

An
**EVERQUEST
NEXT**

Novella

A character in silhouette, wearing a backpack and holding a staff, walks away from the viewer down a long, dark stone corridor. The corridor is lined with large, arched alcoves, each containing a glowing, spherical brazier. The floor is made of stone tiles, and the walls are intricately carved. The lighting is dramatic, with the braziers providing the primary light source, casting long shadows and highlighting the textures of the stone.

**FALL of
BASTION**

Robert Lassen

The Fall of Bastion

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COMPULSION



The sight of dragon blood always made Coralen's pulse race. Elvish blood made his stomach turn, especially when it was his own, but there was something pleasing about the black ichors that dripped from the nearby warrior's Norite-tipped spear. Perhaps, Coralen thought, it was because the spilling of one made the risk of the other less likely. He gave the warrior a half-smile, trying to remember his name.

"Damned stuff," the warrior grumbled, scraping at the blood with a thick cloth. "I'll have to boil it off in the morning." He looked up as Coralen picked his way over the rock-strewn ground toward him. The warrior snapped a salute, tiny flecks of black liquid flying from the blade as he grounded the base of the spear with a crack that echoed through the cool autumnal night. "Arch Mage Larkos, sir," he said.

"At ease," Coralen muttered with a slight wave of his hand. He gave up on the name, not that it mattered. "What's the situation, soldier?"

The warrior relaxed and nodded towards the defile that sloped up into the foothills of the Serpent spine. A faint murmur of voices drifted down on the breeze. "Three drakes, sir," the warrior said. "We killed two of them before they could get airborne, and the third one crawled into the rocks to die. Sergeant Fesler gave it a bellyful of Norite."

Coralen nodded. Norite wasn't the most effective dragonsbane, but a spear or arrowhead that penetrated a dragon's armored hide was rarely less than fatal. Maybe a full-size dragon might survive it but, Coralen thought with a touch of relief, such dragons were rare. The Ring of Scale

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itself, that unholy alliance of draconic creatures and lesser evils, could only count a handful of them in its army. All reports put that army a good six weeks march away.

He gave the warrior a nod and walked up the slope, hoping the reports weren't wrong.

Fifty yards of scrambling brought him to the first drake, lying curled across the sharp edges of the rock. It could have been sleeping, were it not for the jagged rent in its armor that stretched from throat to groin. Exposed innards glistened in the moonlight. He stepped with care over the tail and wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow. The night felt warm for this late in the year, and the trail treacherous enough without having to step over dead enemies. He told himself the sweat and his labored breathing was nothing to do with spending too much poring over maps and books, growing fat while the once-mighty Combine crumbled around him.

He smiled. Merion would laugh at his lack of honesty. It was sometimes not much fun having an apprentice who had the potential to far surpass him in power within a few short years, especially one who wasn't afraid to point out his flaws. Right then, though, Coralen wished Merion was with him instead of back at Bastion. He missed the younger mage, but he also missed having someone he could trust guarding his back.

If the Ring of Scale was still weeks away, what were the drakes doing this far south?

The murmur of voices stopped as he rounded a large boulder. Four elves turned to stare at him before returning to their conversation, ignoring him as they ignored the headless drake at their feet. Coralen suppressed a flash of anger. He didn't like Sergeant Fesler and couldn't care less for the opinion of the three others, but an Arch Mage deserved a certain level of respect. The scarred Sergeant had made it quite clear that the dislike was mutual. Coralen coughed, and the voices stopped again.

Fesler waited a few seconds before turning, a cold smile on his face. "Can we help you, Arch Mage?" The last words appeared to be an afterthought.

Not for the first time, Coralen wondered what Fesler would look like with lightning playing over his scorched skull. There had been a time that a common soldier, even a senior Sergeant with as fearsome a reputation as Fesler, would never have dared slight Coralen Larkos, but those days were long gone. Coralen took a breath. Right now any one of his warriors probably stood higher in the eyes of the King than his once-legendary Arch Mage. How long would it be before they promoted Merion above him?

No, he thought. Merion, at least, would choose death before he dishonored his teacher. "What happened?"

Fesler shrugged. "You know drakes," he said. "They thought they could get a drop on us, maybe get an easy meal. We taught them better."

"I'm told there was a third," Coralen said, ignoring the bored, contemptuous look in Fesler's eyes.

"Yes," Fesler said. "It's in there." He pointed towards a cleft in the rock face about ten yards behind them. A flicker of a smile crossed his face, the thick scar tissue on his left cheek turning it into a grimace. "Don't worry, mage. It's wounded. No need to evacuate just yet."

One of the other elves giggled, trying to hide the sound with a cough. Coralen turned to look at him, eyes glancing at the badges of rank that marked him as a Corporal before moving up to stare into his almond-shaped eyes. There were a thousand ways he could kill him, quick, slow, painless, agonizing. Ways that would leave no mark, others that would leave nothing but a dark charred smear on the rock. The blood drained from the Corporal's face, and Coralen smiled, knowing that his own eyes had lost none of their power.

"What's your name, boy?" Coralen let the emphasis hang on the final word. No respect given, none received, but no matter how low his stock had fallen, an Arch Mage could not ignore such a slight.

The Corporal swallowed. "Mantaes, sir."

"Mantaes," Coralen repeated. "I'll remember that." He turned back to Fesler. "Is it still alive?"

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Fesler nodded. Nothing remained of the officer's smile. Coralen walked past him, and dropped to one knee at the mouth of the cleft. The rock beneath his robe was damp. The tang of dragon blood filled his nostrils. Behind him Mantaes began to stammer an apology until Coralen motioned him to silence without turning. The cleft was narrow and none of the moonlight penetrated deep enough to see within, but with the fool of a Corporal quiet, Coralen could hear the low, rasping breath, funneled to him along the rock walls. He knew pain when he heard it, no matter the species.

Time to remind Fesler and his friends who they were dealing with.

A single word and the cleft erupted into light, bright as noon. He heard the elves behind him gasp in pain and surprise, before shrieking agony drowned them out. At the back of the cleft, the wounded drake writhed and squealed, its eyes burning as the light poured into them. Coralen watched as its stumpy, humanoid arms pawed at the air as if they could somehow hide it, somehow end the pain. Coralen made a gesture and the light brightened further. The drake howled, collapsing and twitching.

Coralen let the light fade to a dull glow. The creature whimpered, elongated snout prodding at the blood-spattered rock behind it, trying to burrow into it. Seven foot of tail flicked against the stone with every agonized breath. Blood oozed from beneath one wing, seeping along the wood of the broken spear shaft lodged in its side. Death waited for the drake, whether it knew it or not. It was just a matter of time. Turning its head, the creature opened one eye and stared at Coralen, fear and pain mixing into one.

The Arch Mage smiled. "Do we have an understanding?"

The drake nodded, the gesture almost lost in the shudder that passed along its entire length. "Yes," it hissed.

"You know," Coralen said, picking up a small stone from the ground and rubbing it between his fingers, "I've always enjoyed meeting your kind. Wyverns are too stupid to be any use, and true dragons? Well, they're just too much work." The

drake looked at him, puzzled, and then flinched as he flicked the stone towards its face. "But drakes, now," Coralen added, "you're fun. You're just stupid enough to attack when you should hide, and just smart enough to tell why." He picked up another stone. "So tell me, what are you doing here?"

The drake laughed. "Foolish elf scum. Won't tell anyth--"

Coralen brought the noon back, harsher than ever. He kept the bright beams of heat and light pouring into the creature's eyes while its screams rattled off the walls. He heard one of the elves curse in disgust behind him, and kept the spell going for a few more seconds on principle before letting it go. Once again, the glow faded. "Shall we try that again?"

"Please," the drake said, sibilance drawing out the word.

"Why are you here?"

"Please," the creature repeated, rocking back and forth.

Coralen watched it with cold contempt as it tried to hide its head beneath its wings. "Wrong answer," he murmured. This time he kept the light intense but let it fade sooner. He didn't want to kill the creature, not yet. Instead he mixed in a little Compulsion. He'd found that line of spell didn't often work on draconic species, but when combined with Pain, it could have good results.

"Scouts," the creature shrieked. "Scouts!"

"Scouts," Coralen agreed in a reasonable tone. It was nice to know that his skills hadn't faded. "Scouts for what?"

"The army," the creature hissed. "We come. We come."

Fesler stepped forward, brushing past Coralen to address the pathetic beast in the cleft. "Army? What Army?"

The harsh squeal of claw on stone rang out as the drake pawed at the rock. "Ring of Scale!"

Fesler looked down at Coralen in confusion. "Why so far ahead? The army is in the north. Even if they could mass their forces, it would take them a month to reach us."

The drake shook its head, frantic. "No, no, one day, one day." Coralen saw the flicker of emotion that passed across the Sergeant's face, and wondered if he hid his own fear so well.

"A day," Fesler whispered. "It's lying. It has to be lying."

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“Not lying,” the drake squealed. “The army attacks when the sun sets. Ithiosar leads!”

Fear became terror, striking at Coralen so hard and so cold he almost lost the spell. Fesler’s eyes stared into space. Behind them, one of the elf warriors vomited noisily onto the ground.

“Ithiosar,” Fesler said. Mantaes echoed the word. Coralen kept silent, though his bowels fought to empty themselves. Soon every voice in the Combine would echo that word, and die with it on their lips. Ithiosar.

He turned back to the drake, and its eyes widened as it saw death. “Please,” it hissed.

The night briefly became day as lightning punched a hole through its chest, and then darkness returned, silent but for the sizzling of charred dragonflesh.

Coralen rose to his feet. Terror would have to wait. He felt oddly calm. Two years of waiting for this day, trying to convince the King that they needed to leave Amaril as soon as possible, warning the Council that the Ring of Scale would soon have the strength to crush the last of them and would not hesitate to use it. Two years of watching as his reputation faded, listening as people doubted him, until the King ignored him and common soldiers like Fesler could all but call him coward to his face. The greatest mage in the Combine of elves and their allies, the Arch Mage who had never lost a battle, and they called him weak.

Not weak. Vindicated.

He turned to Fesler. “Sergeant, gather your patrol. Send your fastest runners to all our outposts and forward patrols. Tell them the Ring of Scale gathers in the mountains and will strike when the sun next sets. Tell them to watch the skies.” He turned to the young elf wiping vomit from his mouth. “Mantaes, find us horses. You will ride with me. I must warn the Council.”

“The Exodus is not due to begin for another four weeks,” Fesler said. “There is no time.”

“We will have to make time,” Coralen snapped. He looked back over his shoulder, northwards through the thin wisps

of smoke rising from the rock cleft towards the cloudless sky beyond. Stars beyond counting hung alongside the glowing orb of the moon. How long until black wings blotted out their light? To the south, torchlight flickered on the walls of Bastion and in the city. How long before all was darkness?

A soldier with terrified eyes pointed towards the dead drakes. "Should we bury the bodies, sir? They'll attract carrion birds," he added when Coralen just stared at him.

"Before the week is out," Coralen told him, letting his eyes pass over each of them in turn, "the carrion birds will grow so fat they will never fly again." He laughed. Vindication! He was right. He'd always been right.

Now he just had to survive long enough for it to mean something.



CRYPT



The entrance to the outer ward was supposed to remain closed to all until the sun was fully up, but the four guards took one look at the sigil that hung around Coralen's neck and ordered the massive wooden gates opened. Or perhaps, Coralen thought, they'd seen his face. Judging by the look of terror that Mantaes wore etched into his features every time Coralen so much as glanced at him, it would not be surprising.

They galloped through the barbican and down the wide avenue that led to the keep, the borrowed horses gasping in time to the clattering of their hooves on stone. Coralen kept his eyes fixed on the massive archway ahead. Better that, than to look at the pathetic masses huddling each side of the road. Once the outer ward had been a place of beauty, where minor nobles and officers could relax with hawking and archery, or maybe even mingle with members of the Council out for an afternoon stroll in the lush gardens. Now the whole area teemed with refugees, every last square foot of ground covered in makeshift tents or blankets. Some stood or rose to their knees as he passed, their unwashed faces showing their surprise at the sudden noise. A baby cried out in the shadows beneath the east wall, the pathetic mewling just another reminder of the misery on all sides.

Ignoring the salutes of the two guards at the inner gate, Coralen reined his horse in and slid from the saddle before it came to a halt. With a motion to the nearby groom, he left the horse where it stood and strode towards the keep. It took all his effort to prevent himself breaking into a run. There would be plenty of time for that later.

The warm light of dawn disappeared beneath the cold

stone of the wall as he passed through the main gate. Any other day, he would have been impressed by the thickness of the stone bulwark, and thought it proof against any assault. Now, knowing what was out there, the walls seemed paper-thin. He turned at a flurry of footsteps behind him, scowling at Mantaes as the Corporal hurried to catch up.

“Go to the west wing,” Coralen told him. “Find Merion. You will know him when you see him, yes?” At a nervous nod from Mantaes, he added, “start with my study. If he’s not there, look in the refectory. Look everywhere. Find him, and tell him to meet me at the council chamber with all haste.”

A flash of color caught his eye. Coralen recognized the livery of the Thex household, and reached out to grab the retainer’s thin arm. “Where is Keramore?”

With a punctilious sniff, the retainer looked down in disgust at the hand on his sleeve. “*Prince Keramore*,” he said with huge emphasis, “is in the Royal Crypt, I believe, and is not to be disturbed.”

Coralen couldn’t stop the harsh laugh that burst from his lips at that. Disturbed? Shock brought a gasp from the retainer as he hurried away. Coralen turned to see Mantaes grinning. “What are you still doing here? Go,” he snapped. The corporal sprinted away before the last words left Coralen’s mouth.

Even here, in the keep itself, there was no escaping the refugee crisis. Coralen understood why the King had allowed them in. With every single town and settlement north of Bastion either burned by the Ring of Scale or evacuated out of fear, there was nowhere else for them to go, not until the boats were ready. Understanding why didn’t mean he had to like it. The keep was a place of war, not a country inn. At least the King had maintained enough sense of decorum to restrict Bastion itself to elves, leaving the lesser races to the sprawling mass of tents that stretched south and east from the wall towards the beaches and the crashing, frigid surf. Picking his way through the snoring shapes that lay against each wall of the corridors, trying to ignore the stench of them, Coralen reached the stairs that led down to the Royal Crypt.

