossbow. The quiver at her belt stood empty.

Coralen swallowed. "Is this all that survived?"

"For the moment, little elf," Akani muttered. "We will join the fallen soon enough." She pointed.

With a collective hiss, the seething mass of drakes and phyxians shuffled forward to claim their final prize.

"I accept," Brozka grunted.

It took Coralen a moment to realize through the terror that the ogre was talking to him. "What?"

"On behalf of my people, I accept the offer to join the Combine." Brozka raised his axe above his head in salute as a wide smile broke across his face. "How could I refuse, when you've given us the gift of this most glorious death?"

Akani gave him a wink.

"Here they come," one of the Teir'Dal muttered. "It's an honor to die at your side, Arch Mage."

Shrieking and bellowing, the drakes and phyxians raced toward them. The halfling brought up her crossbow in one fluid motion and sent her last bolt hurtling through the night air to embed in the eye of a phyxian. It tumbled and disappeared beneath the claws of its fellows. Akani whooped with pleasure and took a step forward.

You should have been king, the voice said.

At least I can die like one, Coralen thought, pushing the voice back to the dark recesses of his mind, where it belonged. He raised his hands.

Even as the first bolts of Lightning left his fingers, he

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knew it would not be enough. Two drakes fell, their corpses writhing and steaming, and Coralen almost collapsed with the effort. Gritting his teeth, he sent a third bolt, then a fourth. A phyxian slid to a halt with a cauterized stump where its head had been, then vanished from view behind the onrushing wall of draconic armor.

One more, he told himself. With the last of his strength, he raised his arms.

A drake exploded, its limbs whirling away from its shattered torso. The phyxian next to it collapsed yelping, its forelegs melted to nothing. A huge fireball engulfed half a dozen creatures, only an oily mist left to mark their passing. The rocks themselves became weapons, scything through scale and the soft flesh beneath with equal ease. Snarls of triumph became squeals of terror. The creatures broke, fleeing for the concealment of the rocks and trees. None made it. Fiery death stalked them one by one, obliterating all in a bloody whirlwind of vengeful carnage.

The echoes of the last explosion faded from the valley, and silence returned to the night.

Coralen felt their eyes turn to him, saw the wordless respect on their faces, and held out his hands. "I—"

"Arch Mage!"

Spinning, almost buckling as the weight shifted to his broken ankle, Coralen saw a smiling face looming out of the darkness, the moonlight glinting off the sigil on his chest. "Merion?"

"Arch Mage," two dozen voices echoed, as the column of gray-clad students closed up behind him. One by one, they dropped to a knee and bowed their heads. The Teir'Dal and the halfling joined them.

"I still say magic is for the weak," Brozka rumbled. "But you are the mightiest weakling I have ever met." He didn't kneel, but the nod of his head spoke volumes more than any bow.

Coralen's head whirled as he clung to the wall for support. "How did you do this?"

Merion grinned. "I had a good teacher. As it happened, your students learned more from you than they knew."

"But..." Coralen's voice slurred to silence. The hot night air stifled him, ribs and ankle competing in a game of agony. Hands flailing, he fell forward, the ground rushing to meet him until Akani caught him and lowered him gently to the stones.

Merion knelt over him, squeezing his hand, his boyish face crumpling with concern. "You'll be fine," he murmured. "We've won."

"No," Coralen said as darkness dragged him down. "We've lost everything."



LOST



They gathered on the plain outside Myris'Hul by the thousands to salute the heroes of the Battle of the Lake, and the Arch Mage who inspired them to glory. The greatest hero of them all.

Coralen Larkos led the small band, sun-charred grass crunching beneath his boots. The others beamed their approval back at the crowd, and the cheers rose every time one of them raised a triumphant fist into the air. Coralen gave the crowd nothing, yet they loved him all the more for it.

They passed in front of whole regiments standing at attention. All the races of the Combine stood proudly, resplendent in their armor and uniforms, each race competing to outshine the others. With the Ring of Scale defeated in the mountains, little threat remained to Myris'Hul or to the towns and villages that lay between the city and distant Bastion. Other than routine patrols, it seemed the whole military might of the united Combine stood on the plain. The war had cost so many lives, but the sheer number of warriors still impressed.

They were so few, Coralen thought with sadness. Ten times as many would still not be enough.

