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**NEXT**

Novella

The  
Mage of the  
Teir'Dal

Robert Lassen



# The Mage of the Teir'Dal

An



Novella

**Robert Lassen**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS



[Chapter One - Common Soldier](#)

[Chapter Two - New Assignment](#)

[Chapter Three - First Encounter](#)

[Chapter Four - Just a Weapon](#)

[Chapter Five - Deserter](#)

[Chapter Six - The Front Line](#)

[Chapter Seven - Allure of the Charge](#)

[Chapter Eight - Horror of the Retreat](#)

[Chapter Nine - The Eye of Death](#)

[About the Author](#)



# COMMON SOLDIER



Coralen Larkos had never heard a rat whimper before, and jotted down a note as the creature held its paw in the candle's flame. The rat's eyes rolled back into its skull, the fleeting emotion in them all too sentient, but Coralen kept the Compulsion in place as it writhed and thrashed. Only the paw remained still, perfectly motionless as coils of smoke rose from its burning flesh.

Someone brushed past the canvas entry of the tent, and Coralen half-rose before the footsteps faded away. Two hours now, and still he waited.

With a half-hearted gesture, he let the Compulsion fade. The rat stumbled across the desk before slumping to the wood, twitching and gasping. Coralen sighed. The work gave him no pleasure, but it was necessary. Three pages of notes already, proof he had taken the magic to a new level.

*You're just getting started, he told himself. Remember the tutors who said that Compulsion was a parlor game, a mind trick only good for negotiations with minor merchants? Remember when they said that no one, or nothing, could be made to do something alien to its nature?* He smiled. He would show them. One day they would name spells after him. Coralen Larkos, master of Compulsion.

Maybe even Arch Mage.

He shook his head. It didn't matter how many spells he created, how far he pushed boundaries, how powerful he might become. Coralen Larkos was a no-name spell caster from a backwards village deep in the northern forests of Amaril. An Arch Mage needed connections, high-level patronage, the ear of a king or even the Emperor himself. He suppressed the

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

urge to spit. Coralen Larkos, Arch Mage? Right now, he was stuck in a tent in a sodden field in Faydwer, a long way from home, waiting for His Majesty King Thex to pat him on the head and mutter something patronizing before the ageing monarch stumbled off to another disaster. And the King was late, leaving Coralen alone with wet feet and a maimed rat.

Guilt rose in his throat, sour and wretched. Coralen reached out and laid a single fingertip on the rat's sleek flank, feeling its tiny heartbeat rattling against the ribcage. With a single word, he infused the creature with healing warmth and watched as the blisters on the paw faded. It was imperfect work, and the scar tissue would never fully disappear, but then healing was not Coralen's strongpoint. The rat tilted its head to look at him with something akin to gratitude, and then began idly scratching at one ear with the now pain-free paw, everything forgotten in an instant.

Footsteps squelched in the mud outside, and a hand drew back the canvas. "The King is here, mage," a voice said. "Best not to keep him waiting."

Coralen gave the rat a quick stare, fixing the notion in its mind that death awaited the rodent should it leave the desk. There were more notes to make, after all. Stifling a curse, he followed the warrior out of the tent and lifted one hand against the sudden glare of sunshine. Nothing but rain and relentless clouds in days, and the moment the King's ship arrived, the gray ceiling above split to reveal spring sunshine. No wonder the Thex family thought themselves beloved of the Seraphs.

Even here, a mile beyond the city walls, Coralen could smell the vast hauls of fish on Stonepier's docks. The scent matched his mood. He followed the warrior along the line of tents, glaring at the elf's back with contempt. A messenger, a common soldier no less, speaking to him like that. Daring to talk of keeping the King waiting, as if Coralen had not been stuck in a tent since dawn.

Coralen's toe caught one of the thick tent ropes, sending a shower of lingering raindrops flying and almost joining them himself. The soldier didn't turn, but Coralen saw the

elf's shoulders rise and fall with suppressed mirth. *One day, he thought. One day no one will dare to laugh at you.*

He adjusted his robes and smiled. His thoughts could be remarkably pompous at times.

In the shadow of the tree line to the north, a line of soldiers stood at ease in maroon parade uniforms with silver flourishes. The twin banners of the Emperor and of the Thex Monarchy bookended their formation. Coralen's escort made a peremptory gesture in the direction of the end of the line, and then turned and marched back toward the massed tents and the bustle of activity that filled the camp.

*Still no sign of his gracious, glorious, chosen-son-of-Solusek majesty,* Coralen thought with a sigh as he joined the very end of the line. The soldiers all shared the same air of cocky insouciance, though considering many of them must have been on the same ragged ships as him during the retreat from Port Valinor, he felt a little humility would have been appropriate.

The nearest warrior, a thickset elf with dull eyes and a nose that had been broken more than once, gave him a half-glance and then turned away in disinterest. Unlike the others, this soldier wore a simple black uniform, with few adornments other than subtle badges of rank. Coralen let his mind run through the fifteen or so different ways he could humiliate and cripple the warrior without moving an inch. He decided the fool would look good hanging from the high branches above, screaming in terror and wondering how he had got there, and what had happened to his clothes. The thought briefly brought a smile to his lips, but then a single horn sounded and the entire line snapped to attention.

Almost the entire line, at least.

"They should teach you how to stand at attention at those fancy mage schools," the thickset elf hissed through the side of his mouth. Coralen barely heard him. His attention was on the group emerging from between the tents.

For all his years in power, the King had never looked impressive. Coralen had only seen him from a distance before,

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

and close proximity was not kind to the old monarch. *He looks tired*, Coralen thought. *Does he have the strength for this war? The dragons will not respect the accomplishments of his youth, or take it easy because he walks with a stoop now. They will go straight for his throat.*

A head taller than the King, a second elf kept close by as if afraid his liege might fall at any moment. There was a certain familial resemblance, Coralen realized. This must be Erador, the King's firstborn. Rumor had it that Erador was a politician, not a warrior, good for making trade treaties but not for prosecuting a campaign of brutal domination against the dragons. Coralen had never met the Prince, but he had heard the whispers in the camp. If only the second son had been born first, the gentle murmurs said. If only Keramore, the legendary warrior, leader of the Teir`Dal, was heir to the Thex kingdom. Then the dragons would pay for their aggression.