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Until the boats were ready. That was the problem. Two years of warning that they would soon be needed, yet still fully half the promised fleet stood stark as skeletons on the beach, much work still to be done. No time to do it now. The boats were as ready as they would ever be. He followed the circular stairs down towards the crypt, muttering. He could see the looks on the faces of the Council in his mind. They would laugh at his story. Arch Mage Coralen Larkos, jumping at shadows again. Never mind that the King had finally realized the danger and given the order for the Exodus across the ocean. That was four weeks away, and it could have been four years for all the urgency some showed. Coralen spat on the stone floor. He could produce Ithiosar himself at the Council table, and still they would laugh in his face.

He needed someone on his side. He needed a friend.

Coming to an abrupt halt at the sound of a voice ahead, Coralen realized where he was. The narrow passage opened out ahead of him into a chamber of ornate, high-vaulted ceilings. Runelight flickered from the walls, casting long shadows from the tall figure standing alone at the far end of the chamber, his back to the entrance. Coralen would have known that figure anywhere. He didn't have many friends. He'd never seen the need for them, but this one was different. There was a time Coralen Larkos would have laid his life down for Keramore Thex. He'd almost done so on more than one occasion, back when they were younger, before the pressures of royal duty and the war. Before Neria died, taking part of Keramore with her.

Keramore stood bowed over her sarcophagus now, and as Coralen watched, he lowered his head to press it against the cold stone. Coralen sighed. Once he had thought he loved Neria, before she chose Keramore over him, but death meant an end to such things, to everything. When his own wife died, Coralen buried her in the same hole as the wyvern that killed her, and moved on. There had been tears, yes, but tears did not bring back the dead. There was no coming back from death. The sooner Keramore learned that, the better he could protect those still living.

If it wasn't already too late.

Stifling a curse, Coralen listened to Keramore murmuring his words at the uncaring stone and knew there wasn't time for this. He walked forward until he was only feet from his friend. Keramore didn't turn, a fact that scared Coralen almost as much as the approaching horde. The old Keramore They would never have let anyone sneak up on him.

Something inside him snapped. "If you enjoy spending time with the dead," he said, his voice rattling from the high ceilings, "you'll soon get more opportunities than you've ever dreamed."

Keramore spun to face him. Shocked, Coralen saw the streaks of tears on the Prince's face. "Friends we may be, Coralen," Keramore said in a voice simmering with anger, "but you overstep yourself this morning. How dare you enter the Royal Crypt and disturb me?"

For a moment, Coralen wanted to meet rage with rage. The Combine stood on the brink of ruin, thousands waited for fiery death to fall on them from the skies, and Keramore was angry because his ritual of self-indulgent mourning had been interrupted? No. Anger wouldn't help, and he needed this elf. Coralen bowed his head. "Forgive me, my Prince. I meant no disrespect." Looking up, he met Keramore's eyes. "However, I think you will find that I am justified."

Without a word, Keramore turned back to the coffin and murmured something. Coralen shifted, impatient, hoping he hadn't wasted yet more valuable time coming here. The dawn meeting of the Council would be underway now. He almost laughed at the thought of a Council meeting without its two greatest members, the fearless fighting leader who had turned his back on his place to wallow in self-pity, and the unrivalled Arch Mage all but banished for speaking the truths they did not want to hear.

The laugh died in his throat as Keramore turned. Coralen opened his mouth to speak.

"Not here," Keramore snapped, and brushed past as he walked back toward the staircase.

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Coralen followed, aware that his eyes bored into Keramore's back and that his entire body shook with suppressed fury. He bit his lip as the Prince led the way without so much as a glance back. They reached the top of the staircase and pushed their way through the throng of refugees, now fully awakened and hoping to find a meal or just scraps from the meager food supplies. Twice Coralen called Keramore's name, without response. Maybe the bustle of the keep drowned out his voice, or perhaps Keramore was so far gone he chose not to hear. Coralen hoped for everybody's sake that it was the former.

Without warning, Keramore came to a sudden halt in the inner courtyard. Coralen almost piled into him.

"Perhaps my father and brother are correct," the Prince muttered. "Perhaps it is time to abandon this land."

"I am afraid they are far more correct than you know," Coralen told him. If only they had not been wrong for so long.

Keramore turned and nodded. It took Coralen a few seconds to realize he had been granted permission to speak, and he took care not to let his bitterness show. Truly, he thought, he was in the presence of a Prince. He glanced each way. The courtyard bustled with activity. Few seemed to show them any attention, but he lowered his voice regardless. Panic could not be avoided, but it could at least be delayed.

"Last night," he began, "while on patrol, I captured a drake. It took some--"

"Wait." Keramore raised a hand in interruption. "You left Bastion. Why?"

What did that have to do with anything? Coralen bit back his retort. Keep calm. He forced a smile. "I felt the need for some night air," he said. "The keep has not been a welcoming place for me recently." He shook his head. "My reasons are unimportant. As I was trying to say, the drake took some persuasion, but in the end it told its secrets."

Coralen looked around again, checking over both shoulders. A couple of soldiers glanced in his direction, probably admiring the legendary Keramore Thex. No one else paid them any heed. He took a deep breath and leaned in

closer, murmuring the words into Keramore's ear like a lover, except no lover ever brought such ill tidings.

"As of this morning," Coralen said, "the entire Ring of Scale army is camped within a day's march to the north."

He expected a reaction, shock for a start point, maybe anger, definitely resolve. He didn't expect this.

Keramore chuckled.

Coralen stood in the courtyard, frozen in disbelief while the condemned walked either side of him. Keramore's eyes danced. "A drake told you this? One you had captured?"

Fighting the urge to walk away, Coralen nodded. He made no attempt to keep the anger from his face.

Keramore reached out and put both his hands on Coralen's shoulders. "I'm not suggesting you are lying, my friend. I'm just saying perhaps the drake was leading you on in the hopes you would not kill it." The smile faded from Keramore's face. "You did kill it, didn't you?"

"Oh, it's dead alright," Coralen said, remembering the exposed lungs and immolated heart, the cauterized flesh. He shrugged Keramore's hands off and moved closer again. "I understand your doubt, but I used Compulsion, with Pain to focus the creature's mind. It could not have lied to me if Ithiosar himself ordered it to." He saw Keramore's eyes widen in understanding. There hadn't been a mage in five centuries who could begin to match Coralen Larkos for skill in the use of Compulsion.

He stared into his friend's eyes. "Keramore," he said, watching doubt become acceptance, "the dragon army is on our doorstep. They plan to attack as the sun sets."

Acceptance became anger. "There's just no time," Keramore snarled. He grabbed Coralen. "How?" Lifting Coralen to his toes, the Prince shoved him back into the archway, out of the sun. Intrigued eyes followed them from the courtyard. Keramore kept his voice low. "How could they have gotten so close without any of us knowing?"

With deliberate slowness, Coralen reached up and tried to pull Keramore's hands from his clothing. The Prince's

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grip might just as well have been cast from steel. Unbidden, a spell began to form on Coralen's lips, something to break Keramore's hold on him, something to teach him never to lay hands on Coralen again. Biting the spell back, he swallowed the words. They burned like bile in his throat.

"I have no idea," he sneered. "It is you who are in command of the Teir`Dal, are you not? Why don't you go ask your scouts how a vast horde of over a hundred thousand kobolds, phyxians, wyverns, drakes and dragons could travel so far, so fast, without them even noticing?"

Keramore released him, stepping back as if struck. He spun on his heel and walked back out into the sunlight, looking up at the azure of the cloudless sky before pointing a quivering finger at Coralen. "Gather the Council," he hissed through gritted teeth. "Let them know what you have told me."

Coralen nodded. "They are already in session," he said. As you would know, he thought, if you were doing your duty instead of obsessing over your dead wife. "I'm on my way to them now, but my words will fall short without your support."

"I know," Keramore said, striding away across the yard. "But I have some matters to attend to first. I will join you in the council room in half an hour." With that, he disappeared into the throng, leaving Coralen cursing and shading his eyes against the mocking light of the swift-rising sun.



MEETINGS



If the meeting with Keramore left Coralen ready to murder someone, the sight of Merion put a smile back on his face.

The boy rose from his seat as Coralen approached. In truth he was well into manhood, but Coralen could not bring himself to think of Merion as an apprentice. He looked like a boy, too. Short for an elf, with narrow shoulders and unruly hair, he could have passed for an older street urchin, were it not for the robes. Appearances could be deceiving, though.

"I got your message," Merion said as he clasped Coralen's outstretched hand, and then his mouth broke into a sheepish grin. "Well, of course, you know that. Why would I be waiting here, otherwise?" He laughed, the sound a silvery peal. The two guards at the Council Chamber doors flicked a disapproving look in his direction, and a flush rose to Merion's cheeks. It made him look younger still.

Coralen wondered whether the two guards would have dared to disapprove if they knew Merion was the youngest mage ever to address the Council, the youngest Apprentice to an Arch Mage in the Combine's history, and the youngest mage to score a confirmed dragon kill. Not some drake or wyvern, either, but a true dragon, in its prime and in full battle. Coralen's heart surged with pride at the memory of the fight. The end result for the Combine might have been yet another fighting retreat, but the Ring of Scale paid a brutal price for their victory that day.

Had that really been two years ago? Coralen shook his head in disbelief. Two years of constant retreat, and just when it seemed they had bought some breathing space, they had

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found the drake patrol and learned better. Merion would have plenty of chances to add to that tally of dragons.

Merion frowned. "Are you okay?"

Coralen gave him a half-smile. "Not really," he admitted. "There is bad news from the front."

"There is always bad news from the front," Merion said with a grin. "The way you looked just now, you'd have thought the entire dragon army was at the gates."

Their eyes met.

"No," Merion murmured. "You're not serious?"

Coralen reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder. "We'll talk after I've addressed the Council," he said.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Merion nodded towards the guarded doors. "The Council has not invited you for weeks, now. The King may be happy to ignore you if you stay out of his sight, but he can hardly do so when you stand three feet in front of him."

"He had better not ignore me," Coralen muttered. "Not this time."

"Let me speak to them," Merion urged. "You know they've been asking me to sit in on their meetings."

"Yes," Coralen agreed. "And the main question remains. Why haven't you? You could be the youngest Arch Mage in history."

Merion frowned. "The Combine already has an Arch Mage," he said. "The King dishonored us both when he dropped his hints."

Coralen's laugh rang false even in his own ears. "I've found kings seldom care about any honor other than their own. Besides, the throne passes from father to son. Why shouldn't the position of Arch Mage be the same?"

"You know you're not really my father," Merion said, the same as he always did, and just as always his face broke into a grin.

"Blood ties are overrated," Coralen said, returning the grin. "Besides, no father could be prouder of his son than I am of you." His smile faded, and he lowered his voice. "Now listen closely, for there is little time." He raced through his

instructions, watching while Merion's face moved from surprise to doubt to reluctant resolve. With a nod, the apprentice turned to leave.

"Merion?" Coralen put his hand on the younger elf's shoulder. "Move fast, but take care you are not overheard. Once this begins, there will be many who would object to the task I have given you." Without waiting for a response, Coralen spun on his heel and walked towards the two guards. They let him get within three paces before dropping their halberds across the doorway, barring access.

"Sorry, my Lord Arch Mage," the older of the guards said. "The Council is in session, and none may enter save those who sit at the King's table."

Coralen stared into the guard's eyes, wondering whether a subtle use of Compulsion might do the trick. A single bead of sweat trickled down the guard's temple, but the halberd remained as unyielding as quartz. There were two of them, and Compulsion always worked better on one. Too many competing emotions otherwise. Besides, he hated to waste magic when simpler words would suffice.

"Do you mean to say," Coralen said, keeping his voice soft, "that the Arch Mage of the Combine no longer receives a seat on the Council?"

The guards exchanged a look. "Yes, my Lord, but the King--"

"Does the King confide in foot soldiers, now?" Coralen kept his eyes firmly on the older guard, and the single drop of sweat became one of many. "Have I been replaced?"

"No, my Lord," the guard said, swallowing.

"Then the law is clear," Coralen continued. "The Council is meeting, the Arch Mage has a seat on the council, I am the Arch Mage. That is the King's Law. Do you mean to disobey your King?"

The guards shuffled on their feet, staring at each other, but the doors remained closed. Perhaps compulsion would be required after all. He opened his mouth to speak.

The halberds lifted in perfect unison, and Coralen swung the heavy doors open.

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The first thing he noticed was that the chamber hadn't changed in the months he'd been absent from it. The huge marble table, fabulous and ridiculous in equal measure, still stood in stark contrast to the drab, utilitarian stone walls. The second thing to catch his notice was that the room was nearly full. It seemed the fewer elves remained alive for the King to command, the more elves he needed to advise him. Despite the high, wood-beamed ceilings, the room was not large enough to accommodate them all in comfort. Most of the occupants stood shoulder to shoulder against the sides of the room, some blocking the wall-carved runes that added their own soft, flickering light to the glow of the sun passing through three thin windows.

The Arch Mage's ornate chair sat empty amongst the ministers and senior officers, but Coralen made no move to approach it. Instead he stopped in the doorway, let the doors close behind him, and waited for the reaction.

Prince Erador rose first, of course, while the King sat silent at the head of the table, letting his elder son speak his words for him just as he let the younger fight his battles. Erador resembled his brother, in physical terms at least, but where Keramore simmered with the prospect of imminent violence, Erador oozed unctuous charm. It worked on many. Coralen was not one of them.

"Greetings, Coralen," Erador said, smiling. "I'm afraid you have caught us somewhat off guard. The King was of the impression you had resigned."

Coralen bowed, and forced a smile of his own. "Alas, my Prince, there I must disappoint you. I simply did not wish to waste His Majesty's time with words he did not wish to hear."

"Am I to assume then," Erador said with a raised eyebrow, "that you have found something new to say at last? We were starting to think you the victim of one of your own spells, doomed to repeat yourself for all eternity." A titter rippled through the onlookers, and Erador winked, playing to the crowd.