Keramore strode out to meet the group, clasping hands with each in turn. "Thank you, my friends," he said. "Enjoy this day. You have earned it." He turned to Coralen. "The Council awaits you, Coralen. Shall we go?"

Together, they set out across the open ground toward a stone table placed a hundred yards from the serried ranks of the army. The table stood in the shade of a single tree. Unlike the sun-shriveled skeletons that remained of most trees after the brutality of the summer, this one stood perfect

and verdant, a gift to the Council from the students of the Guildhall Arcana. Coralen smiled. He'd watched Merion teach them the magic himself.

"I thought the funeral went well," Keramore said.

"Yes," Coralen agreed, thinking back to the morning's solemn service. Ten thousand warriors, standing in perfect silence as they buried the dead heroes of the battle. Fifty thousand civilians had lined the streets of Myris'Hul for the procession carrying the coffin of Lady Orprest. All honored their beloved mayor, who had sacrificed her life attempting to delay Ithiosar, as she passed one last time through the city she had led for so long.

They didn't need to know the truth, Coralen had decided. After all, they would soon have more truth than they could bear.

"Do you think he would have approved?" Keramore's voice broke into Coralen's musings.

"Who?"

"Streck. Do you think he would have approved of the burial we gave him?"

Coralen shook his head.

Keramore laughed. "No, you're right. He would have chided me that the whole ceremony was tremendous waste of time and effort. That we should have simply emptied a tankard or two in his honor at the filthiest tavern we could find."

He'd have been right, the voice said, without mocking.

"Still," Keramore added with a lingering note of sadness, "I'll miss him." A breath of wind caught the tall dead grass, rippling it with a faint sigh. Keramore looked up at the wisps of cloud that dotted the horizon. "The heat has broken at last," he said. "I think the summer might be over."

Shivering despite the lingering heat of the air, Coralen followed his friend to the Council's table.

They rose as one to applaud him. The king nodded with wordless gratitude, and even Erador gave him a magnanimous smile. Brozka reached out as if to squeeze Coralen's shoulder, and chuckled at the wince the gesture provoked.

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"The floor is yours, my friend," Keramore said as they reached the head of the table, stepping back to drop into the empty chair next to his brother. "The Combine Council waits to hear from its Arch Mage."

Coralen looked down the length of the huge table. Above him, vivid green leaves shook in the warm breeze, their colors pulsing with new life. Back across the plain, the massed ranks of the Combine armies gazed at him. He could sense their pride and their hope.

A shudder passed through him. *How soon pride and hope will die.* He took little comfort in knowing they could not hear what he was about to say. They would know the truth of his words soon enough.

He swallowed. He'd never felt so tired. Even the battle with Ithiosar paled in comparison to this. He turned and faced the king, seeing the expectation and respect in the old dal's eyes.

"Your Majesty," he began, and coughed as the dryness of his mouth suffocated the words.

"Coralen?" Keramore stepped closer, his brow furrowed. "You look awful. Shall I fetch a healer?"

"No," Coralen said. He took two steps away, looking beyond the group to the south. Somewhere out there, beyond lands scorched by summer, lay Bastion and the sea. Perhaps there was still time...

"Talk to us," Keramore urged in a soft voice. "You're among friends here."

Coralen smiled. *My only friend,* he thought. *You, at least, will believe me.*

"The night I faced Ithiosar," he began, ignoring the murmurs of approval that rose from the group, "the dragon sought to escape at the last. I held him in place with magic, looking to finish him. You all know that I failed, and the dragon escaped."

"There was no failure, Coralen," the king said. "You foiled the Black. With you by our side, we shall soon defeat the Ring of Scale."

Coralen let him finish. "What you don't know," he said,

his words little more than a whisper, "is that the magic let me see into Ithiosar's mind. I saw everything—his hopes, his plans, his dreams. I wish I had not, but I cannot lie to you. I will not lie to you."

He saw the confusion on their faces, and knew it was too late to stop. He took a deep breath. *Better to get it over with.* "The war is lost."

For a long moment, the only sound was the breeze rustling through the tree, stirring air that hung heavy with expectation. Then everyone began shouting at once.

"Silence!" The king roared the word, the ferocity of his voice belying his age and frailty. He rose and stared in disbelief at Coralen. "What did you say?"

"My King, we cannot win this war. The best we can hope to do is survive."

"Coralen?" Keramore rose to stand next to his father. Others joined him on their feet. "Do you know what you are saying?"