"I said stand straight, damn you," the broken-nosed elf growled under his breath, and Coralen slowly shuffled into a position that mimicked the others. The King had reached the start of the line, and was shaking hands with the first warrior, an earnest expression glowing on his face. The breeze had picked up, flicking at the banners above them and causing a chill to seep through Coralen's robes. His back began to ache with the effort of standing at attention, but when he chanced a look down the line, the others remained perfectly still, faces unmarred by discomfort. The King had reached the second warrior, beaming at the elf while his eyes danced with pride.

*He keeps you waiting again*, he told himself. *Perhaps he does know you after all, and has sworn to make you wait all day.* Coralen fought back a yawn, and didn't even try to resist the first shiver that wracked his body. He should have stayed in his tent, he decided. At least it was a bit warmer there, and those notes weren't going to write themselves.

He let his gaze wander over the camp. The army looked impressive from here, hundreds of large tents arrayed across the fields, each big enough to hold a dozen warriors. Even after you took into account the cooks and bottle washers and servants,



it still left eight thousand soldiers or more. And this was just the advance guard. Riders with orders already crisscrossed the whole of Faydwer, and Coralen had seen the fast ships that sailed from Stonepier, carrying word back to Amaril as the battered sloop carrying him and other survivors of Port Valinor docked. The whole expanse and might of the Empire was mobilizing, an unstoppable sword for the Emperor to avenge the destruction of Port Valinor and to end the dragon threat.

The question was, would it be enough? The dragons had already struck. They would surely strike again.

Someone coughed, and Coralen Larkos realized he stood face to face with the King.

"You're a mage," the King said in a quiet voice. He did not offer a hand.

"Yes, your Majesty," Coralen croaked, nodding. Beyond the King, amongst the expanse of tents, the sound of raised voices and applause drifted into the air. Coralen kept his eyes firmly on the King.

Prince Erador leaned in closer to his father. "Mage Coralen Larkos, father. You'll recall you wished to speak to him?" When the King did not react, Erador sighed. "From Bethel's division, father? During the fighting near Port Valinor?"

"Oh, yes," the King said, eyes suddenly flashing. "Damned nasty business, Port Valinor. I hear you helped out Lord Bethel a little."

"I hope so, your Majesty," Coralen said. An image of that help flickered in front of his eyes. Dead elves scattered in all directions, panicked cries mixing with the agonized screams of the wounded as the line buckled and the kobolds swarmed over the defenses beneath the shadow of a moving, ever-renewing cloud of poison-tipped arrows. He'd have run if he could, but his legs had seemed hollow and weak, and the kobolds moved with such speed that he'd known to run was to die. He'd done the only thing he could, acting on instinct, bringing forth fire and lightning in desperate waves that tore and immolated kobold flesh.

Only afterward, as he stood panting in front of a twisted

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

expanse of seared enemies, terrified and thrilled and disgusted in equal measure, did he notice Lord Bethel cowering beneath a shattered wagon, eyes wide with gratitude.

"I only did what any of your mages would have done," Coralen added. He kept his face straight as he said it, though part of him wanted to laugh at the false modesty.

The King nodded, his eyes flicking toward the tents. More voices seemed to be joining the commotion. "Yes," he murmured, head nodding to its own distracted rhythm. He smiled. "Lord Bethel is a good warrior and a credit to the army," he said, as if agreeing with something Coralen had said. "You must feel honored to have had the chance to serve him."

Coralen had no response to that.

The wave of shouts broke apart into individual voices, more joining them every second.

"Keramore! Keramore! Keramore!"

With a sudden start, the King turned to Erador, a broad grin rippling across his face. "Your brother has arrived," he cried in exultation. "I told you it would take more than dragons to stop him. Come, Erador." With a new spring in his step, the King strode away across the field.

*One day they will chant your name,* a soft voice in the back of Coralen's head murmured. Somehow, it sounded almost a threat.

Erador gave Coralen a quick look of something like sympathy, and then followed his father toward the mass of elves gathering around a tall, dirt-stained warrior. The receiving line broke apart and trailed in their wake. The broken-nosed soldier murmured something inaudible to his companion, but their laughter rang out clear in the spring air as they glanced back at the mage standing stunned and alone in the mud.

Coralen Larkos took the long route back to his tent to avoid the crush. He didn't speak to anyone. He didn't make eye contact with any of the few people not clustering around Prince Keramore bloody Thex. He even ignored the bitter snarling of the voice in his head. He simply walked into his tent, shouted a single word, and watched as his Compulsion spell sent the terrified rat diving headfirst into the candle's flame.



## NEW ASSIGNMENT



To Coralen's mind, there were few less pleasant ways to wake than to a leather booted toe jammed into his ribcage.

His first instinct, as he twisted his body back further on his camp bed, was to kick out. The thought surprised him. Physical violence was a primitive response, fit only for the lesser races. And for soldiers, of course, who weren't much better. Instead he drew on the stale, humid air inside the tent, compressed it into a single incorporeal ball and drove it forward like a fist, hard into the sternum of the figure standing over him.

With a surprised yelp, the broken-nosed soldier stumbled back across the room and slid down the canvas of the tent wall onto the soft ground.

"You're lucky Keramore wants to see you," the soldier growled, rising to a knee, one mud-stained hand resting on the dagger at his waist.

Coralen stood, stretching his arms to the ceiling as a yawn wracked his body. His mouth tasted of sleep and rage. He spat on the ground, trying to ignore the tiny, charred ball on the desk. "Lucky," he muttered, and looked the soldier in the eyes. "Next time you wake me with your foot, you'll lose it."

The soldier didn't blink. "Just get dressed and follow me. The Prince has little patience right now."

Coralen glanced at his ceremonial robe, hanging neatly where the tent supports met. No, he decided. He'd already wasted enough time trying to impress the Thex family. He reached instead for his dark brown tunic and breeches with the silver sigil of the Guild of Mages. After all, Broken-Nose wasn't wearing his best uniform any more, just black hose and a hardened leather jerkin of the same color that struggled

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

to contain his barrel chest and left his huge, tattooed arms exposed to the air. The soldier's badges of rank were not those of an officer. Coralen shrugged and pulled on his clothes. He had little interest in the workings of rank in the army. It was enough to know that Broken-Nose sat somewhere near the bottom of the hierarchy of fools, and that the King sat at the top, the biggest fool of them all.

