

The background of the cover is a digital painting of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a river flows through a rocky, forested area. The middle ground shows a valley with a river and scattered rocks. The background features large, green mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

The
Last Stand
of the **Teir 'Dal**

Maxwell Alexander Drake

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Chapter 1 - Heartbroken

Keramore Thex stood staring at the stone sarcophagus from the doorway, spinning a white lily between his fingers. An ancient, musty scent hung thick in the air, filling the large vaulted chamber with its oppressiveness. Runelight licked at the walls, adding to the gloomy feeling clawing at his soul. He loathed coming down here because once here, he knew he wouldn't want to leave.

Perhaps this time I will lie down beside you, my love, and just...

Letting out a mirthless laugh, he stepped into the crypt and approached the coffin. "Oh, Neria. Why do I feel such the fool when in your presence?" He gazed across the carved likeness of his wife upon the lid. Even in stone, she took his breath away. The knowledge that her broken body rested just below the ornate enclosure slashed at his heart. The memory of a green dragon flying away—of him staring at it helpless as he held Neria—of her dying words whispered to him. These were the demons that woke him each night. This was the black stain on his soul.

I failed you, and you bore the consequences of my failure to this chamber. I shall never forgive myself.

Bending to one knee, he laid the lily's stem between the carved hands on top of the lid, its circular bulb resting just below stone breasts. "I'm sorry I have not visited for so long." He ran his strong fingers through his long, golden hair and sighed. Leaning forward, he placed his head upon the cold lid.

Would that I could sleep with you for all eternity.

He reached out and set his hand on her stone shoulder. "I miss you... so much."

When he lifted his head, tears filled his almond-shaped blue eyes, though they did not fall. "Our son is well. Faelon is now running so fast his nanny is having a hard time keeping up with him." He smiled, and the motion forced the tears sitting in his eyes to roll down his smooth cheeks. He made no attempt to wipe them away.

"Preparations have begun for the evacuation. They feel the entire Combine should be ready to leave in just a few weeks' time." He clinched his jaws at the thought. "I still can't believe Father and Erador are willing to abandon our homeland. We have paid so much for—" Reaching out, he brushed the carved cheek of Neria's image. "I... have paid so much for this land."

His fingers found the pendant hanging around his neck—a worthless bauble of pewter in the shape of three knots of rope encircling a common piece of quartz. The silver chain it hung from held more value than the pendant. Still, touching it brought him comfort.

It had been a gift from his mother, Raina Thex—the last gift she gave him before she died. She claimed it had been in their family for millennia, though the first time he ever laid eyes upon it was when she pressed it into his hand and bade him to wear it always.

His head dropped and his shoulders sagged. "I have no desire to leave Amaril." His voice began to crack. "I have no desire to leave you."

Sucking in a deep breath, he regained control of himself. "I understand. This war is truly lost. The dragons and their hordes have proven—"

"If you enjoy spending time with the dead, you'll soon get more opportunities than you've ever dreamed."

Casting a glance over his shoulder, Keramore's face hardened at the sight of the elven Arch Mage. "Friends we may be, Coralen. But you overstep yourself this morning." He could still feel the tears hot upon his face.

I will not draw attention to them by wiping them away now.

Instead, he rose and glared at the elven wizard. "How dare you enter the Royal Crypt and disturb me?"

The arrogant smile that seemed a permanent fixture on the mage's lips of late slipped, and he bowed his head. "Forgive me, my Prince. I meant no disrespect." When he looked up, his normal confident expression had returned. "However, I think you will find that I am justified."

Turning back to the coffin, Keramore stared down at the perfect reproduction of his wife. Pressing two fingers to his lips, he then placed them on hers. "Goodbye for now, my love."

As he approached Coralen, the Arch Mage started to speak. Keramore cut him off with a wave. "Not here." He walked past the elf and headed up the winding corridors and stairways that led to the upper levels of Bastion.

The walk helped calm Keramore. It was not as if he was someone who stood on ceremony. It was more that his friend had caught him in an intimate moment.

And I loathe showing weakness.

Still, by the time the pair reached the courtyard, the anger had fled Keramore completely.

It was still early, and the sun had yet to rise high enough to top the walls of the keep. The chaos filling the courtyard assaulted him, and he let out a sigh. The supplies and personal goods lying in neat piles around the area were an all too solid reminder of the intent of his race to flee. Refugees filled every empty space between the cargo—a reminder of how poorly the war had turned. Every village and town in northern Amaril had either been put to the torch by the Ring of Scale horde, or abandoned for fear it soon would be. Bastion was the last place of safety left to any who survived.

The keep had not been built to house so many. Food and water were running low. People slept in the halls of nearly every building, which still left thousands camping outside in the courtyard. More than that filled the once lush gardens of the outer ward. The majority of these refugees were elven. Beyond the walls, a tent city stretched like lichen off into the distance. It contained a mix of all the races that formed the Combine—elves, dwarves, ogres, humans, kerrans, and gnomes.

The stench of so many crammed so close hangs like a tyrannical cloud.

A small elven child looked up at Keramore as he passed, causing him to stop. Her tiny eyes, so full of fear and hopelessness, made Keramore realize how much his people relied upon him. "Perhaps my father and brother are correct. Perhaps it is time to abandon this land."

"I'm afraid they are far more correct than you know."

Keramore had almost forgotten the mage. He turned and nodded for Coralen to speak.

The mage's eyes darted around before he continued in a hushed voice. "Last night while on patrol, I captured a drake. It took some—"

"Wait." Keramore raised a hand to stop him. "You left Bastion. Why?"

Coralen shrugged and grinned. "I felt the need for some night air. The keep has not been a welcoming place for me recently."

Keramore felt a tinge of sadness thinking of how the council spoke of the mage lately. In retrospect, the majority of Coralen's problems were caused by Coralen's own paranoia.

The Arch Mage shook his head. "My reasons are unimportant. As I was trying to say, the drake took some persuading, but in the end it told its secrets." He looked around once more, then leaned in closer. "As of this morning, the entire Ring of Scale army is camped within a day's march to the north."

Unbidden, Keramore scoffed. "A drake told you this?" He chuckled again. "One you had captured?" When Coralen's grin turned into a scowl, Keramore reached out and put both his hands upon the mage'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." He gave the mage a hard look. "You did kill it, didn't you?"

"Oh, it's dead alright." Raising his hand, Coralen brushed Keramore's arms aside and stepped in close once more. "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."

Compulsion!

Keramore's eyes widened at the thought of such an evil spell. As a soldier, he knew better than most what sacrifices need be made during war. However, the use of such magic raked at his honor. Still, he knew of no other mage who had as much mastery over the incantation as Coralen Larkos.

Pausing, Coralen pursed his lips. "Keramore. The dragon army is on our doorstep. They plan to attack as the sun sets."

Impossible.

Keramore wanted to deny the mage, as the King had done for nearly the past year. Looking into Coralen's eyes, however, he knew the mage spoke true.

In an instant, the reality of the situation slammed down upon his shoulders. He spun, taking in all the huddled masses gathered in the courtyard around him.

Most will eat only once today! How can they be expected to hold off a siege?

His mind raced. Plans, strategies, lines of attack and defense. "There's just no time!"

Spinning back to Coralen, he grabbed the mage by the front of his robes. "How?" Physically picking him up to his toes, Keramore shoved the mage into the doorway leading back the way they had come. Once inside, he lowered his voice. "How could they have gotten so close without any of us knowing?"

Bringing his hands up, Coralen tried to pull Keramore's fingers from his clothing. When Keramore did not let go, the mage's face turned grim. "I have no idea. 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?"

Anger bubbled up inside Keramore. Instead of lashing out at his friend, he let him go and stormed back out into the courtyard. He stopped and pointed at the mage. "Gather the Council! Let them know what you have told me."

"They are already in session." Coralen stepped toward Keramore. "I'm on my way to them now,

but my words will fall short without your support.”

Nodding, Keramore began walking across the yard once more. “I know, but I have some matters to attend to first. I will join you in the council room in half an hour.”

He let his anger build as he stalked across the courtyard. Someone would pay for him learning of this from an outside entity.

And I know exactly who that someone will be.

Chapter 2 - The Teir`Dal

Grasping the door handle, Keramore Thex paused as giggles spilled from inside the room. The laughter stoked his rage to a new height.

He pressed the latch and slammed his shoulder against the door. Giggles turned to a shriek as a half-naked trollop jumped, then fell to the floor beside the bed, pulling the covers with her.

He took in the room with a glance. It was sparsely furnished, though clutter covered every surface. Empty wine bottles and half-eaten food lay about. A few open books sat face down in no particular order. Clothes and pieces of armor were scattered here and there.

Keramore glared at a shirtless Ailen Rashard.

The elven lieutenant interlocked his fingers behind his head and leaned back into the mound of pillows behind him, a mischievous smile filling his face. "To what do I owe this honor, Commander? I thought we had the day off."

Shaking his head, Keramore felt his scowl deepen. He did not recognize the girl.

Some village refugee looking for whatever comfort she can find in these hard times.

He turned his ire to her. "Get. Out."

Still hugging the blanket around her, the slim elven girl jumped up and bolted past Keramore. He slammed the door just as she passed the threshold and rounded on Ailen. "By the Spirit of Nor`l, what do you think you`re doing?"

"It seems there are some lonely wenches about lately. I`m just providing comfort and easing their pain." Ailen made no motion to cover his nakedness.

Keramore let out a breath and with it his anger. "I have not the faintest idea why I put up with you, Ailen."

The elven lieutenant`s smile grew. "You put up with me, sir, because I`m the best." He hopped from the bed and started tossing things about until he found a wool tunic. Bringing it to his nose, he sniffed, shrugged, and pulled it over his head.

At times Keramore grew tired of Ailen`s lax attitude toward military protocol.

Still, the bastard`s right. He is the best.

Had the entire dragon army not been breathing down their necks, Keramore might have taken the time to discipline the fool. "Well, your day off has been canceled."

"Canceled?" The whine in Ailen`s voice went a long way to make up for the lack of time for punishment. "Who do I thank for that?"

Keramore turned, opened the door, and started down the hall. "The Ring of Scale. Now, snap to, soldier. We can talk while we walk."

Ailen caught up to him before he was halfway down the hall. "You look upset, sir. And more so than simply being angry at me for bedding some village sow."

Grunting, Keramore shook his head. "Your poor judgment with your personal life is the least of my concerns right now. I just found out the Ring of Scale army is not ten miles north of Bastion." He turned a corner and began climbing to the next floor.

"What?" Ailen`s voice no longer held any humor. "That`s impossible, sir. Your information must

be in error.”

Without slowing down, Keramore took the landing at the next level. “I wish it were.” Ailen added nothing more to the conversation, so the two stalked down the hall to the last door on the left. Keramore balled up his fist and hammered on its wooden frame. When no answer came, he pushed down the latch and stepped inside. The room was filled with almost identical furniture as Ailen’s room. The difference was that this one sat neat and tidy—a picture of military organization. To Keramore’s dismay, the room also sat void of its occupant.

Withdrawing, Keramore grabbed the arm of a passing sergeant. “Tarilen, where is Lieutenant Graythal?”

The young sergeant’s eyes went wide at the sight of Keramore and he snapped to attention, throwing his right fist over his heart. “Sir! Lieutenant Graythal went on patrol last night. He should have returned by now. If he’s not in his room, perhaps he’s at mess, sir!”

Letting the sergeant go, Keramore started back down the hall. “Ailen, gather the other officers. Let them know there will be blood spilt today. Rouse the Teir`Dal and ensure each is ready for battle. I want every warrior armed with a woodsman’s bow and two score of norite-tipped arrows, a norite-tipped short spear, and at least one norite long blade.”

“I know of no Teir`Dal who is without a norite spear or blade.” Ailen shook his head. “But I doubt more than a few have two score arrows.”

“Then raid the army’s reserve. If they give you any lip, tell them they will have to deal with me.”

“Sir!” Ailen saluted. “I will have the full company assembled in the courtyard within the hour.”

As Ailen started to bolt past, Keramore snagged his arm. “No. I’m not sure where the Teir`Dal will fight today, but I’m certain it won’t be from behind the walls of Bastion.” Rubbing his chin, he ran through the Combine’s limited options now that the enemy was so near. “Assemble them at the old archery range north of the keep. I will join you there after I have spoken with my father.”

“Sir!” Ailen snapped another salute, turned, and ran down the corridor. “Officers of the Teir`Dal, to me!” He repeated his call as he climbed the stairs to the next level of the barracks.

Before Keramore had reached the stairs leading down to the mess hall, several doors sprang open as the officers quartered on this level rushed out in various stages of dress. Each that passed him saluted, but did not pause in their pursuit of Ailen. Satisfied that his command would be ready, he headed down to find his Master of Scouts.

Keramore reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to the mess hall. As he did, an elven boy wearing Thex livery rounded a corner and ran up to him. “Prince Thex.”

The boy was out of breath so Keramore waved him to settle. “You are from the east stables, are you not?”

“Yes, my Prince.” The boy took a few more deep breaths before he spoke again. “Your man, Lieutenant Graythal, sent me to find you. He’s bleeding in a bad way and says he has news that you must hear with all haste.”

So, the Arch Mage may have delivered the news first, but not by much.

Keramore waved a finger. “Go to the mess and get yourself some water. I can find my way to the stables.”

The boy gave him a grateful smile, but Keramore did not have time to return it. Instead, he all but ran in the opposite direction.

It surprised Keramore to see his Master of Scouts up and about when he entered the east stables. From the look on the face of the young messenger, he feared he might even be too late.

Thelious Graythal gave him a salute as he approached. "Sir. I'm glad you are here. I have grave news."

Nodding, Keramore pointed to the bloody rip that ran down Thelious' side. "I already know that the Ring of Scale army is ten miles to the north. How is your side?"

Eyes wide, Thelious stammered for a moment before he found his voice. "Yes, sir. That they are, sir. My—my side is fine, sir."

Keramore lifted the shredded leather and inspected the wound. The young lieutenant was correct, it wasn't deep. "I want you to report to the infirmary before you join the rest of the Teir`Dal."