Coralen ran his gaze over the assembled throng. He recognized a few, mostly minor nobles or the occasional influential human trader. Two ogres towered above the throng,

and he caught glimpses of dwarves and kerrans, even a gnome. Five or six junior officers exchanged glances and amused smiles. They should have been out with the patrols or watching the walls, not currying favor with the Council. At least, he thought with a touch of amusement, they will not have time to learn how far one could fall from the King's good graces.

"I can assure you, my Prince," Coralen said, "you will not have heard this. The Ring of Scale moves against us--"

"Coralen," Erador interrupted, with an impatient gesture. "Please, please, listen to yourself. Have we not heard your dire warnings enough?" Several in the audience laughed openly. "We understand," Erador continued. "Preparations for the Exodus are underway. In three weeks the boats will be ready and we will--"

Some last pillar of restraint inside Coralen crumbled to nothing. Months of frustration and insult boiled out of his soul into his words, his tone ringing with harsh judgment. "Are you finished?"

A shared gasp filled the room. Erador's eyes widened in shock. The King's brows knitted together, the most emotion Coralen had seen on his face in years. "You overstep yourself, Coralen," he murmured. The room fell silent.

Coralen laughed, enjoying their confusion and anger while a soft, dangerous voice in the back of his skull whispered to him, telling him to unleash Lightning or Fire on them, kill them all.

A bell rang.

The sound echoed through the courtyard, into the narrow embrasures, and faded. Another joined it. Another. Bastion's walls rang with a cacophony of panic.

Without a word, his eyes still on Coralen, Erador strode across the room to the window. The crowd parted ahead of him. Coralen kept his own eyes on the King. "The Ring of Scale attacks at sunset."

This time, the gasp died on two dozen lips, the only sound the thud of a fat elf merchant hitting the floor, his blank eyes staring towards the ceiling.

"Nonsense," Erador said. "It could be anything." His voice trembled.

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"You have long been deaf to my warnings," Coralen told him. "Don't prove yourself a fool now."

Erador's eyes flashed. He turned to the knot of officers. "I want him arrested," he snarled. "I want him out of this room and in the deepest pit in Bastion before he can blink."

Faces setting with resolve, the soldiers moved forward as one. Swords were not allowed in the presence of the King, but each was a veteran of the long war and Coralen knew any one of them could humiliate him in a fair fight. Coralen raised his hand, and they froze, wary looks on their faces. One glanced back at Erador, as if seeking help. Coralen wondered whether he could kill all five without harming anyone else, then decided he didn't care. He couldn't remember his last fair fight.

"Now," Erador barked.

"Father," Keramore boomed from the doorway, "the hour is at hand. Ithiosar comes." He looked at the five officers standing at arm's length from Coralen, and his face darkened. "Back," he snapped. "Leave him be."

"Brother..." Erador began.

Keramore seemed not to notice him. "Out!" He grabbed the nearest onlooker and shoved him towards the door. "I said out! All of you! This is a Council chamber, not a public gallery." He pointed at the small group of merchants trying to lift their unconscious colleague. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

"He's too heavy to lift, Prince Keramore," one protested.

"Is he a member of the Council?"

The merchant looked confused. "No, my Prince."

"Then drag him," Keramore snarled. He faced the five soldiers. "Sarthan, get these people out of here, then ensure no one else enters."

"My Prince," the senior of them said with a sullen twist to his lips, "we have orders to arrest the Arch Mage."

"And now you have new orders," Keramore said. "Don't make me repeat them." He hustled the officers out of the room, and then turned to Coralen with a half-smile. "I see you've been making friends."

Coralen shrugged. "I told you they wouldn't listen to me."

"They'll listen now. They cannot ignore the warning bells." Keramore walked over to his brother, still standing in silent shock by the window. "Erador," he said, but then fell silent.

The King stood.

One by one, the Council dropped to their knees. Keramore bowed his head. It took Coralen a few seconds to realize that only he and the King remained standing. The small voice in his mind told him that this so-called leader was no longer worthy of respect, that he should walk out of the chamber, leave Bastion while he still could, kill any who stood in his way. The King looked frail, his lined face that of a once-great warrior who had grown weak. Merion, the voice reminded him. Why risk Merion against Ithiosar? Why risk yourself against Ithiosar? Bastion is doomed. You did what you could.

His eyes never leaving the King's face, Coralen dropped to one knee.

"Talk to me, my son," the King said.

"Father," Keramore said, raising his chin, "the dragons have made their move. While we thought them resting in the north, hunting down the last pockets of our kin, they have somehow discovered a path hidden beneath the Serpentspine Mountains. They now stand poised to fall upon our walls. Two of my outlying patrols reported movement last night. Two more patrols have seen an army a hundred thousand strong. Three other patrols have not returned at all. I do not believe they ever shall."

Coralen saw the flicker of pain that crossed his friend's face at that last. Keramore had always taken it personally when his warriors died, even if there was nothing he could have done to help them.

The King nodded. "Then we must begin the Exodus today." He turned to Erador. "Send the word. Tell the people to grab what they can and begin boarding."

"There will be panic," Erador warned. His eyes stared past his father to the wall beyond.

"Control it," Keramore snapped, glaring at his brother.

"The fleet is not finished," Erador said, shrinking at his brother's anger, his voice a stunned monotone.

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"Then use the ones that are," Keramore said. His voice grew in rage with every word. "Break the ones that are unfinished and strap the planks together as rafts. Tow them behind the working ships."

Erador's eyes turned to the King, filled with pleading. "It won't work, Father. The dragons will see the fleet leaving. They will burn them from the sky. We cannot hope to escape by sea now. We will be defenseless on the open waves."

"That's true," Keramore said, his tone grim.

The King sighed, his whole body sagging. The lines in his face seemed to deepen into shadowed valleys, swallowing all hope.

Keramore gazed at Coralen. "For over a year you have warned this Council the war was lost, and they have all turned their backs on you. I will admit my pride was too strong to admit defeat until I lost..." Keramore paused, mouth working. "Until Neria was killed." The Prince crossed the room and leaned down, pulling Coralen to his feet. "Our race stands under the shadow of extinction. Can you help us now, in our hour of need?"

No, the voice raged. Tell him no. You did all you could, more than they had any right to expect. You warned them of this.

Keramore lowered his head. "Will you help *me*?"

You tried to save them and they wouldn't listen. Leave them to the fate they have chosen. Every minute you wait here takes you a minute closer to sharing that fate. Tell them no. Tell them no!

"Yes," Coralen said.

Keramore smiled, his shoulders relaxing as if released from unbearable tension. "What can you do?"

"A spell," Coralen said, mind racing. "An Illusion spell to make them see what they expect to see. They think they have caught us by surprise. They will expect ships in the dock, an army on the walls, a host of victims trapped and waiting to die. I will give them that, while the ships sail." The voice in his mind shrieked its dismay. "I will buy the ships the time to get out to sea."

"It will never work," Erador mumbled, still kneeling. "The first dragons to reach the docks will penetrate the Illusion. They will slaughter us."

Coralen swallowed. Erador spoke the truth, and there was only one way around it.

"Then I will make sure the dragons do not reach the docks," Keramore said. Their eyes met, and Coralen saw understanding in his friend's face. "You need a distraction?"

"A distraction," Coralen echoed.

Erador looked at each of them in turn. "What do you mean? You can't take our army and fight the dragon horde in the open. Our troops will be slaughtered!"

Keramore shook his head. "The army will be needed when you cross the ocean. Besides, a small force can provide a distraction as well as a larger. I will take my Teir`Dal and handle this."

"No," the King snapped, and then paused, agony etched into his face. "No," he repeated. "You are my son. I will not lose you."

"It's either me, or all of us," Keramore told him. "Father, I do not plan to become a martyr. And my Teir`Dal do not die easily, even in the midst of dragons." He mouthed something else, too faint even for Coralen's keen ears.

"My King," Coralen said, "he is right. The Teir`Dal can slow the dragon army long enough for me to create the illusion, and keep the dragons distracted so they do not test it. A small force on the walls here will serve to slow them further still. If we fill every ship, every fishing boat and skiff, if we build rafts--"

"Thousands will die," Erador blurted.

"But tens of thousands shall live," the King told him. He ran his fingers through his eldest son's hair in a tender gesture. "You will live to be King, my son," he murmured, "and you will learn that the choices are never easy. And sometimes, there is no choice at all." He turned to Keramore, and rested his hand on his youngest son's shoulder. "You are sure of this?"

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Keramore nodded. "As you say, father. Sometimes there is no choice at all."

The King smiled, pride on his face and tears in his eyes. "Then let it be so." With a sigh he turned and shuffled away, leaving the room silent but for the shuffling and breathing of the stunned Council.

Keramore patted his brother's shoulder, murmured some words in his ear, and the two embraced. Keramore turned to Coralen with a tilt of his head towards the door.

Coralen fell into step beside him as they left the Council chamber. Amazing, he thought, how easily he fell into the old ways. Once it seemed the two of them stood side by side at all times.

Keramore nodded to the guards as they crashed to attention, and gave Coralen a sideways look. "Coralen," he began, "I know we have had our differences of late."

That was an understatement. "I have had differences with many of late," Coralen said, forcing a smile. The difference was that he had never liked Erador, and had respected but not admired the King. Keramore had been almost a brother. Once.

Keramore seemed about to say something. Instead, they walked in silence for a few more steps. "Be that as it may," Keramore said, without looking, "do you feel you are really up to this?"

It took the words a step or two more to sink in. Coralen stopped dead, shock and anger fighting for control. Keramore walked on before noticing. When he did turn, the expression on his face spoke of surprise that his words could have had such an impact. Coralen tried to keep his voice even, but knew as soon as his mouth opened that he had failed. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything, Coralen." Keramore sighed, as if somehow it was Coralen and not him who was out of line. "Look, you and I have been friends a long time. Fought by each other's sides. Saved each other's lives. I will admit that Neria's death hit me hard."

Hard? The once-great warrior had been rendered worthless

by it. Coralen almost laughed, but then Keramore paused and dropped his eyes to the floor.

"Is still hitting me hard," the Prince admitted. "But the very survival of our race hangs on a blade's edge." He looked up and locked his gaze with Coralen's. "I need to know you are willing to see this through, no matter what the costs in the end may be."

Coralen looked at him, keeping his face impassive while inside he seethed. You know what the costs will be, the voice told him. They have ignored you and mocked you and now they want you to die for them. They will accept nothing less. The King and his son will escape to Kunark and leave your bones for the kobolds to pick clean.

But Keramore would stay too, and fight, and die.

Coralen made his decision.

"I understand what's at stake," he said, and grinned. "I am the mage who has never lost a battle, remember? It would be a shame to ruin that reputation today."

Keramore held out his hand with a smile, and Coralen took it. For a moment it was as if the last few years had never happened. They were young and wild and fearless, smiling as they prepared to take on impossible odds yet again, knowing that they would win as always.

Then, with a final squeeze of his hand, Keramore spun and walked away towards his chambers. He did not look back.

Coralen watched him go, a half-smile playing on his features. Tonight, when the Ring of Scale came, he would take back his reputation from the slurs and the mockery. He would remind the dragons why they feared him above all else, why even as they conquered a continent, they had never defeated him. He would do it in full view of the Combine. Every elf, every ogre or dwarf, every race and every child of the Combine would know that it was not the King or Prince Erador or their generals who had delivered them from annihilation. Each and every one of them would owe their lives to Arch Mage Coralen Larkos. He would do what they wanted. He would deliver them from evil.

But he would not die for them.



PARTINGS



Coralen stood atop the north wall, his long hair snapping in the chill autumn breeze, and watched the Teir'Dal march out to meet their fate in the mist-shrouded foothills.

They made for an impressive sight, he decided. Five thousand of them, in six thin columns, each with their Norite-tipped spears, most with swords or bows too. Despite their numbers they moved without a sound, not even a jangling of loose equipment or a muttered curse at an ankle turned on loose rock. Coralen had caught a glimpse of Keramore as their march began, leading from the front, in earnest conversation with a female who looked more fearsome than any of her colleagues. His friend never turned once. A few of Keramore's warriors spared a glance back at the walls, but each time the look on their faces was one of calm military appraisal of the defenses, not fear or wistful longing for safety. Heroes, off to do their duty, checking that the ones who stayed were ready to do their duty too.

Heroes. Coralen rolled the word around in his mouth. There were plenty to go around, it seemed. The call had been for a thousand volunteers to defend the walls of Bastion. So far, Coralen guessed, they had turned away four times that number, all in their prime, eyes glowing with eagerness to fight to the last rather than face the so-called shame of the retreat across the ocean. Coralen shook his head. Why were the young such fools?

Looking down, he watched Merion pick his way through the piles of weapons and the groups of warriors preparing themselves for battle. Another fool, he thought with a touch of pride.

“Does something amuse you, Spell-Flinger?”

The guttural voice shattered Coralen’s moment of happiness. Replacing his smile with a scowl, he turned and raised his eyes. Most thought the Arch Mage tall, but the speaker towered over him. “Just looking forward to killing some dragons,” Coralen lied.

“Good,” the ogre said, the voice a growl from deep within his huge armored chest. “It is good to take pleasure in battle. You are not as weak as you seem.”

Coralen forced a laugh. “Coming from you, Brozka, I shall take that as a compliment. I only hope to prove worthy of standing alongside your folk in this fight.” He almost laughed for real at that. Why was it he could lie and manipulate so easily when it came to lesser races, and yet the Council had never listened until it was too late?

“I grow restless,” Brozka muttered. “All day we wait, and yet they do not come, just their birds. This is not war. This is nature-watching.” A deep, bass laugh rumbled up from behind inch-thick steel plate. “You little elves love your nature.”

Coralen kept his face blank. Stupid creature. Those *birds* were wyverns, watching them from the high skies where they thought they flew unseen, forgetting how the keen eyes of elves stripped the sky of concealment. Why did the idiot ogre think they waited to begin the Exodus? Darkness offered protection, even against creatures born of it. He coughed. “Are your warriors ready?”