Neither elf spoke as the soldier led the way through the darkened camp, picking his way carefully between the tents. The night seemed silent to begin with, but then Coralen's ears began to pick out the individual snores and grunts and shuffling of twenty thousand warriors at rest. Dawn was still an hour or more away, he guessed, and with it the sun's warmth. His breath hung in the air ahead of him, a shimmering wispy veil dancing in the faint sliver of moonlight that pierced the clouds above.

They stopped at a large plain tent with the Thex banner raised above it.

"Wait here," Broken-Nose muttered. With a nod to the two black-uniformed guards standing by the entrance, he ducked into the tent. Coralen gave the guards a smile, watching the moonlight play on the polished blades of their long spears. They ignored him. Stamping his feet against the cold, Coralen listened to the murmur of voices from inside, straining and failing to hear the words, but it didn't require the hearing of an elf to make out the sudden deep chuckle that followed.

Broken-Nose emerged from the tent, his cheeks flushed with what looked like embarrassment. He made a sharp gesture. "Come on, he hasn't got all night."

Coralen sighed, and followed him into the brightly lit interior, blinking against the glare of a dozen candles.

Rising from behind an ornate wooden desk strewn with maps, Keramore Thex stepped forward to meet him. Coralen had never seen the Prince close up before. Keramore was taller than he looked from a distance, and while he lacked the showy muscularity of his errand boy, every inch of the Prince's black-clad frame exuded strength. Even the way he

moved impressed. He flowed across the room with feline, almost Kerran-like grace.

Don't get star struck, he told himself. The Prince has more than enough sycophants as it is.

Keramore smiled. "Coralen Larkos, isn't it?"

Coralen nodded, noting the rich timbre of the Prince's voice and the way the smile only half-reached the intense, icy blue of his eyes.

The Prince offered his hand. Coralen took it, aware of the unyielding power in the other elf's grip. "Thank you for coming at this early hour," Keramore said. "Sergeant Streck tells me you didn't enjoy being woken." He glanced at Broken-Nose. "It's not often someone gets the drop on one of my Teir`Dal," Keramore added, "and I doubt anyone has got the drop on Streck in decades."

Still holding Coralen's hand in his, Keramore paused. "Don't expect to get away with it again." The smile remained on his face. This time it never came close to the eyes.

"Yes, my Prince," Coralen said with care. The aura of danger around the Prince was palpable, a deadly trap waiting to be sprung.

Keramore made an expansive gesture toward the desk and the four simple wooden chairs around it. "Take a seat," he said.

Coralen lowered himself with care into the nearest chair, relieved to find it sturdier than it looked. Keramore sank into an identical chair on the opposite side of the desk, leaning back with his fingers interlinked under his chin, his dark eyes watching, appraising.

"They tell me you're good," Keramore said finally. "Is that true?"

Coralen wondered for an instant who *they* were. "Very good, my Prince."

Keramore pointed at the sigil on Coralen's chest. "You studied at the Guild in Tahrin?"

"Yes."

"Who were your tutors? Beltin? Holme?"

Coralen took a second to hide his surprise. A soldier who

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

knew his mages was all too rare a thing. "Yes. And Arlanes, too, before he was raised Arch Mage."

Keramore's stare didn't waver for an instant. "Were they good tutors?"

Coralen nodded. "For a time."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning they taught me everything they could, until I outstripped them." *Don't go too far*, he told himself.

Keramore paused, stroking his chin. "You outstripped the Arch Mage Arlanes?"

Broken-Nose muttered an obscenity, and hid it with a cough.

"Not in every arena," Coralen admitted. "I couldn't touch him for Ice or Psychic attacks, nor for Healing. But Fire, Lightning, Affliction? Within a few months he was asking me to teach him."

Keramore leaned forward. Coralen had never known anyone to look at him that way. It felt like he was being measured, and the price for being found wanting would be severe. "You're arrogant," Keramore said in an oddly soft voice. "In my experience there are two kinds of arrogant people. Those who can back it up, and those who die. Which are you?"

Anger clawed at Coralen's gut. A Thex, accusing another of arrogance? He ignored the part of his mind that urged caution, buried it beneath the more insistent cries of his rage. He leaned forward too, until his face was inches from Keramore's, their eyes locked.

"My Prince," he said, every syllable pure ice, "there isn't a mage alive who comes close."

Keramore blinked. He seemed stunned, but the moment passed. He threw back his head with a bark of laughter. "Never lose your arrogance, Coralen," he said, tears of mirth glistening against the brilliant orbs of his eyes. "You'll need it where you're going."

Coralen took a deep breath. "And where is that?"

Keramore tapped his fingers on the thick parchment map. "I need a new mage," he said after a few seconds.

"What happened to your last one?"

"I'm glad you asked," Keramore said. "He got his head torn off by a drake."

Coralen swallowed. "Sounds like he wasn't a very good mage," he said, trying to force levity into the words. It didn't work. They still emerged as a croak.

Keramore shrugged. "Claster was a very good mage," he said. His gaze drifted toward the tent wall, but Coralen knew the Prince was seeing something else. "It was just that kind of day." Keramore turned back to him. "I understand you've known days like that yourself. What were you doing in Port Valinor? You weren't part of the garrison."

Coralen kept his voice even. "They needed a senior officer to inspect the defenses, and that officer decided he needed a mage to accompany him."

"You thought the duty beneath you?"

Coralen kept silent.

Keramore smiled. "Well, it's as well you were there. Lord Bethel tells me you turned a battalion-sized kobold attack into a butcher's store display in less than a minute. Is he right?"

"Lord Bethel perhaps saw things differently than me," Coralen said with care.

"He also tells me that without the mist you brought down to cover the retreat of the ships, none of you would have made it back to Stonepier."

Well, that was valid, Coralen thought. Though in truth, only one or two wyverns had seemed interested in pursuing them. "It's a simple enough spell," he said, honestly. "Most mages can manage a mist."

Keramore raised an eyebrow. "A touch of modesty to gentle the arrogance, Coralen? You're a complicated fellow, it seems, but I'll keep my next question simple, just for you. Do you accept the job?"

Coralen paused. There had been four other mages at Port Valinor, and all had died in the battle. The draconic scum knew well enough to take them out early. He leaned forward. "Why me?"