"Sir!" Thelious saluted and made a motion to leave.

"Before you go, tell me what happened." Moving to a barrel, Keramore sat. "What lured you out last night?"

"Well, sir..." The lieutenant eyed a second barrel and Keramore motioned for him to take it. "Late last night two of my outlying scouts came in together. Sarthin stationed up north near the Qua'sian villages, and Talbir who scouts the eastern edge of the Feerrott Forest. Both said they found evidence of enemy movement." Pain laced Thelious' face as he sat on the barrel. "As they are on opposite sides of Bastion, this didn't seem right to me. So, I gathered up five patrols and we headed out. I sent two west, and my group and the other two headed north."

Time was slipping by, and Keramore did not need more details of last night's events at this point. He needed to focus on today. This information put the Ring of Scale army somewhere at the base of the Serpentspine mountain range. Raising a hand, he cut his Master of Scouts off. "How big is their army?"

Swallowing hard, Thelious bobbed his head. "It's big, sir. At least a hundred thousand strong."

"How did they get here undetected?" Keramore said this more to himself than his Master of Scouts.

"Three of the patrols have not returned." The lieutenant glanced out the window toward the rising sun. "I fear they are well past due." The young Scout Master locked eyes with Keramore. "Talbir's group did return and he said they found the mouth to a large cavern at the foot of the Serpentspine that was not there a few days ago."

A cavern running under the mountain range? That would explain a lot, though how the Ring of Scale pulled it off will be a subject for debate at a later time.

Standing, Keramore let out a sigh. "Get yourself healed up. I'll need you today. Then gather your scouts and join the rest of the Teir`Dal at the old archery range north of the city."

Jumping to his feet with a grimace, Thelious saluted. "Sir!"

Keramore returned the salute before turning and heading for the Council room.

This will not be fun.

Chapter 3 - The Council

As Keramore Thex stepped into the open courtyard, Sergeant Fesler and his squad came running in through the main gate. As soon as the sergeant caught sight of Keramore, he veered toward him. Panting, Fesler and the others came to attention and saluted. “Commander—”

“No time.” Keramore returned their salute, but did not break stride. “Unless you have something to report other than the fact that there is a horde of dragonspawn at our doorstep?”

“N—No.” Fesler hurried to keep pace with his prince. “So I see that mage has already brought word.”

The elf’s statement made Keramore come to an abrupt halt. Turning, he glared at the sergeant. “You will refer to that mage as Arch Mage, sergeant! Unless you want to spend your last day on this world locked in the dungeons?”

It was hard for an elf to go pale, yet all the blood drained from the sergeant’s face as he shrank before Keramore’s onslaught. “Sir, I... I meant no disrespect. I just thought—”

“Don’t think. Events are moving too fast for me to wait on you to understand them.” He didn’t like berating a soldier who was not under his direct command.

Still, protocol needs to be restored, and it might as well start now.

Keramore pointed to the outer walls. “You and your squad split up and go to the bell towers. I want every bell ringing warning. Then report to your commander and tell him I said to muster the army. Every man and woman of every race able to wield a sword is to be geared up and ready to fight within the hour!” Without waiting on a response, Keramore turned and stormed off toward the Council chambers.

Is it not bad enough our entire race has been whittled down to a shell of what it once was? Is it not bad enough that we are fleeing the very homeland we have bled for? Must we also have so much petty bickering and infighting?

As he approached the Council chambers, gasps and argumentative shouts rang out as if mocking his thoughts.

The two guards at the door snapped to attention, their halberds pointing to the vaulted ceiling. He nodded to them and entered the chamber.

It had been a few months since he had last attended a session.

Not since Neria’s...

He drove the thought away. Letting his mind become distracted by the dead would solve nothing now. Steeling himself, he looked around the room.

For the most part, the room was void of furnishings. The walls were bare of ornaments, the floor bereft of rugs. His father had always held the belief that a ruler should not flaunt fineries in the same room as he passed judgment on his subjects. He believed that the King’s presence should be enough. Which is why the only things in the room were his throne upon its dais, and the massive marble table the council sat around.

This morning it was a good thing the large chamber held little furniture, as people packed the room to bursting. Elves, humans, ogres, dwarves, gnomes, kerrans—it seemed everyone in the Combine,

from the nobles down to the merchants, had need of the King's guidance today. So many were here, people stood shoulder to shoulder along the walls.

His father sat on his throne at the far end of the room. He looked aged, tired. Keramore's older brother, Erador, stood arguing with Coralen. Keramore knew it would be just a continuation of a battle the two had been waging for over two years. The Arch Mage's abrasive nature had built up a wall of briars between him and the rest of the council.

Still, this is not the time for it.

The first bell rang out just as Keramore stepped forward to intervene. When a second bell joined the first, Erador moved to the window, as if to assure himself the keep was not under attack.

Coralen, brazen as ever, continued to stare at the King. "The Ring of Scale attacks at sunset."

Gasps, followed by a cacophony of voices, filled the chamber. Someone off to Keramore's right fainted.

Erador turned his attention from the window and back to the Arch Mage. "Nonsense." An uneasiness laced his brother's words. "It could be anything."

As if bracing against an oncoming storm, Coralen turned to face Erador. "You have long been deaf to my warnings. Don't prove yourself a fool now."

Coralen, your tongue is the fool!

At Keramore's intake of breath, several of those around him noticed him for the first time. They stepped back, creating a circle around him.

His brother's face turned red with rage. "I want him arrested." Spittle flew from his lips and he pointed at the Arch Mage. "I want him out of this room and in the deepest pit in Bastion before he can blink!"

A group of the King's personal guard stepped forward. Each had the look of a man about to do something he would rather not, though Keramore knew they would obey. For the briefest of moments, he almost let them try.

But it will accomplish nothing.

Catching the eye of the lead guard, Keramore shook his head. To his surprise, the guard glanced back to Erador, as if seeking approval.

Erador, who had obviously not noticed Keramore yet, just pointed. "Now!"

"Father!" Keramore's voice rang out strong over the din of the room. "The hour is at hand. Ithiosar comes." Stepping forward, he glared at the King's guards. "Back. Leave him be."

"Brother..." Erador's expression was a mix of anger, confusion, and indignation.

Keramore ignored him. Instead, he gazed out over the crowd. "Out!" When no one made a move to leave, he grabbed a fat merchant by his gaudy robes, spun him about and shoved him towards the door. "I said out! All of you! This is a Council chamber, not a public gallery."

Several in the back began making for the door. The people surrounding the man who had fainted stood around like a gaggle of hens. He pointed at them. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

One of the group looked up. "He's too heavy to lift, Prince Keramore."

The whimper in the man's tone grated Keramore's nerves and he had to stop himself from drawing

blade. "Is he a member of the Council?"

A confused look overtook the man. "No, my Prince."

"Then drag him!" Keramore's patience was spent. Turning back to the throne, he noticed that the King's guard had not moved. "Sarthan, get these people out of here, then ensure no one else enters."

Sarthan cut his gaze to the mage, then back. "My Prince, we have orders to arrest the Arch Mage."

"And now you have new orders. Don't make me repeat them." Dismissing the man with a wave, he turned to Coralen. "I see you've been making friends."

Coralen gave a coy grin and shrugged. "I told you they wouldn't listen to me."

"They'll listen now. They cannot ignore the warning bells." The last line slipped from Keramore's lips just as the bells fell silent. He walked toward his brother, who still stood next to the window. "Erador..." He swallowed what he was about to say when his father rose from his throne. Bowing his head, the remaining Council Members around him dropped to their knees. For some reason the Arch Mage remained where he was.

Don't be more of a fool than you have already been, Coralen.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Arch Mage bent to his knee with the others. The mage, Keramore noticed, never broke eye contact with the King.

Always the arrogant one.

His father stepped down from his dais and hobbled forward. "Talk to me, my son."

"Father." Keramore picked his head up and looked the King in the eyes. "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 Serpenspine 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." He would need to find out the names of those who did not return and add them to the list he kept memorized.

The thousands who have died under my command.

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

"There will be panic." Erador had always been the negative one of the Thex family.

Rounding on his brother, Keramore glared at him. "Control it!"

As he did whenever there was a physical conflict between them, Erador shrank before Keramore. "The fleet is not finished."

"Then use the ones that are." Keramore let all his rage pour into his voice. "Break the ones that are unfinished and strap the planks together as rafts. Tow them behind the working ships."

Erador turned a pleading eye to the King. "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."

Knowing his brother was correct, Keramore ran a hand through his hair. "That's true." He squared his shoulders on the still kneeling Arch Mage. "For over a year you have warned this Council the war

was lost, and they have all turned their backs on you. I will confess, my pride was too strong to admit defeat until I lost—until Neria was killed.”

Closing the distance between them, Keramore reached down and helped Coralen to his feet. “Our race stands under the shadow of extinction. Can you help us now, in our hour of need?” When the Arch Mage’s face remained the same, Keramore realized for the first time how much his estrangement from the Council must have pained him. “Will you help me?”

The mage gave his obligatory long pause, as if he were actually considering the request. Finally, he inclined his head. “Yes.”

Smiling, Keramore felt a tension leave his shoulders he had not noticed had been building there. “What can you do?”

“A spell.” The Arch Mage rubbed his chin. “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.” His smug grin reappeared. “I will buy the ships the time to get out to sea.”

Erador stepped between the King and Coralen. “It will never work. The first dragons to reach the docks will penetrate the illusion. They will slaughter us.”

As the eldest brother, it was right that Erador follow their father’s footsteps into politics.

But sometimes he makes my stomach turn.

Keramore put a hand upon Erador’s shoulder. “Then I will make sure the dragons do not reach the docks.” He turned and locked eyes with the Arch Mage. “You need a distraction?”

“A distraction.” Coralen’s words echoed Keramore’s.

His brother stared from one to the other 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!”

Shaking his head, Keramore turned to his father. “The army will be needed when you cross the ocean. Besides, a small force can provide a distraction as well as a larger one. I will take my Teir`Dal and handle this.”

“NO!” Pain laced through the King’s eyes as he looked upon his youngest son. He reached out and placed a hand upon Keramore’s cheek. “No. You are my son. I will not lose you.”

“It’s either me, or all of us.” He tried to give his father a reassuring smile. “Father, I do not plan to become a martyr. And my Teir`Dal do not die easily, even in the midst of dragons.”

Yet if I do, it will mean never having to leave you, Neria.

“My King, he is right.” Coralen stood and nodded to Keramore. “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!” Panic filled Erador’s face, as if the reality of the situation had just settled on him.

The King placed a hand on his shoulder. “But tens of thousands shall live.” He moved his age-spotted hand to the back of Erador’s neck. “You will live to be King, my son. And you will learn that the choices are never easy.” He locked eyes with Keramore. “And sometimes, there is no choice at

all. You are sure of this?"

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

It shocked him to see tears well up in his father's eyes. "Then let it be so." He sighed, turned, and shuffled toward his private chambers.

Before he left, Keramore pulled his brother toward the window. "Erador, I know you and I have walked different paths since we were children. However, do not think I take this task lightly. I do this to save our people. Give them a chance for a new life." He glanced over his shoulder to ensure they were far enough from the others not to be overheard. "Father is correct; you will make a fine king one day. If these are the last words we pass, please keep them in your heart. Politics are not simply games played by nobles to gain favor with other nobles. We have a debt to the people we lead. The best rulers are those who understand that this debt must be repaid each and every day."

Erador stood and stared at Keramore for a long time. So long, that Keramore was afraid his words had not found purchase. Then Erador embraced him. "Take care of yourself, brother. I pray that this is not our final parting. If anyone can succeed here and find a way to rejoin us, it's you." When he pulled back, tears rolled freely down his face.

"I'm not dead yet, brother." He chuckled, despite himself. "Still, I am counting on you. I need you to take care of my son, Faelon, and ensure father and the rest of the council are safe. I'm not certain what you will find across the ocean, but you will need to be ready to lead once the Combine arrives."

Wiping away his tears, Erador nodded. "I will, brother. I will."

With one last pat on his brother's shoulder, Keramore turned to Coralen and nodded. The two fell in side by side as they left the council room. "Coralen, I know we have had our differences of late."

The mage harrumphed. "I have had differences with many of late."

Pursing his lips to stifle a retort, Keramore walked on for a few more steps before replying. "Be that as it may, do you feel you are really up to this?"

Stopping in his tracks, the Arch Mage rounded on Keramore. "What are you implying?" Indignation dripped thick from his words.

"I'm not implying anything, Coralen." Keramore let out a long breath. "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." He dropped his eyes to the floor. "Is... still... hitting me hard." He looked up and locked his gaze with Coralen's. "But the very survival of our race hangs on a blade's edge. I need to know you are willing to see this through, no matter what the costs in the end may be."

Coralen stared at him for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, a look sprang to his eyes that Keramore had not seen in a long, long time. "I understand what's at stake. I am the mage who has never lost a battle, remember? It would be such a shame to ruin that reputation today."

Holding out his hand, Keramore was glad when the mage took it. Like friends of old, the two shook hands and smiled at one another.

Keramore was the first to break the connection. Without a backward glance, he turned and headed for his quarters to gather what he would need for this, his final day on Amaril.

Chapter 4 - A Mouse Hunts a Cat

When Keramore Thex crested the hill, his heart swelled with pride at the sight of nearly five thousand Teir`Dal warriors standing in loose formation. It had been nearly a year since his entire command had last assembled in one location. Of late, his Teir`Dal had been relegated to carrying out hit and run missions—harassing the enemy more than taking it head on.

Perhaps all of that was rehearsal for today.

He adjusted the twin long blades at his hips and began jogging down the slight incline toward the waiting group. As he approached, his core officers peeled away to meet him.

Ailen Rashard led the way. His leather armor looked as if it had not been buffed since the start of the Dragon War. Anyone who knew him understood that his lax gait and unkempt appearance belied the assassin's deadliness.

To his right strode Thelious Graythal, the youngest of the core officers, in new leather armor and no longer wincing. Keramore was glad to see the lieutenant had followed his advice and sought out the healers.