The beast snorted, one huge mail-gloved fist touching the hilt of the mace at his hip. The weapon’s steel tip was as large as a wyvern’s head, and could crush one without slowing. “My warriors were born ready,” he snarled. “Condemned are we, yet the legends will still tell of us for eternity.”

And you’ll still be dead, Coralen thought, suppressing a smile. He regretted the coming deaths of so many elves, but ogres were different. They lived to fight. Brozka probably looked on his coming slaughter at the hands of the dragons as a glorious opportunity. Stupid, brutish creatures. When the Koda`Dal emerged from the shadows to take their rightful

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place at the head of the revived Takish Empire, the survivors of the ogre race would return to their rightful place as slaves to their betters. Another reason you must live, the voice in his mind told Coralen. You will hold high rank when that day comes, for you will be the most famous hero of today, and you will be alive to take your reward.

With a perfunctory nod to Brozka and his breath held against the smell of metal and leather and stale sweat, Coralen squeezed past the ogre and followed the line of the wall to the stone steps that led to the courtyard. He met Merion halfway down them. Coralen clasped the outstretched hand of his apprentice, and then motioned for Merion to follow him back into the courtyard.

“Shouldn’t we be taking our places on the wall?” Merion looked confused.

“Don’t be too keen,” Coralen warned him. “You may have faced a dragon, but you have not faced an army like the one we fight tonight. Besides,” he added, softening his tone, “they won’t move until sunset. We still have time, and you have much to tell me.”

“Of course. The boat—”

“Not here,” Coralen hissed. Several soldiers looked in their direction, until he stared back at them and saw them drop their eyes. “Wait until you can show me.”

Merion nodded, and took the lead. Coralen followed him through the inner gate into the outer ward. The noise levels swelled as they skirted the edge of the vast column of refugees waiting to leave Bastion aboard the waiting ships. Sergeants and Corporals on horseback bellowed out their orders, trying to organize their charges.

A heavysset dwarf in the robes of the Moneylenders Guild murmured something to a nearby soldier and received a sharp push to the chest in return. He stumbled to the ground, a large leather purse bouncing from his hand onto the pavestones with a loud, crisp jangling sound.

“Get back with the others,” the soldier snarled. “No one leaves until the signal.”

Merion stepped over the fallen dwarf, who started to rise, spluttering, until he saw the look of angry contempt in Coralen's eyes and stuttered an apology. Coralen waited for the dwarf to clear his path before following Merion into the shadow of the west wall. The dwarves would join the ogres in proper submission when the time came.

Coralen spat on the cobblestones. Some of his secret brethren in the Koda`Dal felt that the Combine deserved to fall for the sin of letting ogres and dwarves and damned humans stand side by side with elves. The King had even given them places on the Council! The pollution of elven culture made Coralen disgusted and enraged in equal measure, but he knew enough to keep his thoughts to himself. After all, the Koda`Dal were a forbidden society now, those few of them who had survived the fall of the Empire and the war that followed. Even worse, Coralen knew that Merion would not understand. The younger elf had grown up with ogres, dwarves and the rest as a part of his daily life. He respected and even liked such creatures.

So Coralen kept the truth from his apprentice. He didn't think he could bear to see disappointment in Merion's eyes.

Merion glanced back with a furtive expression, and Coralen laughed.

The apprentice pouted. "What's so funny?"

"If anyone saw your face, they'd know you were up to no good from a mile away," Coralen said. He realized where they were, and sighed at the crushed flowers and trampled soil. The refugees who camped here had left to join the others, ready to rush to the waiting boats, but their detritus cluttered the ground. Even the stream that ran through the garden had been churned to mud. "You know," Coralen murmured, "this garden was my favorite part of Bastion. My wife and I used to come here often, back before everything went wrong." He pointed to a gnarled tree, twisted almost back on itself, its leaves a dull green while the neighboring trees shone with bright autumn pastels. "I cast my first Growth spell on that tree, to impress her. I thought I could make it tall and straight.

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You can see the result. Kallisa thought it was hilarious. She would point it out, every time we came here."

A sudden gust of wind rippled the muddy stream, and Coralen draw his cloak tighter around himself against the chill. When he turned, he saw Merion watching him, eyes brimming with sympathy.

"Come on," Merion said, and with a quick look to check they were not being observed, the apprentice ducked behind the tree. A second later, Coralen winced at the screech of rusting metal on metal, and breathed a sigh of relief as the wind carried the sound away from the distant crowd. He joined Merion at the gateway and looked down into the tunnel.

"I'm still amazed this is here," Merion said. "I would never have known about it if you hadn't told me."

Coralen chuckled. "Where did you think the stream went? Besides, every fortress needs a backdoor. You followed it all the way down?"

Merion nodded. "It gets a bit clogged up with roots and cobwebs about halfway down, but I cleared a path. Our boat will be at the bottom, waiting." A shadow of doubt flickered across his features. "Are you sure you can trust the crew? They must know their best hope of survival is to escape early, and with the others."

"Their best hope is to stick with me," Coralen said. "Besides, I long ago took steps to ensure their loyalty. They could not abandon me if they tried." He saw Merion's mouth twitch in disgust. "Oh, come now, Merion. It was just a touch of Compulsion to ensure they delivered the loyalty I was paying them for, and paying them well. You really should get over this distaste you have for Compulsion. It's a very useful spell, and you have a natural talent for it."

Merion grimaced. "That doesn't mean I have to like it. Compulsion feels, I don't know, dirty."

Coralen laughed. "And spearing a lightning bolt through an enemy's heart is clean? Or enveloping them in fire and listening to them scream and crackle in the flames? Or using Affliction to rot the flesh from their bones? War is dirty,

Merion. Life is dirty. We do what we must." He squeezed the younger elf's shoulder. "Let's get back to the wall. We have a spell to cast at sunset, and I doubt the dragons are going to sit and wait for us if we're not ready."

Closing the gate behind them, the two picked their way through the abandoned tents back to where the thousands of pale-faced refugees waited. Few gave the mages a second glance, their minds too focused on their own terror. They passed back through the gate into the inner ward, Coralen returning the salutes of those soldiers not too busy with crowd control to notice them. The scent of suppressed panic hung heavy on the air, and Coralen ran his eyes over the battlements above the restless throng, admiring the solidity of the walls and noting that the sunlight playing on the crenellations had turned a soft red. Apt, he thought, that the fortress should seem to bleed red.

When he looked down, he found himself looking into eyes he had known all his life. He blinked, and turned away to hurry towards the keep.

"Father." The familiar voice rang out. Merion stopped, his mouth open.

Stifling a curse, Coralen spun and forced a smile. "Kallor." He took a step closer. "I didn't see you there," he lied.

His son didn't respond, and Coralen draw in a sharp breath. He had forgotten Kallor's blue eyes, the very mirror of his mother's. The boy had taken after Kallisa from the start. No interest in magic, no desire to follow in his father's footsteps, just the same whimsical interest in music that had led Kallisa to become one of the finest troubadours in the Empire, back in the days when anyone really cared for music. The last Coralen heard, Kallor had become a musician of some repute himself, but it had been months since they had spoken. Years.

There was no accusation in those azure eyes now, no emotion at all. Kallor simply looked at him, as if looking at a half-remembered stranger.

He's a failure, the voice in the back of Coralen's mind told him. He's worthless to you. Let him go.

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"You're staying to fight," Kallor said. Not a question, just a statement.

"Yes," Coralen said. "You're leaving with the boats."

"Yes."

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, seconds that seemed like hours.

"Perhaps I'll see you in Kunark," Kallor said.

"Perhaps they will have need of musicians there," Coralen said, but his son had already turned away, slipping deeper into the crowd. Coralen watched him until he was lost from sight among the mass of filthy refugees and their sacks of possessions, and then headed for the keep.

Merion put his hand on his arm. "That was your son?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Coralen told him without slowing.

"But the battle is about to start, and your son is—"

Coralen brushed the hand from his sleeve. "Yes, Merion, the battle is about to start.

Keep your mind on that and not on things which do not concern you!"

"Yes, my Lord," Merion said, bowing his head.

Coralen took a deep breath. Here in the shadow of the keep, the last of the daylight seemed already banished. He put both hands on Merion's thin arms. "Look, as far as I am concerned, you are my son. You are the son I should have had."

"But he is the son you truly had," Merion said. "Your son, and Kallisa's, may she rest in the Seraphs' light."

Coralen winced. "Merion, whatever love Kallor bore for me, it died with his mother. He has never stopped wishing the wyvern had taken me, not her. I know how he feels." For a moment her face flashed before his eyes, and he blinked to clear away the images. "But the fact is Kallor is a stranger to me, and I to him. He will go with the ships, and be safe. You and I..." He paused. Outside, the last of the light faded, the sun lost below distant hills, and a tremor of fear rippled through the crowd.

Coralen smiled. "You and I, my son, have a battle to fight. And legends to create."



ILLUSION



Darkness fell, and Coralen went to work.

Ignoring the warriors around him, he drew energy from the earth and the sky, twisting them to his will. The fortress, the walls, the towering mountains of the Serpentspine, even Merion all faded to the colorless fringes of his vision as he focused on melding the elements of nature with the formless iron of his imagination. Behind him, the sounds of the crowd and the calls of soldiers ceased, as if fifty thousand lungs drew a final shuddering breath, and waited.

Waiting for a signal. Waiting for salvation.

Waiting for him.

With a juddering gasp and a wrenching pain that left his skin tingling with pleasure, Coralen unleashed his creation upon the world, and dropped to one knee.

Merion stepped forward, his face concerned, but Coralen waved him away. "It is done," he breathed. "Give the signal."

Merion barked an order, his voice surprisingly strong for such a small frame, and a dozen voices echoed him, passing the order down the line. From the tallest tower of the keep, the deep tone of a bell rang out across the darkened land, and the Exodus began in a chorus of rasping orders and half-panicked screams.

A hand reached down and pulled Coralen to his feet. Sergeant Fesler gave him a bleak grin, and gripping his spear tight, jogged away to rejoin his unit before Coralen could even ask him why he was here.

"It's like looking through water," Merion said, his voice throbbing with wonder, and Coralen turned to look back towards the ocean. He nodded. The apprentice had put it well.

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A few yards behind them, a translucent sheet seemed to hang from the brooding clouds to the ground. Beyond it, Coralen saw flickers of movement, but nothing to suggest that thousands of elves and their allies were streaming towards the shore, nor any evidence of unfurling sails and rafts being dragged towards the surf. "It looks like that because you're close," Coralen said. "Anyone or anything more than a hundred yards away will just see the fortress, the tents and the waves lapping on the shore."

Merion whistled. "It's incredible. Bastion looks empty. You've hidden everybody." He turned with his eyes blazing with admiration, but then his face dropped as he saw Coralen's grim nod.

"Let's hope the dragons don't wonder how so many could hide, or why they aren't fleeing," Coralen told him, rubbing at his eyes. Casting the spell had left him bleary eyed with sudden exhaustion.

"It is a fine trick, Spell-Flinger," Brozka grunted from the courtyard below. "But all tricks are cheap. I hope you do not deprive my warriors of our reward."

"Don't worry," Coralen sneered. "You'll get your fight." Brozka gave him a blank stare and wandered away, a company of elf warriors parting to let the ogre through. His huge armored bulk loomed over them, making them look as short as dwarves.

Merion plucked at his sleeve. "Look," he urged, pointing towards the north. A series of flickering lights flared on the horizon, before stygian darkness returned like a descending blanket.

"Draconic Fire," Coralen murmured. "Nothing else bears that hue. It has begun." His eyes met Merion's. "Send a runner to every company. Tell them to take their stations and prepare for combat."

Merion nodded, then hesitated. "Do you want to address the soldiers? You command here. They might welcome a word or two."

Coralen shook his head. "Lieutenants Jangleur and

Masteron lead the battle, not I. Besides, they all know their roles and what must be done. If they wanted stirring speeches, they should have gone with Keramore." He smiled at the memories of a dozen battles that danced through his mind, of Keramore standing tall, exhorting his warriors to new heights of bravery and sacrifice while they bayed and cheered like the fools they were. "A great one for speeches, Keramore," he added. "Loves them. Now, off you go, and remember, once the fighting starts, I want you to stay close to me."

He waited until the apprentice left, calling for a runner, then placed his hands on the cold stone of the barbican parapet and let his body sag against his locked arms. Had he always been this easily tired? All those fights, and he could not remember ever being so drained, so soon. And yet, this was not an ordinary spell. He could feel the pressure of maintaining it pulling down on his shoulders, as if a jerkin of iron ore had been draped over his torso. He glanced back at the cascading waterfall of pure magic that hung in the air. It was not perfect, but it would do.

It would have to.

Elven warriors took their places along the length of the main wall to either side, bows in hand, each with a quiver of arrows leaning against the stone in front of them. The ogres jostled for position, laughing among themselves, the sound more like the guttural barks of some foul carrion-eating dog than that of a supposedly intelligent race. A cloying, acrid smell tickled Coralen's nose, and he looked back into the courtyard to see a detachment of dwarf engineers heating several cauldrons of pitch for use in last-ditch defense of the walls. The light of the warming fires cast their shadows back onto the keep, seeming to transform each dwarf into a giant. Coralen caught himself nodding in approval. A single cauldron could drench a dozen attackers in screeching, blistering agony, and save Coralen the energy required to do it with magic. The Seraphs knew he would need that energy before the night was out.

The fortress was of a cunning design, he mused. The main gate faced north. From Coralen's position in the barbican that

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extended from the wall above the gate, he could see the full extent of the north wall and around to the west. To the east the ground plunged precipitously, adding difficulty to any attack from that route. Even if attackers managed to scramble up the rocks, archers and artillerymen on the roof of the keep could reduce any such assault to slaughter. If an enemy were smart, he would sweep around the fortress out of arrow range and attack the southwestern gate, cutting off Bastion from the sea, but dragons rarely thought in terms of outflanking. They would attack where they saw the defenders, because defeating the enemy's main strength early would allow them free rein to hunt down the survivors at their ease. Besides, the southwest gate was protected by a deep ditch and sheer wall. Only the north wall gave a covered approach route in the form of the ridge to the north, and flat ground to charge across all the way to the ditchless base of the wall.