"Listen, mage," Broken-Nose snarled. "When Prince

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

Keramore gives you an order, you don't..." He cut the words short at a subtle gesture from Keramore.

"Easy, Streck. Our new friend isn't a soldier, and I'm not giving orders." The Prince turned back to Coralen. "You're asking why would I choose you to watch my back, when I could have any mage in the Empire? Maybe even the Arch Mage himself?"

Coralen nodded. Perhaps Keramore wasn't the simple, battle-hungry soldier he'd assumed.

"A fair question," Keramore said. He hesitated for a moment, as if revisiting a decision already made. "The Arch Mage is dead. The Guildhall of the Mages is destroyed. Tahrin is a smoking ruin and the Emperor Sillian Tah'Re slumbers for eternity among the ashes."

Coralen fell back in his seat. It had to be a joke. The Imperial capital destroyed? The Emperor dead? A thousand times or more Coralen had walked down the broad, shady avenue that led from the Guildhall to the magnificent palace where Sillian Tah'Re ruled, marveling at the sounds and scents of that most beautiful of cities.

And now it was gone.

"How?" He forced the words out, realizing he had not breathed since Keramore spoke.

There was no humor in Keramore's eyes this time. "While the army retreated from the ruins of Port Valinor, the main body of the draconic army struck the capital at nightfall. I barely escaped with my life, and it took me and my warriors ten days to reach here, moving at night in the mountains to avoid detection."

"I mean," Coralen said deliberately, "how is this not known? Ten days have passed, yet not one elf in this camp knows of this?"

"Some do know," Keramore said, "but they don't speak of it. My brother suggested that our people were not yet ready for the truth, and my father agreed."

"And you? Do you agree?" Coralen sensed Broken-Nose half-rising to his feet, exuding anger, but he kept his eyes on Keramore.



"I believe that every citizen of the Empire has a right to know," Keramore said evenly, "and that the sooner we face the struggle for survival that awaits us, the sooner we can prepare to win it. But I'm a soldier, which means I also believe in taking orders. So once again I ask you, are you in?"

Coralen took a deep breath, and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat, born of terror. "Why don't I feel like I have a choice?"

"Of course you have a choice, Coralen," Keramore grinned. "You can stay here and fight with the army, or you can come with me and fight with the Teir`Dal. I assure you, your odds are better with us."

Coralen snorted. "Meaning they rise from none to slim?"

"Precisely," Keramore said.

Coralen leaned back in his seat. If he lived, he knew, there would be much prestige. And the Empire would need an Arch Mage as much as a new Emperor.

If he lived.

"Then I guess I'm coming with you," Coralen said. "So where are we going?"

Keramore turned his attention back to the map, stabbing one callused finger at the parchment. "The dragons are at Tahrin," he said. "Their army paid dearly for their assault on the city, even with our main force absent. It may be that they rest awhile, or even withdraw to their own strongholds to lick their wounds. It may also be that they strike west, before we can fully mobilize for war." He slid his fingertip across the charcoal-rendered hills on the left of Tahrin. "If they do, they'll strike Lucinia next. Lose Lucinia and they will have an open road to Stonepier, and that will cost us the north."

Coralen leaned over the map. "How large is the garrison in the city?"

"Five thousand," Keramore said. "Seven thousand once we join them."

Coralen shook his head. "What good will two thousand extra elves do if the dragons strike?"

"Not two thousand elves," Broken-Nose said, voice

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

trembling with conviction. "Two thousand Teir`Dal. If the dragons come, they'll find we're worth ten thousand regulars. Twenty thousand. There's a reason they call us the Teir`Dal. We'll make them pay, you wait and see, if they don't just run when they see the black of our uniforms."

"Teir`Dal don't die easily," Keramore added with a smile to his Sergeant. "Besides, we are two thousand and one now, Coralen."

"But you'll never be Teir`Dal," Broken-Nose muttered.

Coralen bit his lip to avoid the retort that flashed through his mind. He wanted to tell them what he thought of their precious Teir`Dal. That he was worth more than every last Teir`Dal, and that soon he would prove it.

"Our job," Keramore said, giving Coralen and Streck each a warning stare, "is not to join the garrison and wait. We'll restock supplies at the city, and then head into the hills. If the dragons advance, we'll hit them with ambushes and sudden strikes. Their numbers won't make as much difference in close terrain, and we'll buy time for my father and the main army to arrive. Every day we delay them east of Lucinia is another day for our ships to bring the army into Stonepier and for reinforcements to arrive from the south."

Coralen looked down at the black spot that marked what had once been the site of Tahrin, then let his eyes wander to their destination. "And if the dragons are already at Lucinia?"

"Then we kill them," Keramore said.

"And have fun doing it," Streck added.

Coralen didn't think his heart could sink further, until it did. They were both, it was now clear to him, completely insane.

And he had just joined them.



# FIRST ENCOUNTER



Coralen hated rain. He hated the cold. And, he realized, he hated the Teir`Dal.

None of the warriors in the long column seemed to care about the horizontal rain that lashed at them in relentless waves as they wound their way across the grasslands. If any noticed the way the wind half-flattened the high grass with the violence of its assault, they gave no sign. For the most part they marched in silence, interspersed with occasional laughter from small groups of warriors.

Sometimes, he was sure, that laughter was aimed at him.

Two days of this punishing pace and murderous weather. Two days, when he had only been summoned to Keramore's side once and had otherwise been left alone, ignored. At least it would slow the enemy down, he decided. No dragon would want to fly in this weather. Of course, the army gathering outside Stonepier, with its carts and logistical chain, would only be able to manage a snail's pace on the mud-clogged tracks, leaving the Teir`Dal ever further ahead of their support.

Why hadn't he just said *no*?

At least he'd had a tent at Stonepier. The Teir`Dal travelled light, which meant basic shelters and rough blankets. Stonepier and Lucinia looked close together on the map, the distance barely wider than the callused tip of Keramore's finger. The reality was far more exhausting.

He'd hoped the relentless beating of the downpour would slacken once they left the grasslands and passed beneath the canopy of the thick band of woodland that bisected the land north of Lucinia. Disappointment awaited. Fewer drops just meant heavier drops, and the wind still howled as it forced

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

its way between the thick tree trunks, seeking him out with brutal accuracy. Coralen's feet screamed their displeasure at him with every tortured step. He didn't dare take his boots off for fear he'd never get them back on, or that he'd discover just how much of the liquid sloshing inside the leather was blood rather than water.