To Ailen's left walked Jerilith Sal`Kerin, which was a surprise, since he and Ailen went together about as well as a fine cut of beef and horse piss. Still, few mages joined the ranks of the Teir`Dal. Those who did, like Jerilith, were hardened elves who did not seek power or glory through magic—they saw magic as a weapon, and nothing more. Jerilith had always had the ability to ignore Ailen's shortcomings as readily as Keramore himself did.

Trailing behind the three were Kailon Rayne and Lanys T`Vyl. Though both were newly promoted, they had been with Keramore long enough for him to know them well. Kailon's skill at both battle and leadership were what earned him the lieutenant rank. It had taken Jerilith pushing Lanys' name forward before Keramore agreed to pin the rank upon her collar, though. It was not as if Keramore had issues with women in command. Far from it. It was more in the way Lanys approached her duties to the Teir`Dal—like an overzealous priest of some long dead god. Even now, her eyes bore into him as if she could gaze into his very soul, see his every hidden secret.

Once they stood in front of him, all five saluted, but it was Ailen who spoke. "The Teir`Dal stand ready, Commander."

Casting a glance at the sun—the morning was nearly gone—Keramore brushed away the leaves and debris covering the dirt ground between them with his foot. When he had cleared a large enough spot, he knelt down. His officers joined him, forming a circle around the cleared patch.

Pulling out a dagger, Keramore stabbed it into the ground directly in front of his left foot. "Bastion sits here." He drew a large upside-down U to his right at the top of the circle. "The southern end of the Serpentspine, here." Looking up, he caught Thelious' gaze. "Where is the mouth of this cave of yours?"

The Scout Master used his finger to draw a circle near the bottom of the U, on the eastern side. "About here, sir."

Keramore leaned back on his bent knee. "This is what I've pieced together. Somehow, the Ring of Scale either found or created a tunnel under the entire length of the Serpentspine and moved their

army through it, avoiding detection. I doubt any of the winged beasts would have gone underground, so they probably flew, keeping high in the peaks. Perhaps using the clouds as cover.” He returned his gaze to Thelious. “Where’s their army camped?”

The young elf drew a second circle about halfway between his first and the spot Keramore had marked as the location of Bastion. “In the flat fields of the Trialith Valley, sir.”

Oh, Ithiosar, I could not have chosen a better location for you to camp had you consulted me.

Keramore smiled. “They show their ignorance of our lands. Their choice of a staging ground aids us greatly.” His smile died. “The Combine is evacuating today. They will have a hard time with that if an army is beating down the gates of Bastion. And should the dragons catch sight of the boats out on the Timorous Deep, they will be easy pickings. To prevent this, the Arch Mage and his people will create an illusion to hide the fleeing ships. The problem is that if the dragons get too close, the illusion will fail.”

He took a moment to look his officers in the eye, nodding to each in turn. “Hear me. For ten years we have fought and lost to the dragon horde. For ten years we have been forced to retreat and lick our wounds.” He let out a sigh. “I wish I could tell you that will change. But it won’t. We are outnumbered at least twenty to one. There will be no great victory today.” Gripping his dagger, he pointed to the spot where Thelious said the Ring of Scale was camped. “What I can tell you is this, that bit of ground is... was our home. Each warrior you lead knows it well. They have traveled through it. Hunted on it. Every hill. Every valley. Every path and road and burrow. We will have little advantage today, but we must use it all to its greatest extent.” Spinning the dagger, he stabbed it into the spot denoting Bastion. “The future of all our kin rests on it.”

Withdrawing the knife from the ground, he drew six separate lines that arched around the circle indicating the dragon army—three over the top, three underneath. “The Teir`Dal will be split into six companies. I want an equal number of warriors, archers, assassins, mages, scouts, and healers with each group.”

Moving the tip of his knife to the topmost line, he looked at Thelious. “You will lead your people around the horde to the north.” He slid his gaze to Jerilith, moving his dagger’s tip to the next line down. “You will do the same, though not as far north.” His dagger shifted to the next line. “Ailen, your group will skirt just north of the army’s location, and I will do the same on the southern side.” He glanced between the last two. “Kailon, you take the next route, leaving Lanys the furthest southern route.”

Keramore leaned back upon his bent leg again. “It is imperative that whatever scouts or patrols the horde has out are dealt with as we move. Nothing can slip past us, and nothing can escape to tell the dragons we are coming.”

Indicating the northern most part of the army’s location, Keramore clinched his jaws. “Thelious, you and Jerilith deploy your forces facing the northern flank of the army. Kailon, your warriors will face the southern flank. Ailen and I will swing around and position ourselves at their backs.”

“What about my company, sir?” Lanys sounded too eager by half.

“I need you to clear our escape route.” He drove the point of his dagger into the ground just in front of her on the far side of the circle. “The Quin`Sari ruins are about there. You and your warriors are to make certain nothing with draconic blood lives between there and where the horde is camped. Once

you reach the ruins, find some place we can defend. We will have wounded, and if we are very lucky —” He let out a laugh. “—the entire Ring of Scale army hounding us.” He drew a wavy line from the top left of the cleared area to the bottom middle. “The ruins, along with the high cliffs of the Greenblood River, are about the most defensible places we have outside of Bastion itself. Not to mention all of that area is thick with trees.” Standing, he stared down into the fervor-filled eyes of the woman. “Make sure to use every advantage you can find to give us a stronghold to retreat to.”

The others stood, grave looks mirroring grave looks.

Keramore slid his dagger back into its sheath. “The horde plans to attack tonight. They have a two hour march to reach Bastion, which means they should begin just as the sun is setting, if not before.” Keramore rubbed his chin and gazed out over the distant mountains.

Ithiosar, you scaly bastard, you’ve always been a clever one.

“The dragons would anticipate the horde’s discovery soon after they emerged from the caves, which is why they cannot afford to wait longer than tonight before attacking. Any longer and they risk the total loss of their element of surprise.” He reached out and placed one hand on Jerilith’s shoulder, the other on Kailon’s. “Their advantage becomes ours. While they may suspect that we will discover at least some of their plan, there is no way they will anticipate us to attack so fast. They will be expecting us to prepare for the siege, with all our strength being poured into defense.”

“Once they organize themselves to march, the army’s first step will be our signal.” He pointed at Thelious. “You and Jerilith will move against their northern flank.” He flicked his finger to Kailon. “You will harass their southern.” He let his gaze pass between the three. “Don’t be heroes. You are not to fully engage the enemy. Your jobs are simply to pull as much attention to you as you can. Rely heavily on your bows. And for Nor’l’s sake, make sure none of your warriors waste arrows on kobolds! Target phyxians, drakes and raptors—there should be plenty of those up front to go around.”

Pursing his lips, he nodded at Ailen. “After the army begins to split and deal with the threats to their flanks, you and I will hit them hard from the rear. That is where the dragons are most likely to be. They are our number one priority. If we can take them out, the remaining army, no matter how large, may end up breaking apart. That would surely buy the Combine the time it needs to evacuate.”

Ailen nodded once in return. There was no need for words. Both knew their groups would sustain the heaviest casualties.

We shall ram ourselves right down the throat of the beast.

“Have your warriors move as silently as possible for as long as possible. The others will have their attention, so no bows. We strike with spear, then long blade. Hit them fast and personal. After the initial kills, make sure your warriors know to break off and retreat. If they feel they have time, they can switch to their bows. But they are to make it back to the cover of the trees with all haste.” Keramore put his hands back on Jerilith’s and Kailon’s shoulders. “As soon as you see us in retreat, do the same.”

“After that, we each head for the ruins. Keep our groups at least a mile apart. Move swiftly for half a mile, find a defensible spot, turn and hit any enemy that is in pursuit. If their numbers are small enough, attack them with melee to conserve arrows. But don’t waste lives. Use ranged weapons if you are outnumbered. Before they become organized, move again. Continue this tactic for about twenty miles if you can.” He harrumphed. “Though I doubt they will follow us that far. If they are still

pursuing us, the warriors will be exhausted by that point. Once you feel your troop has had enough, turn tail and move as fast as you can to the ruins.”

Looking out to the east, he took in a deep breath. “After that, we are on our own. My current plan is that we head northeast and see if we can find a salvageable ship we can use to follow the Combine. Failing that...”

Lanys cleared her throat. “No matter where we end up, sir, we are with you.”

The others cut their eyes toward her, though he knew they all shared her commitment, if not her fervor. He let the pause stretch for a moment longer to let his orders sink in. “Any questions?”

A chorus of shaking heads was the only answer.

Turning to Kailon, Keramore reached out and clasped the lieutenant’s left hand, then placed his right over the lieutenant’s heart. “May the light of Nor’l guide and protect you.”

As Keramore dropped his right hand, Kailon put his upon his commander’s chest. “May the light of Nor’l guide and protect us all.”

One after the other, Keramore repeated the ritual with each of his core officers. Once done, he turned and headed to the front of the gathered Teir`Dal.

The hushed murmurings of warriors speaking to each other died as Keramore approached, and all eyes turned to him. He hated giving speeches. It was the one duty he would have abandoned, if he could have abandoned any of his duties. He always felt the fool standing in front of warriors who were willing to risk their lives— many of whom would be dead soon after his speech. But he understood better than most what the true meaning of being a leader was. So, like so many times before, he stood before his Teir`Dal, took a deep breath, and put on a brave face. “By now you know the Ring of Scale is camped not ten miles from this very spot. While this news has driven fear and panic into the hearts and minds of every member of the Combine, we are not simply members. We are Teir`Dal!”

To a warrior, every right arm shot into the air, each holding a norite-tipped spear. “RAH!” The shout of five thousand elves ripped across the land.

“We Teir`Dal do not have the luxury of feeling fear, for we are too busy bringing fear to our enemies!”

Again every spear rose. “RAH!”

Keramore began pacing along the front line. “Every warrior dreams of being remembered long after their time on this world is over. But most never get the opportunity to fight in a battle worthy of song. For you, today is that day. Today is that battle. What you do here today will be remembered and sung about for generations as yet unborn!”

“RAH!”

“Today shall be the last battle of this long war. And while we may not be able to claim ultimate victory, we can ensure that this land runs thick with dragonspawn blood!”

“RAH!”

He stopped and pointed back to Bastion. “Let all the races of the Combine hear the war chant of the Teir`Dal and take heart!”

“RAH!”

Raising his hands, he looked up into the cloudless blue sky. “Let all the gods of this world hear the war chant of the Teir`Dal and take notice!”

“RAH!”

He lowered his eyes back to his warriors. “Let all the Ring of Scale hear the war chant of the Teir`Dal and take heed!”

“RAH!”

“May the light of Nor`l guide and protect you!”

“MAY THE LIGHT OF NOR`L GUIDE AND PROTECT US ALL!”

Keramore waited until even the echoes of the chant died away before he turned. When he did, he caught the gaze of Lanys. The ardor and passion in her eyes would have concerned him on any other day.

Today, however, was no ordinary day.

Today is the day I atone for my sins. Today is the day I rejoin my beloved Neria.

Chapter 5 - The Best Laid Plans...

The phyxian bit down and the sound of bone crunching reverberated through Keramore Thex's ears. The draconic monster looked like an oversized dog covered in scales, though thicker across its hips and shoulders. Jumping onto the back of the scaly beast, he drove his dagger down with all his might. The norite blade split the thick bone of the creature's skull, burying itself to the hilt. The force of the blow drove the phyxian's face into the muck below it. It twitched once, then lay still.

He glanced around and saw the other two phyxians were dead as well—the one nearest him pierced by four separate spears. He pulled his dagger out, slid off the dead phyxian and nodded to Rashmar. "Help me move this bastard."

The elven sergeant joined him and together they managed to roll the large beast to its side. Underneath lay a blonde-haired warrior.

Salenia Va'Sol.

He added her name to the long list of those who had died under his command. The phyxian's teeth had ripped away her beauty along with half her face. The one remaining eye still attached to her skull sat cocked to the side. The weight of the phyxian had crushed her chest when it slammed her to the ground, and it was doubtful she had been alive when it bit into her. For that, Keramore was grateful.

He wished he could have said the same for his beloved Neria. She had still been alive when the green dragon bit into her. The memory slashed at him and the desire to scream at the heavens was almost overwhelming.

Instead, he reached down and picked up Salenia's norite-tipped spear, before looking at the sergeant. "Take any arrows she carried and pass them out. They will be needed. Do the same with any others who fell."

Without a backward glance, he headed off through the woods once more.

In years past, he would have taken the time to bury and mourn Salenia, as opposed to leaving her body to rot next to three dead phyxians.

I just can't afford that now. Not today.

The ambush was not really a shock. As silent as his Teir`Dal were, it was simply impossible for eight hundred armed warriors to move without making some noise.

And the draconic races have impeccable hearing.

Truth be told, he had expected more resistance—this group had been just the fifth they had come across since leaving Bastion. All had been phyxian, which was not a bad tactic, as the four-legged beasts were large enough to be a threat to any race of the Combine, save an ogre. Still, while they hunted in packs, they were no smarter than the dogs they resembled. They would attack anything that moved, even a group as large as his. That made them lousy at reporting they had seen elves on the move.

A bonus for us.

If the same held true for the other companies of Teir`Dal, perhaps they would actually get into position before the enemy began its march this evening.

Had he been in charge of the Ring of Scale, a full quarter of his army would have been out

scouting. It was just one more sign of how poorly the war had turned against the Combine.

Ithiosar doesn't fear us, and the beast has every right not to.

They had been on the march for nearly half the day. By the position of the sun, Keramore guessed they were getting close to the rear of the Ring of Scale army. Earlier that afternoon, once they hit the edge of the Feerrott Forest, he turned his troop north, swinging around behind the horde's location. For the past half-an-hour or so, they'd been following a small valley covered with hardwood trees and underbrush.

Golds, reds, yellows and maroons speckled the trees around him. Now that the sun had begun its decent, a chill was developing. He pulled his cloak in tighter. Autumn had been his mother's favorite time of year. She said there was nowhere she would rather be than in southern Amaril during the fall.

His hand strayed to the pendant she had given him. While he missed her presence and her council, he was glad she had passed long before this accursed war with the dragons had broken out.

Tucking the trinket under his leather jerkin, he pushed her memory from his mind.