Coralen smiled. To an assailant, the north wall looked like the weakest spot. The Ring of Scale would soon discover that Coralen's spell was not the only illusion.

Another flare tugged at his peripheral vision, and Coralen gazed back towards the battle unfolding in the distance, wondering whether Keramore's plan would work. Judging by the scarcity of the distant flames, they had either achieved total surprise or the draconic horde was smaller than estimated. The plan didn't have to hold them for long. Dawn would do it. If the sun rose and they were as yet unmolested, there might be time for all to escape. He frowned. That would be bad. It would give Keramore all the glory and Coralen Larkos none, and he had seen enough aggrandizement of the Thex clan to last even an elven lifetime. No, all his friend needed to do was distract most of the Ring of Scale army for long enough to get the boats clear and prevent Bastion being overrun. All Coralen had to do was wait.

"Drake!" The shout rang out in a high-pitched voice, shattering the silence of the night. Others soon joined it.

Coralen cursed and peered out into the darkness. He grabbed the nearest elf archer by the arm. "Where is it? Do you see it?"

"Three hundred yards, my Lord," the archer told him.

“There, by that cluster of rocks.”

Coralen followed the line of the archer’s outstretched finger, but saw nothing. The rocks themselves were almost lost in the gloom, a faint bright patch against the dark undergrowth, until the breeze caused an eddy in the clouds above and they parted for just a few seconds to let a shaft of starlight pass through and dance across the open ground to their front.

There. An indistinct black shape pressed against the pale stone. With a twitch of its long tail, the drake slid in undulating fashion into the shadow beneath the rock, fast enough that Coralen thought he had imagined it. There was no imagining the two other shapes that bounced across the rock, one pausing to let out a high cry.

A hundred smaller shrieks echoed the drake’s cry, and the imprint of scurrying movement hung upon his sight as the clouds closed again.

“Kobolds,” someone shouted. “Kobolds to the front!”

Two sharp cracks rent the air as the sentries on the keep roof released their slingshots. Sparkling in the sky, their Glowstones arced towards the line of attackers, the magical luminescence growing in strength until the open ground beneath the wall was bathed in soft, warming light. Even when the stones hit the ground and skittered to a halt, they still provided enough illumination to betray the attackers.

“Archers,” went the cry. “Draw!”

“No, you fools,” Coralen yelled. “It’s just a skirmish screen. Save your arrows!”

Too late.

“Loose!” With a single drawn-out sound, three hundred bows disgorged their deadly payload. The noise of the wind seemed to intensify, but Coralen knew that no wind had ever quite made the sound that hundreds of arrows in flight made. He had heard it dozens of times in this war, but it still sent shivers down his spine.

Perhaps fifty of the arrows found kobold flesh, slamming home with thuds that almost concealed the wet ripping sound

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of metal puncturing flesh. Kobold squeals filled Coralen's ears, overlain with the deafening screech of a drake. Coralen saw the creature writhing, throwing up clouds of fine dust as it flailed in agony at the ground, half a yard of steel-tipped wood in its spine and another through its throat.

"Draw!"

The kobolds should have scattered, half their number already dead or dying, but instead they danced amongst the dry grass fifty yards away, neither retreating nor advancing. Their chattering laughter drowned out the moans of the wounded.

"Loose!"

The whirlwind descended again. Coralen saw a kobold twitch as an arrow punched through its tiny chest and pinioned it to the dirt. It giggled as it tried to pull its frame up the slick wood of the arrow's haft, then gave a convulsive jerk and fell still, hanging six inches above the ground. A second drake stood in the open, one lifeless eye staring at the walls, the other gone, replaced by the feathered base of an arrow that had penetrated right through to the base of its skull. With a sound like leaves rustling, it collapsed into the grass.

"Stop," Coralen shouted. The breeze whipped his voice away. A handful of nearby archers glanced at him before turning their attention back to the enemy and to the louder voices of their officers.

"Draw!"

With an enraged snarl, Coralen drew strength from the iron in the rock below his feet, lacing it through his words. He felt a sudden crushing weight tugging at him, but this time his order boomed from the stone of the keep, bouncing from angle to angle, drowning out all else. Several elves cried out in fear, and the kobolds shrieked in terror. "Save your arrows," he repeated, his words still magnified tenfold. "Let them go." A hand fastened on his arm.

"The shield," Merion rasped.

Letting one spell fade, Coralen spun to look at the curtain behind him. It shimmered and twitched, and for one awful moment it parted to reveal the scene behind. The breeze had

broken the cloud cover to the south, and in the faint light of the stars he saw the glinting mass of a ship under sail. Beyond it, four more labored free of the tide, watched by the seething mass of elves and others on the beach.

Panic gripped him. He forgot all else but the need to renew the Illusion. He reached out with his mind and drew energy from his surroundings. The dwarves in the courtyard muttered oaths as the fires in their braziers dwindled almost to nothing. That heat energy made the difference. With speed and concentration born of terror, he patched the Illusion. Exhaustion struck him like an ogre's mace, and he stumbled back, almost tumbling over the wall until his knees sank from under him and left him clinging like a drowning sailor to the cold stone of the battlements, facing the enemy.

The last surviving drake met his gaze.

It could not have seen the ships, not with the mass of the Fortress looming over it, but it could not have missed the shimmer and break of the Illusion. Coralen saw understanding in the creature's blood-red eyes. The drake's leathery jaws peeled back to reveal row upon row of sharp teeth, its expression a grim caricature of a smile.

"Merion," Coralen rasped. Simply speaking the word took all his strength.

The apprentice nodded and raised one hand as the drake sprang into the air with blinding speed. Merion was quicker. For an instant the two were joined by a glowing rope of multi-colored light, orange and yellow mixing with something darker, more visceral. Coralen blinked with the glare, and the rope vanished, leaving only a vague imprint of it in the air.

The colors reassembled around the fleeing drake, cloaking it in amorphous liquid flame. It screamed. The sound was not that of a beast, but of an intelligent creature that understood and felt every ounce of the agony engulfing it, until it came to an abrupt stop. The steam of superheated blood and water exploded from its eyes and nostrils. The creature slammed into the earth, writhed a moment more, and then fell silent. A thin mist rose from its blackened corpse.

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The surviving kobolds ran. Merion took a deep breath, then raised both hands, and walked the fire down the line of tiny fleeing shapes until the night beyond the wall fell still once again.

Merion knelt down, his face etched with concern. His breathing seemed normal, Coralén noted, as if the complex and deadly havoc he had wrought had exerted him no more than a flight of stairs. He is powerful, Coralén thought with pride, and with my help he will write his name in our history.

He is powerful, the voice in his mind agreed, and could be a dangerous rival.

"Are you okay?"

Coralén nodded, and let Merion help him to his feet. "The Illusion is harder to maintain than I thought," he murmured. His knees buckled again, and Merion caught him before he fell. Coralén smiled his thanks. "You did well," he said.

Merion shook his head. "Simple stuff, if distasteful."

"Simple?" Coralén gave a snort. "I doubt there are more than a dozen mages in the Combine who could do what you did, and none without tiring themselves."

Merion grinned. "I had a good teacher."

"Let's hope so," Coralén said. "You're going to need to do that again many times before the sun rises tomorrow. I'm afraid I'm not going to be much use."

"I'll do you a deal," Merion said, looking younger than ever. "You maintain the Illusion, I'll kill dragons. We'll compare notes in the morning."

"Done." They clasped hands.

"I just wish we had a few more mages," Merion said with a wistful glance towards the shield.

Coralén shook his head. "They were needed with the boats in case we failed. Besides, the bards don't sing of the many. They sing of the few."

"Well," Merion muttered under his breath, "we're certainly that."

Coralén laughed. He felt his strength returning. The Illusion still weighed heavy on him, but without the distractions of other spells he knew he could maintain it long enough.

The bards don't sing of illusionists, the voice warned. They sing of dragon killers.

"Shut up," he muttered.

"Sorry?" Merion gave him an odd look.

Coralen rubbed his face and eyes, and stifled a yawn. "I said what's going on down there?" He pointed to the ground beneath the wall, where a dozen or more elves picked their way through the bloody corpses of the kobolds, giving Merion's char-blackened victims a wide berth.

"I don't know," Merion admitted.

As Coralen watched, one tall elf in a sleeveless leather jerkin reached down and grabbed hold of an arrow, placing his boot on the dead creature's face. With a jerk of his sigil-tattooed arms, he wrenched the arrow free. A trick of the breeze carried the popping sound to Coralen's ears, even from fifty yards. "Come on," Coralen said. "Let's go down into the courtyard."

"I don't understand why they attacked with so few," Merion said as they descended the steps, both of them ignoring the awed looks that nearby warriors gave the apprentice. "They weren't even carrying scaling ladders."

Coralen gave him a smile. The boy knew magic. He didn't know war. "What's the first thing you do when you fight a duel, Merion? You sound out your opponent. You see what weapons he has, what he can do and what he can't. The enemy knows now that we have only a few hundred archers, and that we don't have the discipline to hold our fire when faced with a handful of pathetic kobolds." He clapped his apprentice on the shoulder. "Or at least they would know if it weren't for you. Worse, they would know about the Illusion."

"It was still a waste, to send so few," Merion grumbled.

"If it makes you feel better, son, they'll send more next time. Trust me, when the main body arrives, we won't be worried about wasting arrows."

Merion glanced at the wall, as if he could see through it to the hills beyond. "When will that be?"

Coralen shrugged. "We should have a few hours, if

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Keramore has done his job. Those flashes we saw on the horizon should have been his attack. He's brave enough to fight his way through a lot of them, and stupid enough to invite the rest to chase him when they should be attacking us."

The heavy oak and steel doors of the main gate stood ajar. Three elves entered, talking in low voices, each carrying an armful of blood-soaked arrows. Coralen recognized the leader. "Sergeant Fesler," he shouted. "Who gave the order for you to go outside?"

The sergeant snapped to attention, eyes glaring, throwing up a salute that Coralen ignored. "I did, my Lord."

Coralen stepped forward until he was close enough to feel Fesler's breath on his cheeks. He could sense Fesler's anger and distrust. "Would you like to tell me why you took the decision to open the gates without higher authority?"

A touch of a sneer crept into Fesler's voice, the contempt of a military man for someone he saw as a mere politician, albeit one with magic. "We're already going to struggle to find enough arrows when the main attack comes, without wasting them on filth like kobolds. They were no threat to us behind the walls, and all we did was waste our efforts and betray our strength. The good lieutenants might have known that better if they were down here rather than watching from a window in the keep." He paused. "My Lord," he added. The word sounded like it had been ripped from his protesting lips.

Coralen broke eye contact to scan the courtyard around them. Dozens of elves and a handful of dwarves stood watching, waiting for his next words. They had seen what elven mages could do. He swung his gaze back to Fesler, pleased to see the single drop of perspiration that trickled past the Sergeant's temple, carving a thin damp trail through the House colors painted on his face. "And what would you have done, Sergeant Fesler?"

"Sir," Fesler began, his voice betraying no hint of the fear he must have been feeling, "I would have ordered all defenders to crouch behind the parapet so that the bastards would have nothing to report. Then I would have detailed half a dozen

good shots to take them out one by one, starting with the drakes. Then I would have ordered someone else other than me to go outside and police up the spent arrows. Sir."

Coralen nodded. Without taking his eyes from Fesler's, he pointed one finger at the elf behind him. "You."

The elf trembled, the arrows in his arms clattering to the stones. "Me, sir?"

"Yes, you. Go to the keep and find Lieutenant Jangleur and Lieutenant Masteron. Give them the Arch Mage's regards and tell them that Lieutenant Fesler now commands all forces at Bastion. They may rejoin their warriors on the walls."

Fesler blinked. The trembling elf stood rooted to the spot.

Coralen shifted his eyes, just enough to stare at the messenger. "Go," he said in a low voice. With a start the elf bolted, feet slipping for a moment on the discarded arrows before his soft leather soles found traction and he raced into the fortress.

Merion leaned in close to whisper in Coralen's ear. "Can you do that?"

"I don't know," Coralen said. "What do you think, Lieutenant Fesler? Can I do that?"

Fesler shifted in discomfort. "My Lord, promotion to officer rank requires a signed commission from the King or Prince Keramore."

Coralen couldn't tell if Fesler was disappointed or not at that. The soldier's face remained devoid of any obvious emotion. "The King is in the first boat," Coralen murmured, "fleeing for his life with his heir and his precious Council. If you want to ask him, you had better learn to swim fast. Prince Keramore is knee-deep in dragon blood right now, and doesn't want to be disturbed. So unless you know someone who outranks me, let's just assume I have whatever authority I choose fit to give myself. The defenders of Bastion are yours. Do I make myself clear?"

Fesler banged up a perfect salute. "Yes, sir!" He glanced down at his shoulders and for the first time, a rueful expression slipped across his scarred features. "I don't have officer badges of rank, sir."

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Coralen smiled. "I shouldn't worry, Lieutenant. I expect in a few hours most of us will be dead. I'm sure Masteron or Jangleur will let you have theirs once they no longer need them. Get about your business, now. This fortress won't defend itself." He lowered his voice and stepped closer. "And don't let me down. You don't want to let me down, do you, boy?"

Fesler swallowed. "No, my Lord." He turned and hurried away.

"One last thing, Fesler," Coralen called, and waited for the new officer to turn. "Why did you volunteer? You could have been halfway to Kunark by now."

Fesler smiled, the scar creasing until it formed a natural extension to his mouth. "I always fancied being a hero, sir."

Coralen nodded. "Stay alive long enough and I'll make you one." He waved the Lieutenant away and turned back to Merion, wincing as the weight of the Illusion made itself known again, tugging at his spine, squeezing his lungs. He took a deep breath and forced himself to remain upright as darkness threatened to engulf his vision.

"You should sit down," Merion said.

"Plenty of time for that when we're—" He stopped himself just in time to avoid saying *on the boat*. "When we're dead," he finished instead, flashing what he hoped was a confident grin at the bystanders. Most had already drifted away, returning to their posts. A dwarven master engineer offered a deep, respectful bow. Coralen nodded his head, just a touch. With any luck, the enemy would tire themselves eating the ogres and the dwarves first.