"My friend," Coralen said, "you believe the Ring of Scale to be on the verge of defeat? That the addition of the ogres will allow us to conquer them? The dragons possess power the likes of which we have not even dreamed. Thousands of drakes and phyxians slumber, awaiting Ithiosar's orders. Kobolds beyond counting, growing strong beyond the mountains of the north. Darker magic, too. Magic that chills my soul to think of it. Ithiosar doesn't come to conquer, but to *exterminate*. He will not rest until we are all dead. Each and every one of us! He will not stop until not even graves and ruins survive to mark our passing."

He saw the respect fading in their eyes.

"My son," the king said in a voice a thousand times colder than the breeze, "I think the Arch Mage still suffers from the effects of his heroic struggle. Take him away until his senses return."

Keramore reached out a hand. Coralen shrugged it away. "There is but one hope," he said, addressing the Council directly. "We can cross the sea. To a place Ithiosar's armies cannot follow."

"Come, Coralen," Keramore said, putting his arm around

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Coralen's shoulder and steering him back across the grass. Coralen caught a glimpse of gray-clad Guild students and their instructors in the distance, and saw the stirrings in their ranks as they watched the strange scene playing out before them. He could not make out Merion. He felt a burning need to see him.

Keramore released him, his eyes flooded with concern. "It's plain you're unwell. Look at me. Are you aware what you just told them?"

"I know what I said," Coralen told him. "And I meant it. Listen to me, Keramore. For more than ten years, you have trusted my counsel and my strength. You wish to save our people? Trust me now. Not even you can win against Ithiosar."

Keramore shook his head. "This is madness," he muttered.

"No," Coralen said. "I have seen true madness, and it comes to destroy us."

"It's not too late," Keramore said, putting his hand on Coralen's shoulder. "Everyone knows how exhausted you are, what you've been through. Tell them you're still tired. Tell them you're still the Arch Mage who has never lost a battle, but you have not fully recovered. They will believe you. They will forgive you."

"Forgive me?" Coralen pulled away. "They would be dead already without me."

"You're risking everything," Keramore insisted. The concern remained, but weaker now. "Your position, your rank, your influence. You could lose it all."

"And you?" Coralen ignored the frightened, angry gaze of the watching Council and focused on his friend. "What of you?"

"I will send out scouts," Keramore said. "My finest. If your fears are true, they will find evidence."

Coralen shook his head. They would find nothing, he knew, not until it was too late. The Black was too clever for that. "That's not what I meant," he said, forcing the words past the sucking void that enveloped his heart. "Will you turn your back on me too?"

"Never," the prince said. "Whatever happens, we will still be friends. Always."

The lie shines bright in his eyes, the voice grated. You could have been king. You gave up everything for him. See how he repays you.

Coralen turned away so he did not have to see the lie any more.

Keramore sighed. The sound faded and became one with the breeze. "Very well. If you cannot help yourself, let me do it. I shall tell the Council you are sick, that the battle has left you broken. That Ithiosar was playing tricks with your mind. I will tell them your sense will return." He took a deep breath. For a moment, his blue eyes were those of a concerned friend, nothing more. "And I will hope that it's true."

Keramore's hand reached out again, as if to touch Coralen's shoulder, then dropped stiffly to his side. "Go back to your Guildhall and get some rest," he told him, his voice no longer that of a friend, but of Keramore Thex, a prince again. "Your king and your princes will need their Arch Mage when the offensive begins." He strode away, leaving Coralen alone in the dead grass.

He did not look back.

Coralen lowered himself to the ground and hugged his knees to his chest. Behind him, he heard the sounds of the Council planning their march to glory. *The fools, the voice said, stronger and more confident than he'd ever known it. In time, they will know you were right. Then they will come running to you, begging you to save them from the doom they have chosen.*

You are still Coralen Larkos.

He barely heard the voice. It wasn't the sound of the breeze that drowned it out, or the staccato thumping of his heart in his chest. It wasn't the boasts and laughter of the Council, their Arch Mage's odd outburst already forgotten. It was another voice, buried even deeper within him, hovering wraith-like somewhere between memory and stark, unreasoning terror.

He heard it speak, and knew that the next time he was in its presence, it would mean his death. He heard it speak, and it sounded like thunder roiling from the depths of Anashti's halls.

I'm coming for you, Coralen Larkos...



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.