The last thing I need now is the distraction of ghosts.

A martin called out from his left and eight hundred Teir'Dal warriors came to an abrupt halt, each dropping low to the ground.

He motioned to Rashmar and pointed to himself, then in the direction of the birdcall. The sergeant nodded and followed.

Keeping low, Keramore worked his way from tree to tree for about fifty paces. He rose when he saw Sorthin, Ailen's second in command. As they closed on one another, a knot began forming in his gut. "Trouble?"

Sorthin kept his voice in the same whisper as Keramore's. "Nothing we couldn't handle, sir."

"Were you waiting for us?" Keramore knew he had gone further west than he wanted, but he didn't feel his company was that far behind.

"We have been here for a while now, sir. Long enough for Lieutenant Ailen to get us into position and scout the area." A dead limb broke from a nearby tree and the young lieutenant flinched. He looked around for a moment before continuing. "He has several of us out near where I found you. He feels the best place for you to hold up is right where you are now."

"Where are his warriors?"

Sorthin pointed north, the direction he had come. "We're spread out about a half-mile back." He moved his finger to the east. "The horde is about a mile and a half that way. Would you like to see them, sir?"

"I do." He looked at Rashmar. "Let the company fan out a bit. They can rest up, but make sure everyone keeps their heads low and eyes open. Anything that comes near enough to be a threat, kill it." He motioned for Sorthin to move. "Lead the way."

The grizzled sergeant took off at a brisk pace. "There is a bunch of 'em, sir. They fill nearly the entire damn valley."

Keramore didn't feel like chatting—he would get all the information he needed once he put eyes on the enemy—so he grunted a response.

The pair wormed their way through the underbrush for about twenty minutes. As they climbed a steep hill, Sorthin crouched down and Keramore followed his lead. By the time they reached the crest, the two were crawling on their bellies.

The valley was shaped like a giant elongated bowl with wooded hills surrounding it on three sides. The valley itself stretched out like the surface of a grassy lake. He could see why it had been used for farming. About three miles of flat land separated the hills to the north and south from those in the west that hid him. Thick hardwood trees covered the hills, and the underbrush that had accumulated between their trunks made it impossible to see deeper than just a few yards.

Why would Ithiosar choose this location as a campsite? It is almost undefendable. And, with the woods being so close, any attackers would be right on top of you before you knew they were even there.

Of course, the sheer number of dragonspawn filling the space between those trees would deter an ambush from anything smaller than another army. And an army of that size would not be able to attack effectively through all the underbrush.

Still, it suits our purpose perfectly.

While he could see no sign of the Teir`Dal now surrounding the horde, he could see the Ring of Scale clearly. This was not the first time he'd had the opportunity to look down upon a draconic camp, but this was the largest collection of dragonspawn he had ever seen.

East, on the far side of the valley from him, thousands of small campfires sent tendrils of gray smoke billowing into the air. These would be the kobolds, as the rest of the dragon-kin preferred their food a little less cooked. From where he lay, he estimated a good fifth of their army were comprised of the dirty little creatures.

As he had suspected, groups of wyverns, drakes, wyrms and raptors formed much of both flanks. He was certain they were there as much to keep the kobolds from abandoning their duties as to protect the vulnerable sides of the army. The beasts lounged around in no particular order, many sleeping.

His vantage point was in the center of the rear of the Ring of Scale campsite. Directly in front of him, perhaps two bowshot lengths away, sat something that froze his heart solid.

It can't be!

A green dragon with a jagged scar running down its left hindquarter lay curled up and asleep on the soft grass of a pasture. The early evening sun glinted off its scales, and Keramore watched its massive sides expanding and contracting in rhythm as it breathed.

With each breath the beast took, a ripple of muscle moved down its body, warping the gray scar. The more he stared, the more the scar seemed alive, as if taunting him.

Or calling me.

An image of Neria gripping the hilt of her long blade as it sliced deep into that green dragon's side. Of the dragon turning, acid pouring from its mouth. Of his wife falling.

Nothing except tall grass and a few sleeping dragonspawn separated him from the object of his grief and pain. He had but to rise and fly. Fly like an arrow of death straight into the heart of the monster that had taken his love from him.

“Are you alright, sir?”

The sergeant's whisper snapped Keramore from his thoughts. The elf's eyes were darting between Keramore's face and his hands. Looking down, he saw that his knuckles were white from his grip on the spear. He forced them to relax. Only then did he realize he was shaking.

Keramore pulled in a deep breath through his nostrils and let it out slowly through his mouth.

When he returned his gaze back to the green dragon, revenge still filled his every thought.

You will not escape me a second time!

Slipping back down the hill, Keramore waited long enough for their silhouettes not to be seen before he jumped up and began running back to his troop.

After they were far enough away so their voices would not carry, he glanced at Sergeant Sorthin. "Other than the green, have you seen or heard of any other dragons in the area?"

The sergeant shook his head as they ran.

"Get back to Ailen. Tell him the plan is to be moved forward." Keramore leapt over a log, landing silently on the other side without breaking stride. "With only one dragon in sight, now is the time to strike. Have him send runners to Thelious and Jerilith. I will do the same to Kailon. Tell them they are not to wait until the horde is on the move. They are to attack immediately."

Reaching a spot he recognized, he slid to a stop. "Your warriors need to move forward now. I want to take full advantage of this. Go!" He broke off and ran toward his own company.

Neria, my love. After tonight, your soul will be at peace.

Chapter 6 - A Mouse Catches A Cat

By the time the runners were sent and Keramore Thex had moved his warriors to the hill overlooking the enemy, it was later than he would have liked. It was still a few hours before the sun would fall behind the distant mountains, and the green dragon was still asleep. The rest of the horde seemed to be doing little more than that.

He placed a hand on the Teir`Dal warrior crouching next to him. "Firwith. Run fast. Run silent. No bows. Pass it on."

The elf nodded, then turned and repeated the command to the warrior to his right.

Keramore did the same to the young scout on his left. He redirected his attention to the horde just in time to see a volley of arrows arc from the trees along the southern hillside. Before they reached their zenith, a second volley, this time from the trees covering the northern slopes, sailed high into the air.

As the first arrows fell amongst the dragonspawn, a third volley was already in the air from the south. A grin came to him with the image of destruction those arrows brought. Keramore knew that many more would follow from both hillsides. A steady rain of death.

Gripping the spear he had taken from Salenia, Keramore dashed from the underbrush. He kept low to the ground, slicing through the tall grass like a prow of a ship cutting through water. The whisper-quiet footfalls of his warriors followed him. Glancing to either side, he took a moment to admire the sight of eight hundred elves tearing through the grass. Each held a spear in their hands, and wore determination on their faces.

Regardless of how this ends, the courage of the Teir`Dal fill my soul with pride.

Further to his left, Ailen's group had also broken from the tree line. Like a pack of ghosts with death in their hearts, his elves raced across the open field.

Once the fourth volley of arrows rained down onto the flanks of the dragon-kin army, shouts of pain and death and anger had filtered through the mass, enough that Keramore heard it. The juggernaut that was the Ring of Scale began to awaken. Hordes of dragonspawn ran toward both the southern and northern hills. Keramore could almost feel their blood-hunger and rage as streams of monsters peeled toward his Teir`Dal hiding in the trees.

The army began to split in half as the chaotic and undisciplined draconic army became a mob of individuals, each bent on being the one to kill those who dared attack them. The creatures too far from the action rose and craned their necks in an attempt to see what was causing the commotion.

Launching himself into the air, Keramore landed on the back of a startled wyvern lounging in the grass. He stabbed down with his spear, skewering the creature's neck before it could even screech out a warning. He let his momentum carry him forward. Rotating his arm and withdrawing the spear in one smooth motion, he jumped off the dying beast at a full run.

He chanced a glance to his sides. For as far as he could see, elves ran past startled dragon-kin, each one bent on extracting revenge for over ten years of loss. Spears were thrust. Dragonspawn died.

Then, all sight of the battle as a whole vanished as a drake rose up before him. Easily half-gain his height, Keramore slid to a stop in front of the beast. The long, snake-like monster's tongue flicked out, tasting the air. Its green eyes, each split in twain by elongated pupils, dripped with malice. Even

as the beast lunged forward, Keramore thrust his spear up to meet it. The norite tip tore into the soft underside of the beast's jaw. The spear did not stop until a good six inches of gore-covered shaft protruded from the top of the drake's head.

The blow did not stop the creature's momentum, and Keramore lost his grip on the spear's shaft as the drake's body fell to the ground.

Without pause, he drew his twin long blades.

Spinning, he caught a second drake across its back. The norite blade sliced through scales, meat and bone. It tore through the creature's side, and on its way out, severed one of the drake's wings clean off. The dragonspawn had enough time to spin and hiss at him before two elven spears pierced it from the other side.

He let his spin carry him around, stabbing his other sword through the eye socket of a startled phyxian.

He saw that the noise of his company's attack was finally catching the attention of the dragonspawn toward the rear of the army, and they began to turn in small groups.

A pack of four raptors broke from the ranks, heading directly toward Keramore's location. He picked up speed and ran to meet them head on. A spear arced from behind him, catching the lead raptor in the cheek. The force of the blow snapped the creature's head around, throwing it off balance. It fell hard. Its three companions did not so much as slow.

Keramore ran for the middle one. The raptor lowered its head, pulling back its scaly lips in anticipation of an easy meal. As it snapped its jaws forward, Keramore flung himself to the ground, sliding across the grass beside the creature's feet. Lashing out with his right blade, he struck the creature's leg. The blade cut skin and muscle, but could not slice through the thick bone underneath. The sword hit the raptor's leg bone with such force that Keramore lost his grip on the hilt. The blow sent the beast flipping forward.

Jumping to his feet, he left the downed raptor to be finished by the Teir'Dal in his wake.

The screams of elves joined the screeches of dragonspawn, and the sounds of his warriors dying by the hundreds assailed his ears.

After the initial clash, his warriors had orders to turn and retreat.

Those who can see me will not obey that order. Not with me pushing forward through this throng of monsters. But I will not let that green escape me a second time—no matter the cost.

He knew they would follow him into the very jaws of death so long as he led the way. A wave of shame hit him but he pushed it aside. He couldn't stop now. Not while so close to the creature that had killed Neria. He let his guilt roll from him like water down a cliff. He could see his goal, and he would not abandon it now.

Let my soul be damned tenfold by each warrior who follows me into the afterlife. I care not.

The green dragon rose from the masses ahead. It had its back to Keramore, facing a group of Teir'Dal led by Ailen. The dragon roared. A bitter taste hit Keramore's tongue as the dragon let loose a belch of acid. The breath weapon coated several elves and he lost sight of Ailen. They died screaming and writhing in agony.

Not even caring if his friend still lived, Keramore rushed forward. He could not let this monster

take to the air as it had done after killing his wife. He slashed at the dragon's thigh, cutting at an angle to the scar left by Neria. The beast bellowed, whipping its head around. Recognition seemed to fill the monster's gaze. It snapped its jaws at Keramore.

Dodging to the side, he rolled under the neck of the green. He sprang up, gripping his remaining sword with both hands. A primal scream ripped from his throat as he hacked down. The norite blade chopped through the base of the dragon's wing. Scales, tendon, and bone tore away as the wing crumpled down upon itself.

The dragon shrieked and whipped its head toward Keramore. He spun, bringing his sword up to strike, but was too slow. The dragon's head smacked him like an ogre's mace. Stars filled his vision and he flew through the air. The ground slammed into him, and all breath whooshed from his lungs.

Like a drowning man clawing for something to hold on to, he groped at the grass under him, but he could not rise. A putrid stench filled his nose. He blinked to clear his vision, and found himself staring into the black eyes of a wyvern.

No! Not yet. The green still lives!

He dug deep for any reserves of strength lurking inside, but his body would not obey. All he could do was watch as the creature reared back to deliver the killing blow. The dragonspawn's head whipped forward.

An arrow sprouted from the creature's shoulder, jerking the beast upright before it could sink its fangs into Keramore's flesh. A second feathered shaft joined the first moments before a half score slammed into the creature, sending it toppling backward.

The world shifted as hands gripped Keramore and pulled. His foggy mind tried to grasp the events unfolding around him, but his brain felt stuffed with wool.

A face hovered before him. "Can you run?"

He recognized the voice. Shaking his head to clear it, the world began to materialize once more. He was looking down at grass slipping by like the water of a fast moving brook. A Teir'Dal warrior held each of his arms, dragging him. Ailen jogged along in front of him, a worried look upon his face.

Keramore's feet scrambled below him, trying to gain purchase. By the time he had regained his footing, he remembered where he was.

"NO!" Ripping one arm away from the elf that held it, he pushed the other back and stopped. Standing now under his own power, he saw that they were nearly back to the tree line. Looking toward the enemy camp, the field was a swath of death. Bodies, both elven and dragonspawn, littered the ground. The Ring of Scale had yet to pursue them in mass. Most milled about, as if unsure of what to do. A few small packs of draconic monsters were beginning to head their way, however.

He took a step toward the carnage and Ailen jumped in front of him. "What are you doing?"

Keramore tried to brush the lieutenant aside, but was unable to move him in his weakened state. "Take the warriors and go. I will not leave until that green dragon is dead!"

Shaking his head, Ailen's expression became a scowl. "Is that why you ordered us to attack early?" He reached out and grabbed Keramore by his leather jerkin. "For your own personal vengeance!" Letting go with one hand, he pointed back to the Ring of Scale. "Look! The green bastard is dead. You killed it. That is why the rest are so hesitant to follow us." He turned back to Keramore and locked

his gaze upon him. “But I also want you to look at our dead. Those who paid the butcher’s bill for your revenge.”

Keramore’s vision was still fuzzy, but now that he focused, he saw that Ailen spoke true. Across the field, surrounded by a semicircle of dragonspawn, the large green dragon lay on its side. Buried to its hilt, Keramore’s sword jutted up from its skull, just behind the beast’s right eye.

Neria’s murderer is dead.