Merion ran one hand through his untidy hair, ruffling it even further. "What now?"

Coralen shrugged. "Now we wait."

"Enemy front," a voice bellowed, and the cry rippled along the walls above them. A knot of warriors slammed the gate shut again and dropped the tree-thick bar into place. Coralen sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Ask me that last question again."



ONSLAUGHT



This time, Coralen Larkos did not need an archer to point out the enemy.

The wind had shaken the cloud, dislodging enough that small patches of starlight blended with elven vision to rob the Ring of Scale of their ally, darkness. Coralen almost wished it hadn't, and that he could have the peace of ignorance back again. He knew with one glance that the captured drake hadn't lied, and that the draconic army was everything they had feared and more. The horde marched in thick columns, twisted and depraved kobold banners fluttering in the wind as they crossed the ridgeline to the north, vying for space with dozens of makeshift scaling ladders.

"I've never seen such numbers," Merion breathed.

"There will be fewer later," Coralen said, but his confidence rang hollow in his ears. Keramore had failed. Whatever distraction he had tried, it had not been enough. The Teir`Dal should have cost the Ring of Scale hours, but one look at the dark wave of evil cascading down the ridge towards them, and he knew the Teir`Dal were all dead.

One of the archers just along the wall from them dropped his bow and fell to his knees. "Solusek, bring us your light. Mithaniel, lend us your courage."

Fesler clambered up the steps and grabbed the archer by the collar, dragging him to his feet. "Pick up your weapon," he snarled. "You'll do more good with that than with your prayers." He shoved the archer aside. "My Lord, the defenders of Bastion stand ready and await your signal."

"Your signal, Fesler," Coralen reminded him. "We will contribute where we can, but I have perfect faith in you."

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With a grimace, Fesler turned away, bellowing orders. With some reluctance, a childlike part of him hoping that ignoring them could make them go away, Coralen turned his attention to the enemy again.

Be calm, he told himself. Think of the duel. How many are they? How many kobolds? Twenty thousand, maybe thirty? They're still pouring over the ridge, damn them. Is there no end? Each file of forty has a drake to lead it, so let us say eighty to one hundred drakes, perhaps more. The numbers don't add up. This is just the vanguard, and there's still more to come. No dragons, thank the Seraphs. They will be here, though, sooner rather than later. Ithiosar is out there somewhere. He'll let the kobolds sap our strength before he risks himself.

Dozens of thin, menacing shapes rose above the horde, and Coralen spat on the parapet to rid his mouth of the sour taste of fear. Wyverns.

They flew over the ridge at low level, less than ten feet above the thin spear tips of the kobolds below. Coralen nodded in understanding. It was how he would have fought the battle too. Use the wyverns to distract and pin the defenders, neutralizing their bows long enough for the kobolds to close up on the wall and deploy the ladders. Numbers would surely tell, then. Any elf soldier was a match for a dozen kobolds, but not twenty or thirty. Up close, drakes were deadly, a whirling mass of teeth and talons, hard to hit and armored enough to stop all but a powerful blow. Coralen blinked, his vision flickering for an instant to another battlefield, another day. Ithiosar had fought this way that day too. Coralen had survived. Kallisa had not.

He tore his eyes from the onrushing wyverns long enough to look at Merion. The apprentice stood with his feet apart, braced for battle, eyes burning with wild excitement. Coralen realized his jaw was clenched tight enough to bring pain. He would die before he let Merion share Kallisa's fate. He would let every elf in the Combine die, if that was what it took.

"Draw!" Fesler's voice rang out.

Shrieking their raucous cries, the wyverns turned their noses to the skies, leathery wings beating for altitude.

“Loose!”

Some of the wyverns made it in time, Coralen saw, the ones who were smarter or faster or just luckier. Many did not. Screaming in outraged terror, they flew through the thick shower of descending arrows. Broad blade arrow tips scythed through the thin membranes of wings, severing tendons, shattering bones. Several wyverns plunged to the ground as if made of lead. One flapped upwards in despair despite the half-dozen arrows pin-cushioning its torso, until the wyvern’s tiny brain finally got the message that it was dead and the creature dropped in a lazy spin, wings still twitching in the air. Coralen ducked out of reflex as another plunged straight at him, dead eyes staring either side of the shaft lodged in its skull. Losing height at the last moment, the flying corpse hammered into the stones beneath the parapet with a sickening crunch of snapping bone.

With a howl of pure hate, the wyverns above them rolled and dived towards Bastion.

Fesler’s roar rose above the fearful gasps of defenders. “Down!”

Coralen hurled himself to the cold stone, squeezing his body against the battlements. He saw others doing the same along the length of the wall, and then felt the startling rush of heat as a dozen wyverns unleashed their dragonfire. Liquid flame poured over the stone, bubbling and melting at every point it touched. An elf, too slow to duck into cover, staggered away from the wall, his mouth open in soundless agony until he tumbled to the courtyard below, a rising column of smoke all that remained of his face.

Most of the wyverns wheeled away to prepare for another attack, but with a thunderous leathery flapping one kept coming, passing over the wall. It hovered above Coralen, blotting out the sky. Lowering its head, it fixed him with eyes that burned with malevolence and the urgent need to kill. Jaws parted, and Coralen winced. Drop the shield, the voice urged. Drop the shield and defend yourself!

He hesitated, remembering the glimpse of near-defenseless ships in the bay beyond.

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If you die, the shield dies with you, the voice raged. Do it! Then the world exploded in light and heat.

He had left it too late. Regret pulsed in his ears with each crashing beat of his heart. And yet, he should have been dead, not able to think. Opening eyes that streamed tears from the sudden glare, he blinked away the pain. The wyvern was gone.

A feeble squeal tugged at his ears, and he looked down to see the wyvern thrashing in the courtyard, one wing torn away, leaving nothing but a glowing stump. Lacking forearms, the creature clawed at the ground with its back legs, the surviving wing flapping uselessly, until a dwarf engineer crushed its ribcage with a mason's hammer.

"Thank you," Coralen told Merion. The apprentice nodded, already scanning for his next target.

"Archers, fire at will," Fesler called. "Pick your targets and put them down!"

The wyverns swung around in a wide turn and descended again. Instead of a mass volley, they were met by aimed shots, learning as so many of their kin had that nothing alive could match an elven archer for accuracy. Arrows punched through draconic flesh. Only two survived, somehow unscathed. One climbed away, wings flapping desperately for altitude. The other dove towards Brozka, mouth opening to reveal cruel teeth, ready to fasten on the ogre's head.

Brozka took a half step back, and smashed his club across the wyvern's head. The lifeless corpse slammed into the ogre's chest with a sharp ring of bone on steel. Brozka didn't seem to notice the impact. Pushing back the visor of his helm to reveal a broad grin, he picked up the bulk of the dead wyvern without noticeable effort and flung it from the parapet.

A deafening peal of thunder rattled from the wall. Coralen looked up, expecting to see storm clouds, but there were none. Instead he saw steaming fragments fluttering to the ground like dead moths, all that remained of the final wyvern.

"I didn't teach you that spell," Coralen said.

Merion gave him a grin. "I improvised. Seems to work well, though."

He is strong, the voice said. Too strong, perhaps. He can be an ally or a rival, but not both. Coralen shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the words, and then looked up as an enraged roar filled the air.

As if the thunderclap had been a pre-arranged signal, the kobold horde raced forward, tens of thousands of bodies racing over the stone, their neat files forgotten. There seemed something comic about them, each only tall enough to reach an elf's waist, but Coralen knew too many elves that had died because they underestimated them. A single kobold could still slash a hamstring or eviscerate a belly, but they were pack creatures, swarming over their victims until they could drive their short, slender spears into chests or skulls. Drakes bounded between them, moving with sinewy, serpentine speed, mouths lolling open like rabid dogs, choosing the safety of numbers over the arrow-drawing isolation of flight.

"Volley fire," Fesler called. "Draw! Loose!"

The whirlwind returned. With so many targets packed close together, almost every arrow found flesh. Coralen saw dozens fall writhing to the ground or collapse without a sound, their bodies disappearing beneath the seething mass.

"Draw! Loose!"

Hundreds more kobolds dropped, slaughtered where they stood. Coralen brushed away sweat from his brow. Five hundred dead, perhaps, yet the Horde seemed untouched. With the crash of wood on stone, the first kobolds reached the wall and threw their narrow scaling ladders against it. Almost fighting amongst themselves to be the first up each ladder, they scrambled up in a line of dark, gnarled shapes, their spears and daggers flashing in the thin starlight.

"Drop bows," Fesler shouted. With a clatter, three hundred archers dropped their precious ranged weapons on the stone and drew sword or spear.

The first kobold leapt onto the parapet with a triumphant cackle, only to shriek as six foot of spear tore through its chest. Its killer lifted the kobold up, and with a twitch of the spear's shaft, flicked the body into the crowd below. It

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disappeared from sight, trampled underfoot in an instant. Swords hacked down to cleave through skulls and torsos. A small round shape flew through the air, the headless body it left behind trying to continue scrambling up the ladder for a moment before spinning end over end, knocking three or four more kobolds loose.

An elf screamed as a kobold drove its spear into his eye. Another slumped to his knees, pink bloody froth bubbling from his shredded windpipe. Three more kobolds landed on the parapet, straddling the dying elf until the defenders hacked them down.

Flapping onto the parapet, a drake gutted three defenders in a blur of flashing claws and spattering blood, before being pinned to the ground by half-a-dozen spears. Its maw continued to snap as death took it.

“Engineers,” Fesler roared. “Burn them!”

Thick, stumpy legs almost tripping over themselves, the dwarves lumbered up from the courtyard. Each pair carried between them a pot of the viscous, steaming pitch. Tasking their positions, and without any signal between them, they poured the contents almost in unison onto the writhing throng below. A thousand tiny voices cried out in unspeakable agony as the molten tar melted through flesh and melded with bone. Ladders caught fire and collapsed, their passengers clinging on to the last in vain hope before tumbling into the inferno below.

The mass of the assault force pulled back. Even kobolds, driven by drakes, would not advance into the hellish heat that had already consumed so many of their colleagues. Fesler bellowed more orders, and the archers began raining death on the milling throng again.

“We’re winning,” Merion yelled in exultation, and then the joy in his eyes faded. Coralen followed his gaze to the solitary wyvern in the distance. No, not a wyvern.

Too big. Too lumbering. Too slow.

And yet a thousand times more deadly.



LIGHTNING



“Dragon!” Coralen shouted, his voice lost in a hundred frightened cries.

With an ear-shattering bellow, the dragon dived. Coralen caught a glimpse of a banded purple and black torso, like a giant pit adder, before he flung himself down, grabbing and dragging Merion with him. The apprentice muttered a protest but then the world seemed to disappear in a maelstrom of noise and flame and agonized screams.

Coralen rolled onto his back, feeling his robes smoldering under him, in time to see a huge shape pass overhead. Its massive wings beat waves of hot air onto the survivors below. With a triumphant roar it flew on and blinked out of sight.

“It’s gone through the Illusion,” Coralen gasped, before a wracking cough burst from his scorched lungs. A surge of relief shuddered through him as Merion clambered to his feet. Coralen pulled at the apprentice’s sleeve, wincing as sections of the charred material came away in his hand, burning his skin. “Are you okay?”

Merion nodded, his face pale beneath the coat of soot.

With sudden awful realization, Coralen saw that they stood almost alone on the wall. A handful of elves had survived the blast of dragonfire that had swept across the barbican and the middle section of the north wall. Dozens of others lay twisted and smoking. Huge gaps in the line opened where warriors had been reduced to blackened smears on the stone. He saw Fesler struggling to stand, the Lieutenant’s scars stark white against the burnt ochre of his face. Brozka roared a challenge at the vanished dragon,

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his plate armor flecked with streaks of carbon and his eyes mirroring the dragonfire.

A whoop of joy and bloodlust burst from the kobold army. As one, they charged down the slope again.

"Fesler," Coralen said, "gather the survivors. Pull in all your forces from the outer walls and marshal them here, or Bastion is lost." Fesler nodded, giving no sign any pain despite severe burns and clothing that still smoked. "Merion," Coralen continued, "come with me."

"They will need me here," Merion protested.

"We have to get that dragon," Coralen snapped. "If we don't, the whole fleet will be lost. Bastion will fall for nothing!" He waited for Merion to nod, then raced along the wall, hurdling over the bodies of dead and dying elves, shoving his way through the stream of reinforcements racing in from the untouched wall sections to left and right. It felt like running in full armor, the effort of maintaining the spell weighing him down. The wall took a sharp turn to the south, and still sprinting, he plunged through the waterfall of the Illusion.

It surprised him that there was no physical sensation. One moment the view to the south showed only the fortress and empty beaches, the next the ocean teemed with boats. A handful of ships were clear, racing towards the horizon, but most languished within a mile of the beach, their crews battling with oars to fight free of the offshore breakers and incoming tide. Like a huge, obscene torch, one of the ships floated in a column of fire. Tiny puffs of steam popped from the water around it as burning sailors and refugees flung themselves into the ocean's icy embrace in a desperate bid to survive.

Above the doomed vessel, the dragon banked away to find another target.

"Thank the Seraphs," Coralen breathed. He saw the look of shock on Merion's face. "The dragon is still this side of the Illusion," he explained. If the creature had been smarter, if it had been Ithiosar, it would have turned and reported back to the rest of the Army, and they could have ignored Bastion and gone straight for the fleet. Instead it got greedy, and

decided to help itself to the easy pickings of the boats.

If it had been Ithiosar, they would all be dead now.

The dragon plunged towards a single-mast skiff laden with soldiers. A shower of arrows met it, bouncing uselessly from its thick armored hide. Coralen heard the distant screams as fire engulfed the boat.

Coralen turned to Merion. "Can you hit it from here?"

Merion shook his head with a grim expression. "I can try, but at this distance, I'm as likely to hit a boat as the dragon. Even if I hit it, the spell will have lost so much power it will only draw its attention."

"Then draw its attention," Coralen said.