Brushing more of the endless rain away from his face, he pulled the hood of his cloak tighter, wishing he could close out the entire world. Instead, he could only watch through the narrow gap as a slender young officer made her way back down the column toward him, a wide grin on her face.

"Keramore wants to see you, mage," the officer said.

Coralen shifted his hood back, and a thick stream of rainwater ran down his face and into his mouth. He spat it out. "Why?"

"I didn't ask," the officer said with good humor. "You know why they call us the Teir`Dal, don't you? Because Keramore Thex likes to keep us in the dark. You're a mage, aren't you? Maybe he wants his pipe lit." She laughed. "Right now you don't look like you'd be much use for anything else. Come along now, there's a good fellow."

Stifling a curse and trying to blot out the pain in his feet, Coralen jogged alongside the officer as they skirted the edge of the column. Two thousand Teir`Dal seemed a tiny force when measured against draconic numbers, but when strung out two abreast on a woodland track, it took on the aspect of an interminable black-clad horde. By the time he reached the knot of senior soldiers walking alongside Keramore, his lungs ached with their need for air. The young officer, her face showing no signs of discomfort, gave Keramore a relaxed salute and darted ahead.

"You need to get in better shape," Keramore told Coralen with a half-glance over his shoulder. "Stick with us. We'll have you running like a Teir`Dal in no time."

Coralen took a couple of deep breaths, trying to ignore the amusement on the faces all around him and the open contempt on that of Sergeant Streck. "You wanted to see me, my Prince?"

Keramore nodded. If the rain bothered him, he hid it well. Somehow, the rain streaming down his cheeks never went near his eyes. Coralen couldn't stop blinking to clear his own. "I had a couple of questions," Keramore said. "Can you do anything about this weather?"

Coralen frowned. "What do you want to me to do?"

"We'd move faster if the rain eased."

Typical soldier, Coralen thought. Loves to have magic on his side, but has no idea how it functions. "It doesn't quite work like that," Coralen said.

Keramore looked puzzled. "You called down mist to cover the ships."

"Yes," Coralen agreed. "And if you want some mist with your rain, I can do that. I can add a bit of lightning too, if you wish. Trust me, it's a lot easier to summon bad weather than to get rid of it."

"Shame," Keramore said. He glanced at the dark, dripping cloud above. "We pride ourselves on being able to fight in any weather, but that doesn't mean we have to like it." There were smiles among the others gathered around them.

Coralen didn't join them. He felt useless here. Every single elf in this formation had a purpose, except him. Every one of them moved as one with their weapons, as if their steel blades were just an extension of their bodies. Even the rain seemed to affect them less, as if they slipped with deadly grace between the drops while the foolish mage stumbled and slid in the mud.

He coughed. "There was a second question?"

"Yes." Keramore glanced down. "How are your feet?"

Coralen stared at the Prince for a second. "My feet?"

Keramore nodded. "I'm guessing you're not used to marching, and the rainwater is going to make it worse. Do they hurt?"

"A little," Coralen admitted. As if in response to the lie, another spasm of agony shot through his shredded heels.

"Get the healers to take a look," Keramore said. "If you can't walk, you can't fight."

"And I don't plan to carry you," Streck growled.

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

Keramore grinned and looked up at the sky. "Besides, there's nothing worse than bad feet spoiling a lovely walk in the country."

The young officer rejoined them from the front of the column. "Scouts have reported in, sir," she told Keramore, this time without a salute. "The forest breaks up about a mile ahead and turns to farmland. Wheat fields, mostly."

Keramore sighed and looked again at the clouds. "Can we go around them, Trem? Stay in the trees? One dragon flying overhead while we're out there in the open will ruin our day in a hurry."

The officer shook her head, water flicking from her close-cropped hair. "Not unless you want to take a five or six mile detour to the north, boss. The scouts also say there are some buildings about half a mile into the fields. Should I order them forward to check them out?"

"No," Keramore said, stroking his jaw. "Tell them to hold their position. I'll be up to take a look in a minute." Dismissing the officer with a smile, Keramore turned to Coralen. "It'll be dark in two hours. Shall we go and take a look at these buildings? If you're lucky, you might get a roof over your head tonight."

Dark was a relative term, Coralen decided. By the time they reached the edge of the tree line the cloud had thickened yet further, with only occasional patches of pale grey to suggest that a sun existed above the blanket of angry mottled black. Every now and then, his keen ears gathered a vague impression of elves moving into position among the trees to either side of them, but he saw nothing but Keramore, Streck and the odd fleeting impression of movement. Between the shadows and their training, the rest of the Teir'Dal might have been ghosts.

Keramore beckoned to Coralen to stick close, and knelt down. "What have we got?"

It took Coralen a few seconds to realize there was an elf lying on the ground there, almost invisible in his dark clothing.

"Farming village, sir," the scout said.

"Dwarf," Streck muttered. "There are a few of their settlements in this area."

Keramore nodded and looked up at Coralen. "You can tell by the design of the buildings."

Coralen let his eyes wander over the expanse of chest-high wheat, trying to peer through the curtain of rain, but the buildings remained nothing more than indistinct shapes. "I thought dwarf houses would be smaller," he murmured.

Keramore gave him a sideways glance. "You don't spend a lot of time with other races, do you?" He rested his hand on the scout's shoulder. "Any sign of movement?"

"Nothing, sir," the scout said. "I've been watching for an hour, and I haven't seen anyone at all."

"Hmm." Keramore's eyes remained on the buildings, unblinking.

Coralen shivered. Without the heat of movement, the chill of his sodden clothing sent tendrils of ice into his bones. "They could be sheltering from the rain," he suggested, making no effort to keep jealousy from his voice.

"Maybe," Keramore murmured. Still crouching, he twisted to look up at Streck.

The Sergeant's face dropped. "Is it that bad, sir?"

Keramore nodded. "You always could read me like a book, Sergeant. One day I'm going to make you an officer whether you like it or not."

Streck spat on the ground. "No chance, sir. What should I tell Lieutenant Tremayne?"