He met Ailen’s heated gaze with a cold one of his own. “Every Teir`Dal warrior who marched here today knew this was a suicide mission. Had we attacked at sunset, the cost would have been the same. And we accomplished what we needed. The horde is in chaos. With the dragon dead, they will have no direction. They will—”

Large dark shadows blotted out the sun and pulled Keramore’s gaze to the sky. A group of dragons glided down toward the rear of the draconic army. At their head flew the black dragon, Ithiosar.

Keramore had rarely experienced fear. Now its icy claw reached out and tore at his heart.

I am a fool. We have accomplished nothing!

Dragonspawn darted to the sides to make room for them. Even from this distance, Keramore could hear the black dragon scream at his troops. The dragon’s thick words sent the Ring of Scale into a flurry of motion. “What is this? What has happened here?”

He did not catch their reply, but could guess once the dragon turned its head and stared in his direction. Hate boiled from the creature, and it took a lumbering step into the empty pasture that separated them. “Keramore! Can’t you simply die like the rest of your filthy kin? Trapped behind your walls like rats!”

“Staying now will get us all killed. You are right, we all knew what we were getting into. But I will not let you die needlessly.” Ailen spun Keramore around and pushed him toward the trees. “Go, commander. Before I’m forced to get ugly with you!”

The two Teir`Dal who pulled him this far reached out, but Keramore waved them off. “I can move on my own.” Concentrating on placing one foot after the other, within a few steps he was jogging at a brisk pace.

The dragon’s screams ripped through the air in pursuit of them. “Vashlin, take your foot and go after them! Find every last dirty elf and feast on their flesh! The rest of you prepare yourselves. We march on Bastion now!”

While his body pushed through the agony of moving, Keramore’s mind reeled. All those months of pain, all that time of feeling he had betrayed his love by letting her killer escape, it all melted from him with a thought.

Neria, my love, you are avenged.

Chapter 7 - The Ruins of Quin'Sari

Keramore Thex sloshed through the shallow water of a stream, hoping it would cover his scent. The icy cold water gnawed through his leather boots, numbing his feet. The sensation helped clear his mind.

His empty scabbards slapped his thighs as he ran. The swords had been a gift from his father years ago. He did not mourn their loss; they had served their purpose well. Had he the time, he would have unbuckled the belt holding the ornate sheaths and let it fall to become lost as well.

Gripping a spear in each hand, he used their extra weight to help him balance as he jogged over the slick stones resting just below the water's surface.

He led a group of perhaps a hundred Teir'Dal trailing behind him in a staggered line. Night had long since fallen and the dragonspawn had been harassing them relentlessly since he had split off from Ailen's group. He hoped this new tactic would purchase them some relief.

As he turned to say something to Sergeant Rashard, a crash of limbs sounded through the woods ahead. Fifty feet up stream, a pack of phyxians burst from the underbrush. They spread out across the streambed, blocking the path.

Before he had the chance to signal stop, the twang of bowstrings echoed off the trees and a score of arrows whipped past him. Five of the beasts dropped, leaving three standing. Two of those had at least one arrow buried in its hide. Keramore continued forward, raising the spear in his right hand to throw.

Too late, he caught sight of the raptors.

The lizard-like creatures jumped from the brush of a high, sandy bank. One arced over Keramore's head, landing on a female warrior behind him. The raptor's large fore-claw caught her just above her collarbone and tore a gash from her chest to her thigh. She crumbled with a shriek beneath the monster.

Spinning, Keramore redirected the spear he was about to throw and drove it into the back of the raptor. It screeched as it collapsed upon its victim.

A second raptor snapped at Keramore, its teeth biting deep into the wooden shaft of his remaining spear. He released the weapon, causing the monster to stumble back. Drawing his dagger, he dropped to a crouch. The small blade would be little defense against the nearly eight foot tall beast, but it was all he had.

And it is all I need!

The thing spit out the spear and snapped at the air in front of it, letting out a cooing sound. As it took a step forward, an elven warrior landed on its back. The creature reared, whipping its head around in an attempt to get its teeth on its assailant. Keramore lunged forward, slashing the raptor across its thick neck. He was forced to dive out of the way as the thing fell. Rashmar's spear licked out and stabbed the lizard in the side of the neck, just below its jawbone. The elf on its back clung on. He added his own long blade into the beast's flesh once it was down, thrusting into it several times before the creature lay still.

A quick glance around assured him that nothing remained standing other than his elves.

Holding out a hand, he helped the Teir`Dal warrior to his feet. "Thanks, Mathin."

Mathin took the hand and grinned. "Always wanted to see if I could ride one of those things, commander."

Keramore could not bring himself to share in the young warrior's mirth. Turning, he strode over to the first raptor he had killed and pulled his spear from its back. The female Teir`Dal it had eviscerated still lay pinned under it.

Tiana R'olo.

Her norite sword had fallen into the stream beside her. He reached down and picked it up. Giving it a few practice swings, he frowned. It was a bit lighter than he liked.

Still, it's better than a dagger!

He slipped it into one of his empty scabbards and looked back at Rashmar. "Pass the word to take what weapons are needed from the fallen. We must be on the move again."

Without waiting on an answer, Keramore walked over and knelt by the bodies of the phyxians who had first sprung this ambush.

How do they continue to find us time and again? They should have long since given up the chase.

Their lifeless eyes gave him no answers. He glanced into the thick underbrush surrounding the stream. If the dragonspawn had a leader, and they must have since both phyxians and raptors were too stupid to set a trap, it was long gone.

Drakes! Too smart by half.

Standing, he looked down the stream at his remaining warriors. As many dead elves lay in the frigid water as dragon-kin. When they had split from Ailen's group, he had nearly two hundred following him. Now, less than a hundred remained.

We have paid the butcher enough.

He rejoined the rest, waving them all to come together. "Listen up." He kept his voice low so it would not carry through the woods. "We are being hunted like deer. There are simply too many of the draconic horde searching this area for us to continue this cat and mouse game. We have done our part and distracted as many of the enemy as we could for as long as we could. It is now time for us to concern ourselves with our own survival." He pointed off to the northwest. "The ruins of Quin`Sari are in that direction, some twenty five miles or so. From here on out, we travel as fast as we can. No more stopping to wait on the enemy to catch us up. If we hit the Greenblood River before the ruins, we follow that north." He paused for a moment to make sure those in the back were told what had been said. "May the light of Nor`l guide and protect you."

"May the light of Nor`l guide and protect us all." The response was repeated quietly through his warriors.

Nodding to Rashard and Mathin, Keramore climbed up the shallow stream bank and pushed his way through the thick underbrush.

A few more hours saw them to the edge of the Feerrott Forest. The forest was old, one of the oldest on Amaril. Its massive trees stretched high into the sky, some with trunks so big around that ten people could not encircle it with hands joined. They were all limbless for at least fifty feet or more, their leaves creating a nearly solid canopy. Keramore felt an odd sensation of being inside an

endless, grand hall. The canopy allowed little sunlight to reach the ground, and he assumed this was the reason the area had almost no underbrush. The only thing covering the space between the giant trees was moss and a thick layer of needles.

Without the thorny underbrush of the woods that covered the lands south of the Serpentspine Mountains, he and his people were able to move much more rapidly.

Of course, this means our pursuers will be able to cover more ground as well.

He pushed those thoughts aside and simply concentrated on running. His kind were well suited to cover long stretches of ground in a hurry. While they could not run at full speed for long, elves did not tire easily.

The fact that death itself hounds our heels is as good a motivator as anything.

After another hour of running at a good clip, they came upon the cliffs overlooking the Greenblood. The fast flowing waters of the river had worn away the land over time, digging out a wide and deep chasm. The far side was a good two hundred yards away, and at places along the river the walls were nearly as high.

Not wanting to be out in the open on the cliff's edge, Keramore kept his group under the cover of the trees' canopy and turned them north.

He was thankful they had met no resistance so far.

I hope the others are faring so well.

By the time they reached the ruins the moon had set, leaving the night as black as tar. If it had not been for his natural elven ability to see in the dark, Keramore doubted he could have seen further than a few yards.

The city of Quin'Sari had fallen nearly a hundred years ago during the last Dragon War, a time when Amaril had still been controlled by the Takish Empire. At one time, it had been a major metropolis—a hub for goods traveling both up and down the Greenblood river.

Even in ruins, the city was majestic. Standing on a rise and looking down across its crumbling buildings, towers, temples and plazas, Keramore could easily imagine what it must have looked like when it was whole. Whoever had planned the city had done well. It filled a large flat valley roughly two miles in diameter. The Greenblood flowed from northeast to southwest, cutting through the city. The majority of the city sat to the east of the river, leaving only about a third on the western side. The remnants of wide boulevards cut across the city at regular intervals. Broken cobblestones and weeds covered the streets not filled with collapsed buildings.

In the center of it all stood a large, domed structure. It dominated the city. Even though he was miles from it, a strange urge crept into him. It felt as if something pulled at him—beckoning him to come to the building. It took all his willpower to shift his eyes away and continue his scan of the area.

The surrounding forest had begun creeping in. With enough time, nature would eventually reclaim the land, and the city would be remembered only in myth.

Will my people suffer the same fate?

Off in the distance, rocky cliffs clawed their way into the night's sky. With the moon gone, stars twinkled across the vast open blanket of the heavens.

Movement off to the right caught his attention. A large pack of phyxians crept through one of the

city streets on the eastern-most edge of the ruins.

Rashmar tapped him on the shoulder and pointed in the direction the pack was heading. "I see signs of our people in those buildings to the west, commander."

No sooner had the aging sergeant said this than a barrage of arrows flew from the windows where he pointed. Each arrow found its mark, and in the blink of an eye, a score of draconic beasts lay dead or dying on the broken cobblestone street.

At least twice as many more of the monsters came pouring from the tree line. They dove into the decrepit buildings like a swarm of flies. Keramore started to motion for his people to attack when the beasts began emerging from the buildings. The creatures wandered around, sniffing at anything they could before gathering in a group in the middle of the street.

Rashmar gave a grunt of a laugh. "Our people must have fled. The beasties are at a loss over what to do."

"Yes. It seems Lanys is using the city's buildings to maximum effectiveness." Keramore turned to those around him. "If that many physicians are here, there will be others as well. Keep sharp."

Jumping from the fallen pillar he had been standing on, he made his way down the hill. He took one last look at the domed building in the distance before dropping to city level. It pulled at him even when it vanished from his sight.

Continuing down, the dome appeared and disappeared behind the buildings of the city sitting between him and it. Each time it came into view, his eyes were drawn to it like a moth to a flame. He picked his way between broken statues and destroyed fountains that littered the southern edge of the city. This area must have been some type of public bath, though no water flowed through its stone reservoirs now.

As they approached what might have been a large mansion, a lone drake came slithering from a dark alleyway. Its tongue flicked out as it tasted the air, looking for prey. Raising a hand with two fingers pointing up, Keramore motioned at the drake. The dragonspawn must have caught sight of the movement for it turned, locking its gaze with Keramore. Before it could open its mouth to hiss, two arrows slammed into it. The first struck it in the chest. The second took it in the eye. The thing crumpled like a cut rope.

Keramore led as his group picked their way between the buildings. Every few hundred yards he would stop and give off a night willow call. The third time he did this, the call was returned from off to his left and they began working their way in that direction.

Ahead lay a long one-story building with most of its southern wall gone. A cooing noise Keramore recognized as that of a hunting raptor came from the other side of it. He waved for Mathin and Rashmar to follow. Careful not to jar any rocks loose, he climbed the rubble and ducked inside. Making his way to the far side of the open interior, he peered out an open window. Buildings in various states of decay circled a large courtyard. At the center, a massive tree had grown out of an old, broken fountain.

A raptor circled the base of the tree, its eyes never leaving its upper branches.

Signaling for Mathin to look out the window, Keramore dropped silently down to one knee. The young Teir'Dal warrior ghosted forward and pulled the last arrow from his quiver. Keramore nodded for Rashmar to join him.

The near simultaneous snap of two bowstrings ripped through the night.

Both arrows hit their mark, but neither killed the raptor. It fell to the ground and let out a loud screech as it kicked its powerful hind legs against the loose stones of the street. Large chunks of rock tore loose, adding their clatter to the echoing noise.

Keramore vaulted the windowsill and raced across the courtyard. The beast's dying screams ricocheted off the ancient stone walls, reverberating into the darkness. Just as he reached the raptor, a shadow fell from the trees and landed just behind the beast's head. A flash of norite, and the shadow drove a dagger into the side of the raptor's neck. Keramore slid his spear in just below its stunted front legs, piercing its heart.

Spasms racked the raptor, then it fell still.

"My thanks, commander." Locien's grin could be seen clearly, even in the darkness. "I was—"

Keramore cut him off with a wave. "Not here. That raptor's screams will have every dragonspawn within earshot here any minute." Suiting his own words, he hurried back to the building where Rashmar and Mathin waited. He ducked back inside the building, waving for them to follow.

As they left the area, he turned to Locien. "You are Kailon's cousin, are you not?"

The elf nodded. "Yes."

"What are you doing wandering this place alone?" Keramore stepped over three large gashes in the street and realized they were made by a dragon's talon. Mud filled all three, and it was apparent the damage was done long ago.

"I was separated from Kailon's squad after we entered the Feerrott Forest." Locien nodded thanks when Mathin handed him a water skin. "When I couldn't find them, I figured I'd come here to the ruins. But once I arrived, instead of finding the Teir`Dal I was told would be guarding our retreat, I ran into more dragonspawn."

"I understand." He let out a sigh, frustrated that he had not found any of the other companies yet. "Well, you're with us now."

Turning the corner, Keramore came up short and stared straight down the shaft of an arrow.

"Commander!" Lanys' eyes went wide as she took the tension from her bowstring. "It's good to see you, sir."

He put a finger on the norite tip of the arrow and gently pushed the weapon down. "Good to see you too, lieutenant." He brushed past her and found himself in a thin alleyway, the far end of which was comprised of two buildings that had toppled over upon each other. Squatting in the alley were perhaps two hundred Teir`Dal. Each looked worse for wear but all stood ready to move, bows in hand. He turned back to Lanys. "Where is the rest of your company?"

"Dead, sir." She scrunched up her face. "The enemy was waiting on us."