Merion nodded, and lowered his face towards the stone of the wall beneath their feet. Coralen shivered as the younger mage draw energy from the surroundings, including his teacher. He heard Merion's breathing stabilize, one, two, three deep breaths.

Then the apprentice raised his head, jaw set, and pointed one finger at the distant dragon.

Lightning arced through the air in a twisted, undulating cable, illuminating the sky and throwing dazzling reflections from the water. The end of the beam rippled and weaved, a snake sniffing out its prey, then lunged forward and struck its target beneath the left wing.

The dragon bellowed with pain. Chunks of immolated scale spun away and splashed into the sea. So much power to break dragonscale at that range, the voice told Coralen. Could you have hurt it so much?

Swinging its head from side to side, the dragon turned towards shore and flew at them, snarling.

"Well, now you've done it," Coralen told him, raising an eyebrow. Merion half-smiled, but Coralen could see the fear on the boy's face. He felt it himself. With the weight of the Illusion still holding him, he felt naked, defenseless. Only Merion stood between them both and total annihilation. The dragon flew closer, jaws glowing as it gathered fire. Coralen looked at Merion again, saw determination mingle with the fear. Make me proud, son. Make me proud.

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With a banshee yell, Merion raised both hands and unleashed the lightning.

The dragon's eyes went wide. For a second it flew cloaked in a blue nimbus, and then the lightning wrapped around it like tangleweed, smaller streaks joining the whole into a flaring net of energy. The dragon flickered, and Coralen saw an image of skull and spine and ribs flashing white against the black backdrop of the night. He reached out and grabbed Merion, and pulled the apprentice back as the dead weight of the creature plummeted into the wall, smashing through stone and tumbling into the ditch below. With a crash, a whole section of the wall collapsed on top of the beast.

Merion coughed, and waved away the cloud of dust that rose from the gaping rent in the stone where he had stood five seconds earlier.

Coralen ruffled Merion's hair, sending more dust into the air. "Have I ever told you about the greatest honor of my life?"

Merion shrugged. "I know what you're going to say. I don't want to be Arch Mage. I know it's an honor, but--"

"Not Arch Mage," Coralen interrupted. "Having you as my apprentice. That's the true honor. Do you know how many mages in the Combine have two dragon kills?"

"No."

"Two," Coralen said. "They're both sitting right here."

Merion smiled. "Thank you. I wouldn't be anything without...wait a second. It's gone very quiet at the wall."

Coralen felt his stomach lurch. In the fury of the fight with the dragon, all other thought had fled his mind. "The Illusion works both ways. Come on." With a last glance at the half-buried carcass of the dragon, he led the way back along the wall and plunged through the Illusion.

And saw defeat.

With the barbican stripped of almost all its defenders, the kobolds had gained the foothold for which so many had died. The top of the wall swarmed with small bodies, their blades flashing as they hacked into elven flesh. Coralen caught a glimpse of Fesler, drenched in blood, hacking a path clear

to reach a knot of nearby spearmen. A stream of kobolds dropped down into the courtyard, despite the arrows that scythed through them from the outer wall. Dwarf engineers rushed to meet this new threat, and for a moment forced them back with axe and hammer. More kobolds tumbled down on top of the dwarves. The fight did not last long.

The kobolds, chittering and giggling, raced to unbolt the main gate and let the horde in.

“Father,” Merion yelled, “you have to drop the Illusion. All is lost if we do not stop them here, and I cannot do it alone!”

Coralen shook his head.

“We can put it back afterwards,” Merion implored. “They might not see. At least it would give us a chance.”

The boy is right, the voice muttered. If the fortress falls now, you will not reach your boat. You will die here with a thousand other fools, and none will remember anything but your failure. Sighing, Coralen closed his eyes and braced himself for the wrench of letting the Illusion leave him. The Arch Mage who never lost a battle, the voice mocked. What do you call this?

With a colossal creak, the gate began to open.



SACRIFICE



“Spell-Flinger!”

Coralen opened his eyes and looked down at the courtyard. Brozka stood there, his armor slick with blood, twenty of his fellows gathered around him. The ogre raised a huge mailed fist and shook it at the sky. “Watch and learn, Spell-Flinger. See how a true warrior fights!”

With a roar, Brozka lunged forward just as the gate swung fully open and a mass of kobolds poured through. The ogre swung his mace in wide, sweeping arcs, and to pass within those arcs was oblivion. Crushed kobolds spun through the air. To his right, a second ogre slashed with a broadsword as if cutting hay with a scythe. A dozen kobolds came apart in a shower of blood and viscera.

“It’s like watching the Reaper herself,” Merion gasped as the ogres advanced, kobolds falling like the autumn leaves in Bastion’s gardens. The front ranks of kobolds tried to retreat, but with more of their comrades forcing their way through the gate into the courtyard, the enclosed space of the gateway became a fratricidal melee. Until the ogres closed again, and turned it into an abattoir.

“Come on,” Coralen urged. “We have to clear the wall.”

Coralen could not tell whether the kobolds had been distracted by the slaughter of their kin or Fesler had succeeded in rallying the defenders. Either way, a counterattack had begun. Advancing behind methodical spear thrusts, the elven infantry closed from either side, while a group of archers atop the keep poured a relentless stream of arrows into the shrinking, tight-packed group in the center. Coralen saw

fresh kobolds clamber over the parapet from ladders, only to pause in horror at the devastation around them.

With Coralen leading, they reached the front of the wall and looked down on the battle. The steel-clad ogres had hacked their way free of the gates, but now stood like metal islands in the midst of a sea of enemies. At first glance they seemed impervious, but a closer look showed each bore a dozen puncture wounds in their armor. An ogre on the far side of the formation struggled to clear its battleaxe of the dead bodies of kobolds, and the delay proved fatal. Scrambling upon the ogre from all sides, thirty or more kobolds bore him to the ground. The armored fighter twitched once as a kobold blade drove through his visor into his brain, and the body disappeared from sight behind the onrushing hordes.

Brozka crushed a kobold's skull between his steel-sheathed fingers and looked up. "Close the gate, Spell-Flinger," he said, the words muffled by his blood-drenched helmet.

"We can't," Merion said. "They will be trapped outside."

But if the gates stayed open, the kobolds would get inside again and Bastion would fall.

The ogre slammed his mace down onto another group of kobolds, killing two and leaving the third squealing at the sight of its pulped legs. "Don't delay, Spell-Flinger."

Coralen nodded, and gave the order. Merion bowed his head. The gates swung shut with a mocking note of finality.

Brozka raised his visor and smiled. Lifting one bloody fist, he smashed it against his breastplate in salute. Then he dropped the visor, and turned back to the slaughter.

Coralen slumped against the parapet, feeling sick to his core. He watched the last of the kobolds on the wall hunted down and killed, and caught a glimpse of Fesler directing arrow fire in support of the dwindling ogre force. How the new Lieutenant still stood with such wounds was beyond him.

"Maybe I can clear a path free for them with fire," Merion said.

Coralen shook his head. "Brozka made his decision. You would dishonor him if you tried to help him retreat. Save

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your strength for the next wave." He rested his head against the cold stone, closed his eyes, and listened to the sounds of combat dwindle to nothing. The Illusion felt so heavy, and dawn was still hours away.

“My Lord?”

Coralen opened his eyes, heavy with sleep. A young page stood in front of him, wearing the livery of one of the minor houses. “What is it, boy? Another attack?”

“My Lord, I was sent to tell you that the last of the ships are away.” The page grinned. “The Exodus has succeeded!”

Suppressing the surge of hope in his chest, Coralen clambered to his feet and gave Merion a nudge. The young apprentice snapped awake and Coralen pulled him up. Along the length of the wall, elves crouched behind the parapet, one keeping watch for every one asleep. He saw an archer using a dead kobold as a pillow. Nearer to him, an elf lay in a puddle of blood, lifeless eyes staring from within a familiar face. Mantaes, Coralen thought. Another fool who stayed when he should have gone.

With a nod to the page, he led Merion along the wall, one eye watching the kobold horde squatting below the ridgeline. It felt like thirty thousand eyes followed him as he walked. He forced a jaunty strut, still not daring to hope, and they passed through the Illusion.

He gasped.

A hundred sails dotted the sea towards the horizon. The beaches stood empty. The docks stood empty. Nothing remained of the fleet within three miles of the coast, except for a single fire-blackened mast poking free of the shallow water.

“We did it,” Merion whispered. “We got them all away.”

Coralen smiled. “Most of them,” he said. “But we’ve still got a few to get free. Or did you forget the Ring of Scale?”

“No,” Merion said. He leaned over the wall and spat onto the dead dragon. “They won’t forget us, either.”

They passed back through the Illusion, to be greeted by a wall of sound.

“Archers, draw!”

Driven forward by drakes, the wave of kobolds scrambled over their own dead towards the walls.

“Loose!”

The whirlwind struck, seeming lesser now. Less than a hundred arrows took to the air. Most found new homes in kobold flesh.

Coralen nodded towards the Illusion. “I don’t believe we need this anymore, do you?”

Merion grinned. “No, my Lord, I don’t believe we do.”

Coralen took a deep breath, and let the spell fade.



AFFLICTION



Like a drowning child pulled to the surface, Coralen filled his lungs and felt the weight of the Illusion drop from his shoulders. He watched as the air shimmied for a moment, but this time the view hardly changed. He turned his attention to the battle before him.

More kobolds and drakes poured forward. Maybe twenty thousand between the ridge and the wall, packed in close. Vulnerable. Ready to die.

“Merion, find Fesler,” Coralen said. “Tell him to pull his warriors back from the wall into the courtyard.”

“What? We’ll be overrun.”

“Do as I say. And tell him that they should cover their faces, and try not to breathe too deep.”

A flicker of understanding crossed Merion’s face, edged with a trace of disgust. He ran without a word to the knot of warriors in the barbican, which now stood like a stone isthmus in a sea of kobolds.

Coralen brushed his fingers along the stone of the wall, watching as more kobolds poured into the mass at the base of the wall. They had lost most of their ladders, and he saw in an instant what they were trying to do. Kobold arms flung kobold corpses into great piles, layering them one on top of the other, ignoring the scattered incoming arrows that did nothing but add grim fresh building material.

He heard the voice in his head chuckle. They will be able to build a pile as high as the keep soon.

Pushing out with his mind, he reached tendrils of thought along and into the ground, searching out the deep, dark places

of the earth, sucking the putrescence from the long dead and the freshly killed. Without the weight of the Illusion, he felt a century younger. With so many corpses to choose from, he knew there was almost no limit to the strength he could bring to bear. Through the haze of power bubbling through his veins, he saw Fesler and Merion locked in argument. The Lieutenant glanced at him, and Coralen stared back, glowering until the officer nodded and began shouting orders Coralen could not hear over the rush of imminent slaughter in his ears.

With a moment's hesitation, the elves raced for the nearest stairs down to the courtyard and streamed away from the wall towards the gardens and the safety of the keep. The kobolds screamed in triumph, redoubling their efforts. The highest of the unspeakable piles almost reached the top of the wall now.

Coralen smiled, and exhaled.

At first the cloud that emerged from his lips seemed little more than a puff of air, one that stank of decay and rotten swampland and the murk of dark water. It grew as more followed, a steady brown-green fog that poured from Coralen's lungs long after they should have emptied of air. Roiling along the wall, it clung to the stone and sank over the parapet into the mass below.

The first kobold scaled butchered flesh to reach the top of the wall, and breathed in the fog.

A distant buzz filled the air. The kobold swung its tiny hand in front of its face, as if brushing away an unseen insect, and then it screamed, a shocking gurgling sound. It tumbled back into the army below. Its scream was joined by others. It clawed at its own throat, flesh sloughing off in sickly yellow and pink chunks.

Panicked, the kobolds tried to fall back, but the fog moved faster. It enveloped them, the buzzing sound growing stronger with each new kobold that disappeared into the cloud. The fog moved across the landscape, leaving behind it huddled masses that decayed into the ground itself, flesh turning pink then brown then dissolving until it was unrecognizable as anything that had ever lived. Only when it reached the ridge

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did the cloud break, falling apart in the stiff autumn breeze, a field of noisome, shapeless carnage in its wake.

Silence descended, broken only by the sound of Coralen's laughter.



FALL



Coralen awoke to sunshine.

Merion stood over him, one hand resting on the trunk of a tree, his eyes on the wispy clouds beyond the north wall. Healers walked among small groups of wounded scattered throughout the outer ward, doing what they could. Three elves sat nearby, laughing and joking. Each of them bore at least one bandage, their ruined clothes drenched with blood, but at least they were alive. Coralen could tell it was early, with the autumn sun only just rising above the walls, but its rays brought a pleasing warmth and every sign that the day would be a beautiful one.

"You called me father," he said.

Merion looked down. "You're awake. I thought after that last spell, you'd sleep for a month. What did you say?"

"You called me father. During the fighting."

Merion smiled. "You must have been hearing things, my Lord. They say that often comes with elves of your age." He grinned, and looked again towards the wall. Coralen saw sentries patrolling along the parapet, behind and above the approaching figure.

"Lieutenant Fesler," Coralen called, too tired to rise. "How does it feel to be a hero?"

Fesler grunted. "I'm not sure I'd know, sir."

Coralen laughed. "An elf could walk from the wall to the ridge without once stepping on anything but the corpses of our enemies. I'd say that qualifies you. I see you found some badges of rank." He pointed towards the Lieutenant's sigil on Fesler's left shoulder. His right shoulder remained bare.

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“One, at least. Is that all Masteron would let you have?”

“Jongleur,” Fesler corrected. “And one shoulder is all we could find of him. We couldn’t find Masteron at all. Him and a dozen others.”

Merion frowned. “The butcher’s bill is extensive,” he told Coralen. “We’re down to about two hundred and fifty soldiers who can hold a spear or a bow. We’ve got nearly as many wounded. Maybe half of those will live.” He looked at Fesler. “Lieutenant, I don’t mean to sound rude, but if there’s nothing else I’d like to give the Arch Mage some rest.”

Fesler ignored the apprentice. “My Lord, I need you to come with me.”

Coralen yawned. Merion was right. He should sleep for a month. “Why?”

“It’s easier to show you, sir.”