"Tell her we'll advance with caution, with a skirmish line out front and our flanks well guarded."

Streck saluted, and turned to leave, halting when Keramore said his name again.

There was no amusement in the Prince's voice this time. "Tell her I want every archer to have their bow strung and an arrow notched. If something happens here, it will happen fast."

Coralen watched the sergeant leave, and felt an odd sense of regret. The forest seemed less secure without the broken-

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

nosed warrior's presence. He looked out at the distant buildings. Rippling in time with the breeze, almost as if it breathed, the wheat waited for them.

He shuddered, and this time he knew it was not the cold.

Keramore rose and looked at him. "Are you okay?"

"What do you expect to happen?"

Keramore shrugged. "Maybe nothing," he said. "But I still have the scars from the last time I ignored a hunch." He fell silent, his focus on the buildings and a frown on his face. His hand dropped to the sword at his side, fingers resting on the rain-soaked pommel. "I should have got you a sword," he murmured, with a sideways look.

Coralen would have laughed, except for the fear that writhed inside him. "I don't use swords," he said.

"Neither do I," Keramore said, "except when I have to. At that point it's too late to go and find one."

The distant cry of a marsh bird rose above the relentless patter of the rain.

"It's time," Keramore said. The scout rose from the undergrowth and led them down the gentle slope into the wheat field.

For a moment, they were utterly alone. The wheat tickled at his chest and a few taller stalks lapped at his chin, as if the three of them floated in a tarnished-gold sea. Then the shadows at the edge of the forest seemed to break apart, individual patches shifting and coalescing into clusters of Teir'Dal, little more than shadows but for the dim light reflecting from the blades of their spears and swords. A second wave followed, the loose lines stretching for a hundred yards either side. Several groups bounded forward, racing through the thick wheat without letting it slow them. One group paused, scanning the ground ahead, before darting forward again.

With each step, the buildings became clearer. Coralen guessed they were four hundred yards or so from the nearest one. As he stared, the rain eased enough for him to make out the design of the roof. Keramore was right. It looked very different to the elven farms he'd grown up among. Still, the



building looked more than solid enough to keep the rain out, and the warmth of a fire in. A good fire and the chance to dry his clothes would be very welcome. Maybe he could find a healer to take care of his battered feet while he was at it.

He stumbled and muttered a curse. His eyes would be better employed watching where he was going, instead of lingering on the crude design of the chimneystack. It really was an odd design, he concluded. Almost as odd as the fact that no smoke rose from it. Why wouldn't a farmer sheltering from the rain light a nice fire?

One of the scouts ahead gave a sudden cry and disappeared from sight beneath the wheat. It made Coralen feel better that even the fearsome Teir`Dal could trip and fall. A second scout took a few steps toward the spot where the other had dropped, either to help or to mock. From what Coralen had seen of soldier humor, it was certain to be the latter.

The second scout disappeared.

"Halt," Keramore cried. His sword was in his hand, though Coralen hadn't seen him draw it. Across the length of the line, the advance halted. No one spoke. The field lay silent, except for the steady whisper of the rain. The wheat undulated in the breeze, but otherwise nothing moved where the scouts had dropped from sight.

Coralen frowned, suddenly puzzled. Beyond Keramore, a patch of wheat shuddered, shifting across the field as if the wind roamed stronger there. What puzzled him was that the wheat there moved against the breeze.

With a scream, another Teir`Dal disappeared. His scream shattered the silence before seeming to merge with a guttural snarling. A roar echoed across the field, hanging in the air. The wheat around him thrashed with awful violence.

"Phyxians," Keramore yelled, the cry taken up by a dozen others.

A nearby warrior plunged his spear into the wheat, his triumphant yell drowned out by a high-pitched yowl. The elf wrenched the spear free, the tip slick with dark ichor. Coralen caught a flickering glimpse of something large and

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

black slicing through the wheat, and the spearman spun and collapsed without a sound, throat open to the bone.

Coralen saw the crimson flecks on the tips of the wheat. He could only stare. Frozen.

"Run," Keramore bellowed, racing forward. "Get to the buildings!" Grabbing Coralen by both shoulders, the Prince shoved him toward the village.

The contact shattered the paralysis. Blind panic filled Coralen, flooding his body, fuelling his muscles. What use were spells when you couldn't see your enemy? He ran, stumbling through the wheat that seemed to cling to him, sucking him down like quicksand. Screams and growls battered his ears. An arrow whistled through the air, close enough to touch. He could not tell if it found a target. He didn't have time to care.

Three hundred yards to the buildings.

Something shrieked, shockingly loud. The scream was high-pitched, close. Elven. The sound drowned beneath a crunching noise, and something hot and wet splashed across his face and hands.

He ran on.

Two hundred yards. His lungs burned with their desperate need for air. He burst from the wheat onto the rutted ground of a track, and saw something else dart out twenty yards away and throw itself at an elf. His terrified mind only caught impressions of a scaled forearm pinning the elf to the ground while a second clawed paw opened the Teir'Dal from throat to groin. Then the wheat enveloped him again, leaving him with his terror and the image of a mace-like skull pulling away with coiled, bloody entrails between razor-sharp teeth. He ran on.

The buildings loomed out of the rain.

A shadow launched itself out of the wheat toward his left side. Three flashes of wood and fletching, three solid thunks, and the creature was gone as suddenly as it had appeared. The wheat gave way and there was damp grass under his feet and the damp stone of a farmhouse close enough to touch.

The wall had no door, mocking him with its blankness. Ignoring the urgent pain in his chest, he kept going, wheeling

around the corner of the building, feet scrabbling for purchase on the wet earth.

And then he was on his back on the ground, the last of his breath gone, staring at the falling rain.

A short, wiry Teir`Dal scrambled to his feet, shouting incoherent insults and pointing an angry finger while his other hand searched for his spear. Coralen sucked in his breath, aware of new pain where the other elf's lowered head had smashed into his chest. "I'm sorry," he gasped, trying to rise. The soldier found his spear and opened his mouth to say something more.

The words dissolved into a muffled, gurgling sob as powerful jaws closed on the elf's head and slammed shut with a crack. Hot blood showered Coralen, pumping in rhythmic spouts from the butchered mess that had once been the soldier's neck. He tasted the salty tang on his lips, watched as the phyxian dropped the still-twitching corpse into the mud and turned its eyes on him.