Keramore grunted. He had feared as much when he failed to find the defenses his plan called for. He glanced back down the street holding his hundred warriors. "How secure is this location?"

"We have only been here a short while, but..." Lanys motioned to a doorway off to her left.

"Sergeant Rashmar, set up guards and get our people under cover. Don't let them get too comfortable, we can't stay here long." After Keramore nodded for Lanys to continue, he followed her into the building. Laid out in a haphazard manner were perhaps another fifty warriors, each with

various wounds. A few seemed on the edge of life.

A female sergeant walked up and saluted.

Lanys returned her salute. "Status, Tarila."

"We lost two more, ma'am." Tarila cut her eyes to Keramore before returning her gaze to Lanys.

"Thank you. Continue to do what you can." The Lieutenant turned and faced Keramore. "We have a hundred, ninety four warriors and forty seven wounded, sir."

"What happened to your healers?"

Lanys' frown deepened. "As I said, sir, the enemy was lying in wait for us. We found very little resistance on our way to the ruins. Once here, though, we were ambushed by a superior force. We lost nearly half in the initial attack, along with all of our healers. Many were forced to scatter, so there may be others in the splintered groups." She paused. "Ithiosar himself led the attack against us, sir."

So that's why he wasn't with the main horde.

Keramore waved for Tarila. "Go outside and find Sergeant Rashmar. Have him send in any healers we have and start tending the wounded."

The young sergeant's eyes filled with relief. "Yes, commander. Thank you." In her haste to leave, she failed to give him a salute. Keramore was too tired to care.

He squared his shoulders on Lanys. "What was your plan?"

"Well, sir." She swallowed hard. "At this point, I have been concentrating on keeping those with me alive. We found this alley about half an hour ago and it seemed like a defensible position. We had been carrying the wounded before then and since we were not being pursued, I had them placed in here."

"But your task was to give the other companies a safe place at their backs." He glanced around the room. The back wall was nothing more than a pile of rubble. He was amazed that the building even stood. "Was it your group who laid an ambush on the eastern side of the city?"

She shook her head, embarrassment plain on her features. "No, sir. I have not had the opportunity to do anything but run and hide."

Reaching up, Keramore rubbed his chin. "There were too many arrows for it to have been a splinter from your group."

"One of the other companies, then?"

"That's what I'm thinking." Keramore let his eyes wander across the wounded. "We can't stay here. The dragonspawn are scouring this city in mass. And not just the ones who were here when you arrived. I'm pretty sure each Teir'Dal group that arrived has dragging a horde of the draconic bastards with them."

A dozen Teir'Dal healers entered. They fanned out amongst the injured and began administering aid. Keeping his voice low, Keramore addressed the room. "Listen up. Those that can be healed, get them back on their feet as quickly as possible. Those who are going to need more time, get them to the point where they can be moved. We need to move soon."

Nodding for Lanys to follow, Keramore stepped back into the alleyway and headed for the collapsed buildings at the end. As he went, he took the time to acknowledge those who caught his eye.

Some he touched their outstretched hands. Others he stopped to pass a quick word. Many more he simply exchanged an unspoken nod. One and all, they looked back at him with dirty, tired faces. As he interacted with them, he noticed that they all seemed to sit up a bit straighter, appear a little less fatigued.

I must not forget what the main duty of a leader is.

Leaving the warriors behind, they reached the rubble pile and began to scale the debris. Thirty feet of climbing brought them to the top, and the position gave Keramore a good view of the city.

He was about where he had assumed—toward the center of the ruins and perhaps a half-mile from the river. Further north and away from the river sat the large domed building he had seen when he first arrived. It was about a mile away. The pull he felt upon arriving at the ruins increased as he stared at the massive structure. For some reason, he had to get to that building.

Motioning for Lanys to climb back down, the two made their way back to the alley. “Go organize the warriors, we need to keep moving. Ask for scout volunteers. At least twenty pairs if possible. Have them start searching the city for other Teir`Dal groups. They need to tell whomever they find to head for the large, domed building near the center. We can regroup there. Perhaps even find a place to hold up. We shall then see what the morning brings.”

“Sir.” Lanys strode away.

Hopefully, the morning will hold a better option than we have now.

Chapter 8 - Against the Wall

The domed building rose high into the night sky, looming over Keramore Thex like an oppressive blanket. This close to it, the pull he felt was palpable. An open, rock strewn courtyard lay between him and his goal. A group of dragonspawn searched the area—physicians overseen by a few drakes.

Sergeant Rashmar shifted next to him. “I could take a squad of archers around to the west.” He raised a hand and pointed. “Those buildings over there would give us cover. If we hit them fast enough—”

“No.” Shaking his head, Keramore belly crawled back down the small rise they were laying on. At the bottom, he rose to a crouch and weaved his way through the narrow alleys toward where the rest of the Teir`Dal waited. “I don’t want to risk any more lives if I can help it.” He kept his voice to a low whisper. “Besides, we circled that entire building. I don’t see a way inside. We need to find an alternate location to hold up in for the night.”

The sergeant grunted. “Night’s nearly done. Sun’ll be up soon.”

Motion from his left caught his eye. Grabbing Rashmar’s sleeve, Keramore pulled him to the ground. The sergeant didn’t hesitate to comply, though he did give Keramore an inquisitive look once they were both flat against the cobblestones. Pointing, the sergeant nodded that he understood. Rising just a bit, he pulled back his bowstring. He then released the tension on the bow and stood.

Keramore noticed why a split second later. A knot in his gut loosened as Ailen and Sorthin melted from the shadows of a nearby house. The two kept low as they approached, Ailen wearing a big grin. “Commander, it’s good to see you.”

Taking the lieutenant’s offered hand, Keramore gave it a quick shake. “You, as well.” He tried to peer into the small building behind the two elves, but the total darkness of the place prevented him from seeing more than a few feet in. “How many of your company made it?”

The grin slipped from Ailen’s face. “We lost more than I care to mention during the hit and run missions we maintained on our way here. We joined up with both Jerilith’s and Thelious’ groups just before hitting Quin’Sari. I’d say we have about five hundred total between us.”

The structure they had emerged from was too small to house so many, and Keramore glanced around at the surrounding buildings. “Where are they?”

Ailen’s grin sprang back to his lips. “One of the mages with me knows these ruins well. He led us to an underground network of tunnels. These have provided us the ability to move from location to location virtually undetected. I have been taking advantage and harassing the enemy everywhere I can.”

“So, it was you who ambushed a large group of physicians about an hour ago on the eastern side of the city.”

“Probably. We have taken out a half dozen such groups since arriving.” He laughed. “Hit ‘em hard, then disappear into the tunnels. So far all the entrances we’ve found are intact and well hidden.”

Keramore motioned toward the small house. “Is there an entrance inside there?”

“Yes, sir.”

Nudging Rashmar, Keramore inclined his head in the direction of where his company was hiding.

“Gather the warriors and bring them here.” He turned back to Ailen. “Show me the tunnels.”

Toward the rear of the building sat a small room. Nestled between two larger rooms, it appeared to have once been a utility closet. Upon entering, Keramore could not see any exits other than the main door. Ailen walked to the back wall, slid his hand over the corner of a fresco that ran across the top, and pressed. The muffled click sounded and the back wall rotated out toward them.

Two elves stood on the other side, one with a bow nocked and drawn, the other with a makeshift torch. The one with the bow released the tension on his string and lowered the weapon.

Ailen squeezed past them into a narrow corridor. “Sarthin, stay outside and show the rest of the Teir`Dal where to go.”

Saluting, the sergeant dashed back to the front of the small house.

Holding out a hand, Ailen indicated for Keramore to take the lead. “Whoever built these did a fine job. They seem to stretch under the entire city.” The narrow tunnel went forward for only about ten feet before it turned into a steep downward stairwell. “We have found several of them caved in. But this area is intact.”

The stone forming the stairs was ancient, though they did seem well constructed. After a descent of about fifteen feet, the stairway dumped them out into a much wider passageway, one that was nearly twenty feet across. This new passageway ran both left and right. Torch brackets lined the length of it, though very few held torches. Those that did were lit. The smoke from these spread out in a thin layer across the arched ceiling. A group of five armed Teir`Dal stood guard here, and saluted as Keramore approached.

Ailen turned to the right. “Down here, sir. There is a large room I am using as a command center.”

Small rooms punctured the hallway at regular intervals. The rooms held no furniture. Whatever their original purpose was, Keramore had no idea. Currently, each room held a score or more Teir`Dal warriors in various states of rest. About a hundred yards further down the tunnel sat an ornately carved arched doorway. Entering the room, both Jerilith and Thelious turned, surprise painted over their features. “Commander!”

The room was made from the same stone as the hallway, though it was oval in shape. A massive stone table with benches on either side dominated the center of the chamber. The wall on the far side from the doorway caught his eye immediately. It had what appeared at first glance to be a map of the city, but the more he looked, the more he realized it was...wrong.

Tearing his gaze from the map, he gave a nod to each officer, taking their offered hands as he did so. “I am glad to see you both made it.”

A tsk escaped Jerilith. “Barely!” He waved a hand at Ailen. “And after we were here, this damn fool has had us chasing every large group of dragonspawn his scouts can find.”

“Shut your mouth, mage!” Ailen slapped the stone table causing dust to fly. “I don’t remember you complaining when I saved your ass from that pack of raptors back in the Feerrott!”

“Enough, you two.” The verbal war between Ailen and Jerilith was legendary. Keramore had neither the time nor the patience for it now. Though, he hated appearing to take sides. He gave Ailen a stern look. “The hunting stops now.”

Ailen looked hurt, but said nothing. Jerilith wore a smug grin.

Keramore was beyond caring for anyone's feelings. "Have you had any word from Kailon's squad?"

"No, sir." Ailen shrugged. "Truth be told, I'm amazed we ran into you. Do you think he's here?"

"I do. I found his cousin while making our way through the city. He became separated from the group after they got into a scrap with some of the horde." Moving closer to the map, he took in its detail more carefully. It had no writing or legend, and different sized lines crisscrossed it in all directions. He could make no sense of it. "Tell me about this."

Stepping forward, Jerilith pointed to a line that was thicker than the others. "I haven't been able to decipher much, sir. My guess is this line represents the river. But since it runs horizontal, I can't be sure. I have not been able to pick out anything else that could be a landmark to use for verification."

"What is this jewel marking the center of the thick line?"

"Could be anything." The mage shrugged. "At first, I thought it was the big domed building in the center of the city. But if it is, that would mean that thick line is not the river since the dome is over a mile from the water."

Whatever it was, Keramore was certain it marked the location of the Domed Temple. As he ran his finger over it, the strange pull radiated up his arm.

The others joined them in front of the map. Thelious glanced at Jerilith. "Do you think the river shifted after the city was abandoned?"

"I don't." The mage sounded annoyed.

It will obviously be of no help to us now, and we don't have the time to study the thing.

Keramore turned from the map as Lanys came walking in. He gave her a smile, then sat on one of the benches. "Let's concentrate on what we do know. The room we are in now is not far from the dome. If these tunnels are connected, and there is a way inside, it should not be hard to find. If not, these tunnels should provide us with a good hiding spot for a while. If we stay down here long enough, the draconic bastards may tire and leave. Food and water will be our main concerns."

"And arrows." Ailen sat down next to him. "We are running low."

The others took seats around the table. "Based on where we entered, the dome should be that way." He pointed at the wall holding the map, though he was really just pointing in the direction from which he felt the strange pull. "We need to see if we can find a tunnel leading under it. I still feel it is our best option right now."

"What is so important about that dome?" Thelious shifted in his seat when all eyes turned to him. "If I may ask, sir."

It struck Keramore as odd that until the young lieutenant questioned it, he had not even thought about why he was so bent on getting into that building. He did not think the pull he felt was misleading him. If anything, it comforted him. He shook his head. "I'm not sure. It just... feels right. It's like there is something tugging at my soul, pushing me to find a way into that building."

"If there is a way, we'll find it, sir." Lanys locked eyes with Keramore for a moment before staring daggers at the rest, as if daring them to say different.

Keramore cleared his throat to break the tension that had sprung up in the room. "We can use this area as our base for now. Thelious, gather the scouts and start mapping these tunnels. I want to know

if any of them lead into that dome. The rest of you organize the remaining warriors. I want an inventory of what we have, especially what arrows remain and any food or water we have in reserve.”

“Sir!”

As his officers left, Keramore brooded. He did not know why he felt so compelled to get inside that building, and that began to gnaw at him. He had also lost nearly all his Teir`Dal over the past twelve hours—some to decisions he was not proud of. He had done so much wrong, made so many bad choices. Lost so many who had looked up to him. Trusted him. The weight of it all bore down on him. He wanted to be alone. To allow his emotions to take over. But he couldn't. His people were still not safe.

“And I refuse to lose any more!” He pounded his fist on the table.

Standing, he turned to the map on the wall and stared at the crystal sitting in the center of the thick line.

Why do you call to me? What are you?

Chapter 9 - No Elf Left Behind

When Keramore Thex heard Ailen return about an hour later, he was still staring at the map. Or more precisely, through the map. He had been lost in thought, and it was not until the lieutenant cleared his throat that Keramore even realized he was no longer alone.

He did not turn around. "Give me some good news, Ailen."

"I'm Kailon, sir."

At the unexpected voice, Keramore spun and found himself smiling for the first time in a while. Standing alone in the doorway was lieutenant Kailon. Dirty, haggard, with dried blood matting his blonde hair. But alive. Keramore crossed the room and held out his hand. "Kailon! It's good to see you. How many of your company are with you?"

The elf's jaws clinched. "It's just me, sir. I lost everyone else." His gaze dropped to the floor and his shoulders slumped.

An icy claw reached up from the depths of the abyss and gripped Keramore's heart. He knew when he took this mission many of his warriors would die, but the reality of it was so much worse than he had imagined. "I'm... I'm sorry, Lieutenant." He tried to keep a strong face. "You'll be glad to hear one survived." At the inquisitive look from the elf, Keramore nodded. "I found your cousin, Locien, just after we entered the ruins."