Merion opened his mouth to protest, until Coralen motioned him to silence. “Fine,” Coralen said. “Lead on.”

Fesler spun on his heel and led the way towards the keep, setting a punishing pace. Merion muttered something about liberties. The lieutenant led them through the gate and up the spiral staircase that led to the rooftop observation post, still without speaking, until they emerged from the darkness of the fortress into the glare of sunlight. A stiff, cool breeze whipped the battle pennants above the sentries’ heads. They saluted Fesler as he approached. Coralen frowned. Their faces could have been carved from pure fear, and somehow he knew it wasn’t because they remembered the Arch Mage’s last spell.

“Look,” Fesler said, and pointed to the north.

Coralen blinked. His eyes, still heavy with sleep, were deceiving him. Beyond the ridge and the thousands of unidentifiable bodies, a cloud of dust moved closer. Above it hovered dozens of bird-like shapes.

“I estimate fifty thousand or more,” Fesler said in a quiet voice. “Kobolds, drakes, probably some phyxians and raptors too. One hundred wyverns overhead, maybe twice that.”

Merion gasped. “Then we...”

“Defeated the vanguard,” Coralen finished. “Nothing

more." He turned to Fesler. "Have you alerted the rest of our forces yet?"

"No, sir." Fesler's face showed no emotion, even in the face of this. Coralen almost admired him. "I thought it best to wait until I'd spoken to you," Fesler added. "The fleet has gone. Should I order an evacuation?"

Coralen shook his head. "Outside they will hunt us down one by one. Behind the walls we still stand a chance, even if it is a small one. Sound the signal. Get your defenders to their positions."

Fesler nodded, and began issuing orders to the sentries.

"How can he be so calm?" Merion looked pale. "Doesn't he realize we're all dead?"

"Not all," Coralen murmured. "Come on." He took the apprentice by the arm and, as the warning bell began to toll, drew him back to the stairs. "We're going to the boat. Now."

Merion pulled his arm free, eyes flashing in anger. "You're just going to leave them to die while we escape?"

"That was always the plan," Coralen hissed. "You knew that. We were never supposed to win this fight."

"We destroyed an army," Merion protested.

"And it took every scrap of power we had. Merion, half the defenders are dead. The ogres are all gone. The dwarves, too. We have no strength left and the army that approaches is stronger than the one we destroyed. What would you have us do?"

"Fight," Merion snapped.

"Die," Coralen corrected. "For nothing. We have achieved everything we dreamed and more. Now shut up and follow me, before it's too late."

They reached the bottom floor and passed out into the sunshine. The outer ward buzzed with activity, the bell still ringing its call to arms. Coralen saw walking wounded limping towards the wall, blood-caked weapons in hand. Sergeants and corporals yelled out orders. No one seemed to notice the two mages walking in the opposite direction towards the pleasant garden by the south wall.

Truly you will be a legend, the voice in his mind told him.

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The Arch Mage who destroyed an army. The Arch Mage who survived when so few did. With a legend like this behind you, you could challenge the King himself. You could end the tainted Combine, raise the Empire anew in the image of the Koda`Dal. In your image. All you have to do is live.

“Coralen Larkos!”

The words seemed to suck the oxygen from the air, replacing it with a tidal wave of deep, predatory rage that echoed from every wall. Coralen felt hope die. He staggered, holding in the vomit that tried to explode, bowels turning to water. The sound faded, leaving nothing but the deepest silence.

Ithiosar.

Coralen seized Merion by the shoulders. “Go to the boat. Go, and do not wait for me. I will hold him as long as I can.”

Merion shook his head. “I can help you.”

“No, you can’t. No one can.”

“Come with me, then.” Tears glittered in Merion’s eyes. “Please. We can still escape.”

Coralen almost laughed. To get so close, and yet to fail at the last. “Ithiosar comes. Without me, Fesler’s warriors will not last five minutes. You would emerge from the tunnel to find Ithiosar waiting.” He swallowed, and pulled Merion to him, embracing him, shocked to find tears pouring down his cheeks. “Everything I have done in my life is for nothing if you do not escape. If I must die, so be it. You must live, my son. You must live.”

Merion nodded, and opened his mouth to speak. His words faded into a sob. Coralen shoved him towards the hidden gate and walked away. He did not look back.

Fesler waited in the barbican, his surviving warriors spread in lines either side of him. He didn’t so much as glance at Coralen’s tear-streaked face. His eyes remained locked on the thing on the ridge.

Half again the size of the dragon Merion had killed, Ithiosar the Black towered above the lesser creatures of the draconic horde that streamed down the ridge. Huge eyes

burned within the deep recesses of his armored, helm-like skull, blinking against the glare of the sun. One hundred feet of tree-thick tail flicked across the ground behind him. Stretching the vast leathery expanse of his wingspan, his wide maw cracked open into a smile.

"We meet again, Arch Mage." Once more, the voice rolled through the valley in a crushing wave. "You were fortunate the last time we faced each other. This time will be different."

"Yes," Coralen agreed, amazed at how thin and weak his own voice sounded now. "This time I will kill you."

Ithiosar laughed, an obscene sound, the bones of a thousand dead being played by some hellish orchestra. "I think not, Coralen Larkos. I think you will die, as Thex's pathetic commandos died, as Thex will soon die. You will die, but not soon. I think you will live in agony long enough to see my army slaughter your pitiful defenders, and root out the last of the Combine from Bastion. Only when I have gutted the last elf in front of you, when I have eaten my fill of delicious elven entrails, only then will I let you die. And you will thank me for my mercy."

Coralen laughed.

His laughter surprised him. It surprised Fesler, who gave him a look like he had gone mad. Perhaps I am mad, Coralen thought. Mad to think that I could always remain the Arch Mage who never lost a battle, mad to think I could escape, mad to think I could win. No, he corrected himself, the laugh fading. I have already won. Merion is safe. Nothing else matters.

"You fool," Coralen spat at the dragon. "Your arrogance has cost you once again. The elves you see here are the last of us. You can kill us, but the Combine lives on, and every time you close your eyes to sleep, you will dream of our revenge and know fear."

"Impossible," Ithiosar sneered. Tilting back his head and extending his massive neck, the dragon sniffed the air. His eyes narrowed. The skin around his mouth pulled back into a snarl.

"Kill them all!" Ithiosar roared.

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With a wild cacophony of yells, the Ring of Scale poured forward, ignoring the handful of arrows that hammered into their ranks, scrambling over each other for the honor of being first to spill elven blood. Wyverns dove screeching towards the parapet. And Ithiosar, with a scream of pure rage, lunged for Coralen.

Diving to the side, Coralen avoided the first attack and hammered a lightning bolt into the dragon's flank. It didn't seem to notice, retaliating with a burst of thick, roiling flame which Coralen managed to divert with a hasty shield spell. A dozen elves disappeared, the flesh stripped from their charred bones in an instant. Coralen sent a fireball at the dragon's face, but it moved with speed that belied its bulk and the fireball cut through a surprised wyvern instead. Ithiosar swung one giant clawed hand, and Coralen rolled away as a section of the wall broke apart, leaving him to fall into the courtyard below. He crashed hard onto an empty barrel, the wood splintering beneath him, and ended on his back, winded, looking up at the sky.

"You are weak, mage," Ithiosar mocked. "I remember you being stronger."

He's right, Coralen thought. I am weak. Not enough energy left after last night to punch a lightning bolt through that armor. Affliction won't work, either. Too weak. Merion! I did what I could.

With feline grace, Ithiosar slid over the wall and dropped into the courtyard, forked tongue flickering across brutal, sword-like teeth.

Kill the mind, the voice urged. Kill the mind and the body will die!

With the last of his strength, Coralen summoned energy from the ground and lanced it through the air in a wispy stream of multi-hued vapor, linking his mind with the dragon.

Images flashed across his consciousness. The burning of a hundred towns, the killing of a thousand victims. The joy of the hunt. The rage of knowing that the Combine had escaped across the ocean. The need to fight back.

Coralen felt his strength ebb, and now Ithiosar pushed, crumbling his mental defenses. Pressure grew until he thought his head would explode. The dragon was in his mind. He screamed as the agony grew, certain that this was death.

Then, with shocking abruptness, it was done. He lay, drenched in sweat, listening to the screams of dying elves and the crackle of burning corpses.

"I know your secrets now," Ithiosar growled. "I know your ambition, mage. I know the darkness that boils within you."

The dragon edged forward, resting one razor-tipped talon on Coralen's chest. The slightest pressure and it would spear him through. The dragon placed its snout inches from Coralen's face, the heat and stench burning at his eyes. Coralen tried to spit in its face, but his mouth was too dry from terror.

The dragon smiled. "Don't think of this as death," it said. "Think of this as liberation. I will set you free, Coralen Larkos. I will set you free forever." The lips peeled back. The jaws opened.

From deep within the dragon, a bubbling darkness rose and exploded forward. Coralen saw it race toward him, blotting out all light, blotting out all sound, until there was nothing but a world of darkness and pain.

And then he died.



REBIRTH



His eyes flicked open.

Merion smiled, taking his hand from Coralen's shoulder. "Thank the Seraphs," he said. "I thought for certain you were dead."

Coralen didn't respond. He raised one hand to cover his face from the painful glare of the sun. The fortress around him sat silent. No dragons, no kobolds, no Ring of Scale at all. He sensed the movement of a handful of elves, limping among the dead.

The dead. They lay everywhere, calling to him. Their smell, their taste hung heavy in the air.

"You look dead," Merion said with a grin. "Well, you've looked better, at least. Can you get up?"

Coralen stared at him.

The apprentice swallowed. "Look, I know you're mad, but I just couldn't leave. The boat is still there. Fesler's dead, almost everybody is dead. There aren't many of us left, maybe a dozen who survived by hiding under bodies. They said after Ithiosar def..." He coughed. "After you fought Ithiosar, they say the Ring of Scale just left and marched north." He smiled again. "We won, father. Now let's get to the boat before they change their mind and come back." Merion rose to one knee, an expectant look on his face.

Coralen reached out, ignoring the apprentice's offered hand. His fingers brushed Merion's cheek.

Then closed around his throat.

Merion's eyes went wide. His hands clamped onto Coralen's forearm, clawing at it, drawing blood. Coralen felt nothing.

What are you doing? The voice within in his mind was almost a sob. You're killing him. Merion!

Coralen ignored the voice. He had some vague recollection of a weaker creature, one who had loved this apprentice as a son, one who had chosen sacrifice over escape. Such weakness could not be tolerated, not when so much remained to do.

Stop, the voice begged. It is Ithiosar. He has cursed you. Fight it! Fight it...

Merion's struggles grew weaker, his eyes starting to fade, the light overwhelmed by horror and confusion and accusation. This one was weak, too. No one else here could threaten Coralen. This one had power, magic that could have destroyed his attacker, but Coralen sensed the love and emotion that stopped him using it. Coralen smiled. With a last convulsive squeeze, his grip slammed shut, crushing windpipe and bone. Fresh, sweet-scented blood ran between his fingers. With a lustful sigh, he let the body drop and rose to his feet.

Elves watched him. He could smell their loathsome light and goodness, and smiled at their terrified, disgusted faces. He killed them without emotion, sending lightning to dance between them, burning the skin from their flesh, boiling the fluids in their eyes. Then he knelt beside the dead mage.

Somewhere he could hear sobbing. He looked around and sniffed the air, but sensed no presence of life, except a vague scent to the southeast, by the water. It sounded almost like the sobbing came from within the recesses of his head, and with a smile he remembered that strange voice that had begged for Merion's life. Ignoring it, he reached down and touched his blood-soaked fingers to the corpse's forehead.

Its eyes opened, as black and lifeless as a doll's. Coralen walked away, glancing back to see the corpse rise to its feet, pulled from above by unseen strings. He moved through the courtyard, pausing at each new body, raising it again. Ogres and dwarves he bypassed, too wretched and bestial to be of use to him. Kobolds he might return to later. For some reason, he felt sure they would make good eating.

The Fall of Bastion

The vexing presence of life still tugged at him, and he headed across the sun-drenched garden, dragging a cloak from a dead warrior to draw over his head to keep that awful glow away. One touch and the warrior itself joined the stumbling, shuffling host behind him. A memory of another life led him to the hidden gate in the garden. Even the garden itself seemed familiar, somehow important, but he dismissed the thought and plunged into the soothing darkness of the tunnel, following it down. Life glowed at the end of it.

They screamed when they saw him, these sailors, running to their boat and trying to make it out to sea. He let them get free of the dock, enjoying their fear and the flowering of the hope that they might escape him, until he grew bored and sent fire their way.

The delightful song of their screams filled his ears.

Coralen laughed, then snarled as that horrible voice of weakness returned, louder than ever. Look, it said. Look at the ocean. They made it. We did enough to save the Combine. They will be free and safe, and will sing songs of those who died to save them. The legend of Coralen Larkos will live on, the Arch Mage who never lost a battle, the Arch age who gave his life so that others might live.

Pulling his cloak tighter around his shoulders and skull, his dead-eyed thralls following in silence, the Lich retreated into the tunnel.

To wait for darkness.

To wait for the chance to bring death to this world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Having terrorised his parents and teachers throughout his school years in the UK with offbeat, often twisted short stories, Robert Lassen graduated from college with his first full-length novel in his hand, determined to embrace the life of a novelist-at-large. Instead, fate chose a different path for him. A childhood love of aircraft, particularly the Spitfire and the Mosquito that contributed so much to the defeat of Hitler, merged with a desire to serve his country. That combination led him directly to the Armed Forces Careers Office, his writing ambitions put on hold.

Now eleven years into his career as an officer in Britain's Royal Air Force, a period of time that includes two all-expenses paid trips to Iraq on Her Majesty's Service, Lassen has never

forgotten his original dream. As he nears the end of a three-year exchange stint as a United States Air Force Aggressor, teaching the cream of America's pilots the tools that will keep them alive in future wars, the time is fast approaching for Lassen to return to that dream.

Lassen is married to a wonderful, supportive American beauty, and is the father of two staggeringly amazing children. *Wrathful Skies* is his debut published novel, the first in a trilogy that forms part of an open-ended series, 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.

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