And suddenly, all the sounds and sights of the battle seemed to retreat to a muted, distant murmur. With a jolt of surprise, Coralen Larkos realized he felt nothing but utter, detached calm.

He had never seen a phyxian before. He'd read about them, but the descriptions had hardly done them justice. The creature was magnificent. It could almost have been a big cat, but for its size and the thick scales that covered its body. Remarkable, how those plates allowed such freedom of movement and yet provided complete protection. Coralen could see the thick muscles of its legs tense beneath the layer of scale as it prepared to launch itself at him. The head, he decided, was more like a dog, with an elongated muzzle, but no dog ever had teeth as long and serrated as those, nor such sunken eyes.

He raised his head, and his eyes met those of the creature as it prepared to spring. Coralen almost laughed. In a few seconds he would be dead, and yet all he could think was that he wished he could take notes.

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

The phyxian didn't move.

It took Coralen a few seconds to realize he'd spoken, that he'd said "stay". The phyxian looked as confused as he felt. It tensed up again, but he continued to stare into its eyes. "Stay," he repeated.

He wanted to giggle with the power he felt surging within him. Let the Teir'Dal see this. Let them see how far he had taken Compulsion. Keramore's precious warriors could have their swords and their spears. He had something they could never dream of, power beyond their imagination.

Keeping his eyes firmly locked with the creature, Coralen sent waves of Compulsion its way, feeding commands to the raw part of its brain that dealt purely with survival. You have expended much energy today, he counseled it. I am not worth eating. You have already killed, enough meat to last you, to provide the energy you need for future hunts. You should rest now.

With a shake of its head, the phyxian lay down next to the now-stilled body of the soldier, resting its thick, ridged skull on its forelegs. The low growl that emerged from its throat had a questioning note to it.

Still sending the Compulsion its way, Coralen reached out one hand and took hold of the dead elf's spear.

In a sudden, tumultuous rush, the cacophony of battle exploded into his ears. Something roared to his right. He turned to see a phyxian loping down the street, one nearly severed ear trailing blood behind it as it flapped against the beast's skull.

He brought up the spear. The panic in the field lay behind him, forgotten. This thing was no invisible killer striking from beneath the wheat's cover. It was mere draconic scum, a mistake of nature.

And he was Coralen Larkos.

Lowering the spear to point at the phyxian's maw, he reached out and drew in pure power. The sky above was his friend now, the clouds already charged, just waiting for a spark. He pulled their energy into the spear, weaving it

around the haft until blue tendrils coiled and writhed along the length of the wood.

With a roar of anger and contempt, he sent it at the creature.

A blue orb exploded from the tip of the spear. It hung in the air before springing forward to envelop the charging phyxian's skull and torso. The creature shuddered, opening its mouth to squeal in agony. No sound emerged from behind the gag of blue light that arced between its vicious teeth. With a deep bass sound, thunder to his lightning, the phyxian's skin and flesh dissolved into a greasy black mist.

Stripped clean, the bones fell to the mud and lay there, still sparking. Their bleached whiteness glowed in the twilight gloom beneath the clouds.

Coralen took a deep breath. Four more phyxians emerged from the shadows between the buildings, fanning out as they padded forward. He saw the wariness in their eyes. Fifty yards beyond them, two Teir`Dal watched him, their swords dripping blood. He heard their warning shouts, and smiled.

They would look at him differently now, he knew, they all would, once they saw what he did to these phyxians. He lowered the spear again, irked that none of these simple soldiers would truly understand what they had witnessed. After all, lightning was nothing. Any battle mage could do that. The Compulsion he had used on the first, on the other hand...

His smile died on his lips. The link was broken. The Compulsion was gone. It had worked beyond anything anyone had ever believed possible.

But it was gone.

He spun, knowing he was half a second too late, a lifetime too late. There was no time for magic, no time for anything but an instinctive duck. He felt the air flinch as claws sliced past him, an inch above his head. Then the first creature's massively muscled shoulder hammered into the side of his skull, eight hundred pounds of phyxian behind it, and he knew he was gone too.

His last fleeting thought as his blood-coated face struck the turf was a deep regret for a forgotten notebook.



# JUST A WEAPON



Why was he on a ship?

Thoughts came in bursts, jumbled and terrifying. Images of fighting and cruel, violent death flashed before him. There had been a battle, then. A name came to him, Port Valinor. Of course. Waves of Kobolds, tiny yet lethal, ready to kill him, until he brought up his hands and laid waste to them in their hundreds.

He felt rhythmic, rocking motion and the caress of cold water on his face. Yes, that was it. They must still be on the boat, leaving the smoking, skeletal ruins of Port Valinor in their wake.

His memories spoke of terror but part of his mind laughed now, a part he'd not noticed during the fight. Such power at his fingertips. Such joy in destroying one's enemies! No enemy could touch him when he let the magic run free in his system, when he ignored all those rules the Guild of Mages had taught him, their pitiful structures, and just let himself be one with the magic.

*You are Coralen Larkos.* Amusement played in the voice.

So it had a voice, then, this part of his mind that so reveled in destruction. What's more, it sounded familiar. He had heard it before, this voice. He had heard it at Port Valinor, exhorting him to greater efforts, applauding the chaos around him. He had heard it at Stonepier, sneering contempt of the King.

"Coralen." Another voice, unknown. He opened his eyes and blinked as rainwater from an angry gray sky poured into them. Four tall figures loomed over him.

Not a boat. A stretcher.

"Aye, he's awake," one of the figures said, looking down

at him. A Teir`Dal, Coralen saw, two spears strapped to his back, his dark-brown clothing rendered still darker by the water it had soaked up. The loose garments clung to him like the lank hair that framed his face. They were all warriors, Coralen realized, one at each corner of the stretcher.

Coralen opened his mouth to speak and felt the words smothered by his dry lips. He let rainwater trickle in and swilled it around. His jaw ached. "Where am I?"

"Thirty-two miles southeast of the village," the warrior said, and laughed. "The one where you decided to take a nap. Want to know how I know that? Because when you've been carrying a mage on a wet stretcher for two days, you count every damned step."

The others chuckled. *They mock you*, the voice in Coralen's head murmured.

"Put me down," Coralen said.