Kailon's face brightened around the corners of his eyes, though not by much. "That is good news, sir. Perhaps more of my warriors are out there. We should—"

He was cut off by Thelious' entry. "Commander! There's something you need to see."

"Go find your cousin." He patted Kailon on the arm. "He should be in one of the rooms off the hallway. Once the two of you reconnect, come find me."

"Sir!" Kailon gave a salute before bolting out the door.

Keramore waved for Thelious to lead on.

As soon as they entered the passageway, Thelious fell in beside him. "My scouts could not find a tunnel leading up to the domed building. There may be one, but many of the tunnels near that building have collapsed." An elf standing guard at the far end of the hall held out a torch, and Thelious took it without breaking stride. "However, they did find a network of natural caves that descend further down, well below the tunnels we are in now. We wouldn't have found them had it not been for a bit of luck. We discovered a large sinkhole that took out some of those tunnels. The hole drops down into a massive cave system even further below ground. I had the mage Quisen take a group down and check it out. He said those caves are much older than anything up here—older even than the city itself."

"I want you to keep looking for a way into that domed building, but you can show me this sinkhole you found."

Once they left the area the Teir`Dal were using as a base camp, the tunnel narrowed and became void of connected rooms. After about five minutes of winding through passageways lit only by the occasional torch and marked with fresh elven script showing the way, the tunnel widened out once more.

This new hallway was much like the one they were camped in—about twenty feet wide with rooms on either side. It even had the same ornately carved arched door leading to a large oval room. This room, however, did not have a stone table filling its middle. Instead, an ornate fountain—dry as the desert sands—sat in the center of the room.

A few Teir`Dal scouts were talking quietly when Keramore entered. He returned their salute when they hopped up. “As you were.”

Thelious walked to the far side of the fountain. “This was discovered by Josties, there. I’m still not sure how.” Josties grinned, but said nothing. “Whoever made these tunnels really appreciated their privacy. I’m sure they came in handy when the dragons sacked it so long ago.” Bending down, he pressed the carving of a flower on the lower lip of the basin. The fountain slid to the side, revealing a spiral staircase leading down into darkness.

As soon as the fountain opened, the pull Keramore had been feeling intensified and he knew he was heading the right way.

Holding his torch high, the young lieutenant led the way down the narrow stairs. They descended only a short distance—perhaps ten feet—and stepped out into a tunnel very different from the ones above. A natural limestone cavern, large enough for two people to walk side by side and roughly circular in shape, stretched out both to his left and right. Without pause, Thelious turned left and headed further down the cavern. The walls were dry, but Keramore could tell that flowing water had carved it out sometime in the distant past. He also found it odd that such a natural looking cavern would have such smooth walls. Normally when he ventured into similar caves where water no longer flowed through them, stalagmites and stalactites lined the floors and ceilings. This was not the case here.

“How much further?”

Thelious glanced over his shoulder. “Not much, sir. You can see the light up ahead now.”

Looking past the elf, Keramore could indeed see a faint glow in the distance. Several Teir`Dal scouts stood in the cavern, a few holding torches. They were on the edge of a large hole. The limestone cavern continued into darkness past this, but the sinkhole was some thirty feet across, making it impossible to continue without aid. Several ropes dangled down to where two more torch-wielding scouts waited some thirty feet below.

Handing his torch to the warrior next to him, Thelious grabbed a rope and dropped over the side. Keramore did the same and soon found himself on the edge of the largest underground cavern he had ever seen. It was easily seventy-five feet high and nearly twice as wide. Stalactites and stalagmites grew everywhere, some as thick as a tree. A thin thread of water ran down the center of the place. Torches lit the area around the sinkhole, having been stuck sporadically where they could. In the same way, torches ran off to the left. To the right, the cavern disappeared into darkness. Keramore pointed that way. “What’s down there?”

The lieutenant stopped and shook his head. “I have some scouts exploring that way, but they haven’t returned yet. It could go on forever.” He turned and started up the tunnel. “Over here is what I wanted you to see.”

Around a bend, the cavern changed drastically. The fact that this chamber had been carved by sentient hands was not the only thing that set it apart from the natural cavern they left behind. It was

just as large, but the stalactites and stalagmites had been removed and the floor flattened out. Not by modern tools, either. Keramore could see the telltale signs of stone tool marks against the limestone.

Strange statues lined the walls. The statues had been worn away past the point of recognition, and Keramore was not certain they had ever even been humanoid. At least not any of the races he was familiar with.

The proportions seem... off.

From the wall to his right, a shallow trench cut across the floor. It was only a few inches deep, but it was what filled it that drew Keramore's eye. A dark blue energy, with what appeared to be tendrils of lightning snaking through it, ran the length of the trench. It weaved its way toward the center of the room where it stopped at a mound of black, rock-like material. The mound rose up some twenty feet and an ornately carved wall about four feet high surrounded it. Small, rune-covered pillars broke this wall at regular intervals. It reminded Keramore of a gigantic King's crown sitting on a raven-haired head. On each side of the mound, a stairway ascended to a small platform at the top, dividing the structure in fourths. The shallow trench filled with its strange flowing energy cut up the center of the stairs, splitting them in half and adding a strip of color offsetting the gray in the granite.

From each of the four sections, a massive curved pillar rose up, arching inward to hover high over the center platform. A small group of Teir'Dal mages stood at the foot of the stairs, chatting excitedly.

During the walk down here, Keramore had been fighting the urge to berate his Scout Master for wasting his time. Upon seeing the strange altar, the pulling sensation he had been feeling intensified to the point that tingles rippled through his body.

Before he could move toward it, one of the mages peeled away from the group and scurried over to them. "Commander. I am glad you came."

Without taking his eyes from the structure, Keramore returned the wizard's salute. "What is this place, Quisen?"

Glancing over his shoulder, the mage frowned. "We are, as of yet, unsure, commander. The runes along the wall and those on the... device itself are mostly unfamiliar to us. From what we have been able to decipher, we think this might be some type of portal."

"A portal?" Keramore ran his gaze up the large pillars in the center of the device. Each one rose up some fifty feet into the air, nearly touching the ceiling. "To where?"

Quisen shook his head and began walking with the group toward the stairs. "Of that we are uncertain. We are also at a total loss as to how, or even if, the device works."

A tingling sensation reverberated against Keramore's chest as they drew near the device. Reaching up, he placed his hand upon the necklace his mother had given him. Even through his leather jerkin, he could feel vibrations rippling from the pendant.

Stepping onto the bottom stair, the energy filling the shallow trench began to glow even brighter. "What the—?" He jumped back out of reflex.

The mage, however, let out an excited squeak and moved forward. He bent down and waved his hand near the energy. "Interesting." Without looking up, he waved for Keramore to approach. "Please, commander. Return to the stairs."

Hesitantly, Keramore let his foot hover over the bottom one. As he did, the vibrations from the

pendant around his neck intensified. Setting his foot down, the energy flared brighter once more. Bending to one knee, he joined the mage in examining the glowing substance. As he brought his hand closer to it, he felt the same vibrations tickle the tips of his fingers as poured from the pendant around his neck.

He stood and stepped fully onto the stair. The rest of the energy in the trench lit up. In addition, the black stone creating the mound began to give off a faint, deep purple radiance. As the trio ascended toward the top platform, the vibrations from the pendant around Keramore's neck increased. Runes he had not noticed on the four side pillars blazed to life. By the time he reached the top stair, the entire area was glowing bright enough to dispel the shadows from every corner.

The group of wizards stepped back, several with their mouths agape. Quisen opened and closed his mouth several times before he found his voice. "H...how?"

Keramore let his fingers delve beneath the collar of his jerkin and pulled out the pendant. When he withdrew it, everyone squinted from the bright light it emitted. "I think this is your answer."

Quisen reached up and touched the amulet, then snatched his hand away. "It's crackling with energy!" The mage gazed up to where the four pillars leaned in high over their heads. "Commander, step toward the center of the platform."

"Are you sure?" Keramore had never been afraid of magic, but this was something else entirely.

Glancing around at the other wizards who nodded, Quisen swallowed hard. "Fairly, sir."

Keramore frowned as an uneasiness filled him. "What will happen?"

Again, the mage glanced at his companions. None seemed to have anything to say. "There is a chance it will open the portal."

"A chance. What else is there a chance of?"

"Well, sir. By our best guess, this device has not been used for millennia." He shrugged. "If during that time it has somehow been damaged, the magical feedback of trying to activate it could be enough to destroy half the city above us."

"Just half?" Keramore laughed, though it held no mirth. He turned and took in the entire device. As far as he could see, it seemed intact.

As if I could tell whether the thing was damaged.

He took a step forward, and a ring of runes appeared on the floor before him. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the ring.

Cold air washed over him. It felt far colder than the cavern, as if the black stone was sucking the heat from the air around it. The runes under his feet began to pulse in a slow rhythm. Then the runes covering the four pillars began to beat in time with those on the floor.

Before he could say anything, lightning began dancing from pillar to pillar. The electricity shot from one, arcing out into the room, slamming in to one of the others. Tremors ran through the floor and dust fell from the ceiling. The mages took a step back down the stairs, but Keramore and Thelious held their ground. A few of the mages took more than one step away. A thundering clap erupted from the space between the tops of the bent pillars and a wave of energy burst out, throwing everyone into the air.

Keramore landed hard on his back, the wind rushing from his lungs. Rolling to his front, he pushed

himself to one knee. When he looked up, a shimmering, smoky cloud, like that from a rainstorm, filled the space between the pillars. Lightning arced from it as it grew in size. Before the span of a few heartbeats, the smoky cloud filled up almost the entire platform area.

A moan came from beside him and he turned to see Thelious struggling to his feet. "Is everyone alright?" Within a few moments, the rest had regained their feet, nodding or waving that they were fine.

Keramore pointed to the cloud. "Is that what I think it is? A portal?"

Coughing, Quisen brushed dust from his clothes. "Yes, commander. I think it is."

"Where does it lead?"

Again, the mage looked puzzled. "There's no way to tell. I haven't read any texts mentioning a portal like this anywhere on Amaril." He frowned. "We just don't have enough information, sir."

Thelious stepped forward. "Can we scout it?"

"Perhaps. But there is no way of knowing if you will be able to return. It could be a one-way trip."

Keramore's scowl deepened as he circled the massive portal. "So we can stay here and be hunted down like rats by the horde, or we can step through to Nor'l only knows where." Once he had made the circle, he looked back to the mage. "What are the chances it doesn't lead anywhere. That whoever steps through will be instantly killed?"

"I would say very little, sir." Quisen walked over and stood before the swirling smoke. "Items with this much power normally have safeguards in place. For this to have activated, I would say it is connected to where ever it is intended to send people."

"Enough that you would be willing to be the first to step through? I have no desire to send more of my scouts to their death." Thelious sounded harsh, but Keramore understood. Just as he had, the elf had lost many under his command today. The thought of sending more to their death needlessly...

Inching forward, Quisen passed his gaze over the device. As if in a trance, he slid forward just a bit more before turning back to them. "Yes. I would have no issues being the first to step through."

The young lieutenant moved in front of Keramore. "It's up to you, commander."

This made Keramore laugh. "Neither choice is a good one. No matter how you—"

"Commander!" A scout came running into the chamber, a large bloody gash across his right cheek. He stumbled on the way in and fell. Keramore was the first to reach him, pulling him to his feet. "They've broken through, sir. The dragonspawn have found our base camp!"

Chapter 10 - A Strange New World

Keramore Thex looked back over his shoulder at the portal. The fog swirled around, falling in upon itself. Standing before it, he knew.

This is what has been pulling at me since arriving in Quin'Sari.

He shifted his gaze back to Thelious standing next to him, and then to the young scout who just entered. Fear warred with confidence in both their eyes. They, like the rest of his Teir'Dal, would stand and fight to the last if that is what he ordered. He could die here, fighting against his mortal foes, pouring the last of his strength into killing those who had killed so many of his kind—taking vengeance upon those who had taken his beloved Neria from him. He could make one last stand. Enter the afterlife avenged and be with his wife for all of eternity.

But can I sacrifice even more for my own personal gain?

He shook his head. "No!" His growl caused the others to flinch. He pulled the necklace his mother had given him and handed it to Quisen. "Keep that portal open!"

Placing his hands upon Thelious' shoulder, he gazed into his Scout Master's eyes. "We can't let the Teir'Dal die here." He pointed back to the device. "If that is an escape route, we must take it. Go with the first group through the portal. Scout the area and deal with anything that is of danger. The rest of the Teir'Dal will be right behind you."

A resolve washed over Thelious' features and he nodded. He took Keramore's left hand in his, placing his right over Keramore's heart. "Sir! May the light of Nor'l guide and protect you."

Keramore placed his right hand over the lieutenant's heart. "May the light of Nor'l guide and protect us all."

With that, Keramore ran back down the cavern toward the sinkhole. As he approached, he heard a scream. Rounding a natural limestone pillar, he drew his sword and rushed forward. One of the scouts lay dead. The other had his back to the wall, holding out his spear in an attempt to ward off an advancing phyxian. A drake hovered just on the edge of the shadows further down the cavern.

Bringing his sword around, Keramore sliced the side of the phyxian, causing it to yelp and hop to the side. The scout lunged forward, slipping his spear into the dragonspawn's neck. Keramore stabbed with his own blade and the beast's legs buckled. It lay there twitching as its lifeblood pooled beneath it.

Keramore spun and looked for the drake, but it was gone. "Where did these things come from?"

Sucking in air, the scout pointed in the direction the drake had vanished. "That way, sir. We didn't see them until they attacked."

The warriors who had been standing guard above slid down the ropes and started scanning the area. Keramore grabbed a scout by the elbow. "Follow the torches and let the mages know what happened. Tell them they are to come and defend this area until the rest of the Teir'Dal have arrived." He leapt to one of the ropes and climbed a few feet before looking down at the warriors taking up positions behind the natural stone columns. "Under no circumstances are you to let any dragonspawn past this point!" He glanced in the direction the drake had vanished. "Where there is one, there is always more. Stay alert!"

When he came to the archway leading to the upper tunnel, he took the stairs two at a time. He cursed himself for not grabbing a torch, and by the time he reached the top, he was bathed in total darkness. Groping around, he found a lever and pulled. The grinding sounds of stone against stone filled the air as the fountain above him slid to the side. Stepping up into the room, he looked at the group of scouts still on guard. “Do you know how to find the chamber with the strange alter in it?” One of the scouts nodded. “Then stay here and direct everyone to it as I send them.” He pointed to the others. “The rest of you come with me. I want you stationed at each turn, directing everyone here. We are evacuating, but we need to move fast.”

“Sir!”

Keramore did not wait for the elves to salute. He just turned and ran.

The sounds of fighting reached his ears before he was halfway back to where his Teir`Dal were camped. Rounding a corner, he came up behind a long line of warriors straining their necks to get a better view of what was going on further down the hallway. Putting a hand on each of their shoulders, he pushed them aside and peered down the corridor.

Chaos was all he saw.

There was obviously fighting going on at the end of the tunnel, but there were so many elves clogging the way he could not tell how far down. He got the attention of those at the rear of the corridor. “Follow this hallway until you find a scout who will direct you. Go!”

The warriors nodded and ran.

Keramore repeated this as he worked his way through the crowded hallway. Somewhere in the middle, he ran into Kailon and his cousin. He told them the same, though he told Kailon to take charge of evacuating everyone through the portal. The young lieutenant made a confused face at the mention of the portal, but said nothing as he rushed to follow his orders.

By the time Keramore reached the front, it seemed as if hours had passed. A group of five Teir`Dal warriors stood in a tight formation, their spears pointed down the hall. A dozen or more dead phyxians lay piled up before them. Behind the spearmen, another half dozen warriors stood shooting arrows past those in front. Ailen, Jerilith and Lanys crowded in behind the archers, shouting orders.

Grabbing Jerilith by the sleeve, Keramore spun him around. “We don’t have time for this! Can you block that tunnel?”

The wizard glanced over his shoulder before nodding. “I don’t know what damage I’ll—”

“Cave it in if you have to, just get it done!” Keramore shoved him toward the front.

The archers spread as Jerilith stepped between them. The hairs on Keramore’s arms began to stand on end as the power in the air shifted. Crackling balls of light began to dance across the mage’s hands. “Move!”

The spearmen before him did not hesitate. They pressed themselves against the walls and began working their way behind the wizard. In the added light of Jerilith’s spell, Keramore saw the glinting eyes of a pair of raptors clawing their way over a host of dead phyxian and elven bodies.

With a crack of thunder that ripped through the confined space, the world went white.

Lightning shot from Jerilith’s hands, arcing out and stabbing the lead raptors in the chest, legs, and head. They screeched and the smell of burning flesh filled the corridor. The mage’s spell did not stop

there. Lightning continued to arc out from him. Thick bolts of energy—larger than Keramore had ever seen a mage create—slammed into the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Where each hit, large chunks of rock and stone tore away. The entire hallway began to shake as dust fell from the ceiling. Within moments, a mass of stone and debris had piled atop the bodies, nearly reaching the ceiling.

Even as the light from the energy began to fade, a chill permeated the air. Jets of frost shot from the mage, and ice began to fill the gaps between the fallen rocks. Within a few heartbeats, the corridor was a solid wall of rubble suspended in frozen water.

The wizard slumped and would have hit the floor if not for the fast reaction of Ailen who caught him. “Easy now, you fool.”

Silence fell throughout the hallway. Then the faint sounds of screeching and clawing filtered through the ice. “We need to move.” Keramore glanced down at the mage and saw he was conscious. “If they found one entranceway, it will not take them long to find others. Come.”

Following his own command, he spun and headed down the hallway.

When they arrived at the room with the empty fountain, only the scout Keramore had left remained. He motioned for the elf to go ahead of them and for the rest to join him. He was the last one down, and as he stepped onto the steep stairs, he triggered the latch. The fountain slid back into place with a thud.

Keramore pushed past his waiting lieutenants and took the lead. When they arrived at the sinkhole, nearly all the Teir`Dal warriors had already descended into the cavern below. With Keramore verbally motivating the rest, it did not take them long to get everyone else down. They had to tie one of the ropes around Jerilith to assist the mage, as he was still too weak from his spell casting to climb down on his own.

As they reached the bottom, a loud rumble echoed through the cavern, shaking small rocks loose from the ceiling.

Ailen threw one of Jerilith’s arms over his shoulder and looked at Keramore. “What’s that?”

Small vibrations rippled through the ground at regular intervals, and the sounds of large footsteps filled the cavern.

Keramore grabbed the elven warrior nearest him and shoved him toward the chamber with the portal. “Run! Everyone run. Now!”

He lagged behind, backpedaling to keep an eye on what was heading their way. A pack of physians came bounding from the darkness. Snarling, their eyes held death. The first two fell with arrows embedded in their heads. The rest came on faster.

Drawing his dagger, Keramore flicked it at one of the beasts as it lunged for him. The blade caught the creature in the eye, burying itself to the hilt. The physian landed in a heap, tumbling over the ground and tripping the one next to it.

The physians held very little of Keramore’s attention. Behind the dragonspawn, at the far edge of his vision, he saw the enormous black head of Ithiosar bobbing up and down as the dragon shambled toward them. The dragon was nowhere as graceful on its legs as it was in the air. Still, it was closing the distance fast.

The last three physians fell to arrows by the time the group had reached the bend leading to the

portal area. Keramore could hear the dragon's breathing clearly now, and knew his people would never reach the portal before the great beast caught up to them. He also knew that all those under his command who still lived were now ahead of him.

Drawing the sword he had taken from his fallen Teir`Dal, he jumped up on an outcrop of rock. With one last look at his fleeing warriors, he turned to face their tormentor. "Ithiosar!"

"Keramore! No!" Lanys' scream nearly drowned out his own.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that she had stopped and was heading his way. He pointed his sword at the woman. "Go! That's an order, lieutenant!"

She looked as if he had kicked her in the gut. Pain danced behind her eyes as she stood there gaping at him. Her mouth worked as though searching for words that would not come. Finally, her features hardened and she turned. Putting her hand on a passing warrior to hurry him along, she disappeared around a bend in the cavern.

Returning his attention to their rear, he watched as the great black lizard slithered its way into the light cast by the torches lying about.

Ithiosar stopped about forty feet away. "Keramore." Its voice was more of a hiss. "It is fitting the last of your race should die here, trapped like worms in a hole in the ground."

"I may die here today, but you are sadly mistaken about my race. The Combine will live on."

"Oh, that is where you are wrong, elf." The dragon licked its lips. "Bastion has fallen. Whatever vermin you are protecting are the last of your pathetic kind."

Keramore's heart dropped and he nearly stumbled from his perch. "No... you... You lie!"

A deep growling laugh sprang from the beast. "Do I now? Well, you won't live long enough to find out." The dragon lurched forward, dagger-sized teeth flashing in the torchlight.

Leaping to his right, Keramore scrambled behind a large stalagmite. If he could keep the beast busy long enough, he could purchase enough time for his people to escape.

Perhaps my death will then have meaning.

The dragon did not relent, and used its massive size to smash through the natural stone pillars as if they were made of wood. Each time Keramore dove for cover, the dragon was there. It took all his prowess to keep the monster from sinking fangs into his flesh.

He kept this cat and mouse game going as long as he could, but eventually he found himself on the worked floor of the portal area. As the dragon rounded the last bend, its wing snagged on a rock pillar and it let out a roar of frustration.

Keramore chanced a glance behind him. The room sat empty, but to his horror, the portal was still active. The thought of the Ring of Scale following his people was almost more than he could bear.

Why didn't they simply leave me?

Then he saw it. His mother's pendant lay at the top of the stairs.

With a flap of his wings, Ithiosar broke free and hurled himself after Keramore. The giant lizard slammed onto the ground. Too slow, the impact knocked Keramore to the ground. He smashed against the floor of the chamber, his sword slipping from his grasp and clattered across the ground.

Ithiosar slid forward, slapping a clawed foot next to Keramore. One of the beast's sharp talons

ripped through Keramore's jerkin, slicing into his side. Keramore let out a gasp as pain shot through his body. Ithiosar turned his head lazily to stare at the portal. "Is that where you sent the rest of your vermin?" It gazed down at Keramore with serving-plate sized eyes. Pulling back his lips, it exposed a row of teeth the size of swords. The dragon's breathe reeked, and Keramore gagged as drool dripped down over his face. "I will take care of them next."

When Ithiosar rose up to strike, Keramore caught a flash movement from his left. Kailon Dashed out from behind one of the misshapen statues. The elf carried a spear in both hands, and when he neared the dragon, he launched himself high into the air.

Jerking to the side, Keramore felt his skin tear along with his clothing as he ripped free of the dragon's claw. He rolled out of the way just as the dragon's teeth snapped the spot he had just been. At the same second, Kailon slammed into the dragon, burying his spear into the thick scales covering Ithiosar's shoulder.

The beast hissed and shook like a dog after a rainstorm. Kailon flew back into the air. As he fell back down, Ithiosar whipped his massive head around and bit. The dragon's teeth caught the lieutenant across his waist. The crunch of bone reverberated through the room as the dragon tore the young elf in half.

Keramore slid across the stone floor and scooped up his sword. With a scream that was a mix of rage and grief, he flung the weapon at the dragon. The blade spun through the air like a disk. Ithiosar turned to Keramore just as the sword struck the beast's face. The norite blade sliced across the skin separating the dragon's mouth from its nose before it flipped off into the shadows on the far side of the room. Black blood spurted from the wound and the dragon reared up, shrieking in agony.

Spinning, Keramore ran for the portal. He did not turn back when the dragon came crashing back down to all fours. Nor when the beast bellowed and galloped after him. He poured all his remaining strength into getting to the necklace.

Taking the stairs three at a time, he bent low, scooped up the pendant, and slid to a stop. With a flick of his wrist, he flung his mother's necklace into the swirling portal. The swirling fog swallowed up the glowing crystal, but nothing happened.

"Close, damn you!"

As the words left his mouth, lightning crackled from rune to rune and the fog inside the stone ring began to swirl faster. In the blink of an eye, it became a whirlpool, pulling the smoke into a tighter and tighter ball

Keramore spun just in time to see Ithiosar gliding directly at him, mouth open wide. He screamed and launched himself at the dragon, one hand stretching out to grab a handful of bristly hairs lining the beast's nose, the other fumbling with his empty dagger scabbard. Cursing the phyxian he had flicked his dagger into, Keramore landed on the snout of the great black monster. He slid sideways until his flailing free hand found purchase.

Ithiosar snapped his mouth to the side, trying to get Keramore's dangling legs between its teeth. The dragon's momentum carried them through the swirling gray fog inside the portal.

Darkness consumed them.

Keramore fell into nothingness.

He landed hard, knocking the wind from his lungs. Looking around, he stared up into the tear-filled eyes of Lanys. She was screaming something at him, but he couldn't understand what she said. It sounded like a hive of bees filled his ears. Then Ailen was there, half-pulling, half-jerking him to his feet and across the dust-covered ground.

A roar ripped through his haze-filled mind and he spun just in time to see Ithiosar thrashing around on the ground just feet from where he had landed. The dragon's back left foot and most of its tail were missing. They looked as if they had been severed by some giant blade.

Ithiosar regained himself at the same time, and the two locked gazes. Keramore could feel the loathing radiating from the beast's large, cat-like eyes. The dragon scrambled and leapt into the air as a hail of arrows pierced the rocky ground where he had just been. With one downward stroke of its wings, the beast was nearly thirty feet into the air. "Loose!" Ailen's voice rippled over the barren landscape, but by the time the second volley of arrows tore into the black sky, the dragon was gone.

Keramore glanced around but his eyes found nothing to focus on. The sky sat dark and empty. The sandy, rock-strewn ground was black and featureless. It seemed that everywhere he looked, the blackness stretched on forever.

Lanys stepped up next to Keramore, tears still resting in her almond-shaped eyes. She gave him a nod before looking around the area. "Where are we, commander?"

Shrugging, Keramore just shook his head. He had no answer. He could not believe such a desolate, barren landscape could exist. Rotating around, he faced nearly five hundred Teir`Dal warriors standing on the black sands of an alien landscape. They were dirty, tired, and many bore wounds they had acquired over the past few hours. But they were here. They were together.

Jerilith clapped Thelious weakly on the shoulder. "Wherever we are, we are alive."

"Are you sure, mage?" Ailen grunted a laugh, though a sour look sat upon his dirt-smeared face. "This place looks like the abyss to me!"

Pulling in a deep breath through his nose, Keramore let it out slowly through his mouth. Not twenty-four hours ago he had been convinced he would not live to see another sunrise. The thought of spending eternity with his beloved Neria had been a welcome one. He knew he would not be joining his beloved today, and looking at the distant horizon, he was not so certain he would ever see the sun again either.

Still, my task is not yet done. My people need me. They need a leader who is strong.

Rotating his head in the direction Ithiosar had fled, he could see no sign of the black beast. He turned back to his warriors. "Listen up!" His voice sounded hollow in the strange, shadowy land. It was as if his words wanted to echo, but found nothing to bounce off of. "I know you're tired. We all are. But we have work to do."

He nodded to Thelious. "Gather your scouts and get me a clear picture of what is around us."

The Scout Master saluted and moved off to follow his orders.

Keramore winced as he shifted, and placed a hand over his bleeding side. "Lanys, get me an inventory of what we have—weapons, food, water."

"Sir!" With a nod, the fiery-eyed woman started shouting for anyone with canteens or rations to gather around her.

“Ailen, find us a defensible location to set up a temporary camp. Jerilith, organize the healers and tend to anyone who needs aid.” His knees wanted to buckle, but he refused to show weakness standing in front of what could be the last of his people. “They can start with me.”

“You heard the commander!” Ailen let out a shrill whistle and waved his hand in a circle above his head. “Let’s move, people!”

Keramore watched as his officers began to organize the exhausted Teir`Dal into a semblance of order. He knew it was what his people needed right now, even if it was far from the end he had hoped for.

I’m sorry my love. You must be patient. I will join you once my duties on this world are complete.

The End