"Hey, Lieutenant," the warrior called, brushing back dripping strands of hair from his face. "Our cargo's awake and wants to get down."

Coralen raised his head. The effort made colors swirl before his eyes. He sank back onto the cold stretcher, the sour tang of vomit in his mouth.

"You don't want to do that," Lieutenant Tremayne said, appearing wraithlike out of the rain to look down at Coralen. "How are you feeling?"

Coralen blinked away more water. His eyesight seemed blurred, and not just with the rain. "Like a phyxian smashed me in the skull."

"Well," Tremayne said, "at least you haven't lost your memory. The thing cracked your head a little, but you'll live and the headache will go away in a few days. It also broke your right leg when it landed on you. The healers have done a pretty good job on it in the circumstances, but you'll find walking uncomfortable for a month or two."

Coralen snorted. "Anything else?"

"Yes," Tremayne said comfortably. "He opened up your right side, so you'll always have a scar there to remind you of

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

why we don't play with physicians. General bruising, that sort of thing. I considered sending you back with the other wounded."

Coralen twisted his head to look at the officer. The movement sent agony clawing down his spine. "Other wounded?" They had sent wounded back? Why was he still here? By the sound of it, he was lucky to be breathing.

"We sent ninety casualties back to Stonepier," Tremayne said, nodding. The fool girl thought he was inquiring about their health! "We buried sixty-three of our dead at the farming village. Along with the farmers." She paused. "There were a lot more of them, not that we could count all that well. It took us a while to find what was left of them. The physicians..." Her voice trailed off. "Let's just say that in the circumstances, you got off lightly."

"Lightly?" Coralen winced. What madness had possessed him, to make him think he was safer with these fools than with the army or on a ship to Amaril? "Why wasn't I sent back with the others? I can barely move."

Tremayne shrugged. "Prince Keramore said he still needed you."

Anger surged through Coralen, drowning even the pain. "I want to see him," he grated. "Now."

"I don't think you're--"

"Now," Coralen repeated.

With a sigh, Tremayne turned to the four elves holding the stretcher. "Okay, you heard him. Take him to the boss."

Taking deep breaths against the pain and the rage that still threatened to bubble over, Coralen took in their surroundings. The ever-present rain aside, this was new territory for him. Not quite hilly, the ground undulated over a succession of low, grassy rises. A handful of stark, weather-beaten trees seemed to huddle against the rain, and the wind plastered the grass at the crest of each rise into the mud.

Coralen gripped the slick edges of the stretcher as the warriors picked up their pace. They passed Teir'Dal after Teir'Dal, spread out in a long, grim-faced column. Some glanced down at the stretcher, and each time Coralen met a



Teir`Dal's eyes he saw the same look. Not quite respect, not quite fear. Whatever that look was, it was a world removed from any he'd seen before the village.

The Prince stood just below the crest of one of the endless rises, pointing into the distance. Several others stood around him, all dwarfed by the ever-present Sergeant Streck. The stretcher-bearers made straight for the group, cursing as they slipped and struggled for footholds on the wet slope.

"Good to see you're awake, Coralen," Keramore said. An amiable smile played on his handsome features as he returned Tremayne's salute. A fresh and vivid red scar curved a path across his cheekbone, almost touching the orb of his left eye. "You'll be pleased to hear we're within fifteen miles of Lucinia. At this pace--"

"Why am I still here?"

Someone gasped at the interruption. Keramore merely frowned. "The healers tell me your wounds aren't--"

"You know damn well I should have gone back with the other casualties," Coralen snarled.

Streck growled and took a step forward, fists clenched. Keramore reached out and laid the back of his hand gently on the broken-nosed elf's chest, and the Sergeant stopped in his tracks. His angry eyes stayed on Coralen.

"As I was saying," Keramore said, his tone icy yet even, "your wounds aren't life-threatening. Painful, perhaps, but a Teir`Dal can take pain."

"I'm not a Teir`Dal," Coralen spat. "I've been told that enough to know. And I didn't sign up to get killed."

Keramore's jaw clenched. His voice remained cold. "I don't plan to get you killed."

The last vestiges of Coralen's pent-up rage broke free, lacing his words with hate. "You didn't plan to get those sixty elves back at the village killed, did you? Yet you still blundered in there, and they're still dead. Just like you're going to blunder into Lucinia and get the rest of these poor dumb bastards killed, so that the amazing Keramore Thex can get another medal on his chest. Who cares how many of your

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

precious Teir`Dal die for it? Well, you can count me out. I`m not just another weapon for you to use.”

He took a breath, and then putting every ounce of contempt he could muster into the word added, “my Prince.”

Silence. Coralen shook, though whether with cold or the release of anger he could not tell. The whole column of Teir`Dal had halted, watching them. The last of the color drained from Keramore`s face.

“That`s where you`re wrong,” the Prince said, voice soft. “You are a weapon, Coralen. That`s all you are.” His voice grew louder, addressing not just Coralen now but the whole formation. “You are a weapon, and I will use you to kill dragons. We will kill them at Lucinia. We will kill them wherever we find them. You think you will be safe at Stonepier if we fail at Lucinia? You think you will be safe on Faydwer?”

Keramore`s eyes swept over the formation, lingering on individual warriors. “What about Amaril, our home? Do any of you think that your homes will be safe when the dragons push on? Your families? This is war, Coralen, a war of extinction. Either we win, or we cease to exist.”

He took a step forward. Even the wind seemed to have faded. Keramore`s words hung in air silent but for the soft patter of rain on grass. “You know what you are capable of, mage. Everyone here knows what you did to that phyxian. We`ve all heard what you did at Port Valinor. To us, you are *nothing but* a weapon. And I *will* use you to kill dragons. Until they are all dead, or we are.”

With a dismissive flick of the hand, Keramore turned away. “Let him get some more rest, Trem,” he ordered. “It seems to me he hasn`t woken up yet.”

Coralen dropped back on the stretcher, neck and stomach muscles aching from the effort of rising. He took a breath and battered down the urge to empty his stomach. *Foolish*, the voice in his head told him, and fell silent. Slowly the formation began moving again. No one spoke. No one even looked at him.

One of the stretcher-bearers coughed. “I think your

chances of promotion just dropped, Lieutenant," he said. A couple of the other warriors chuckled, though the amusement seemed fond rather than mocking.

"Yeah, thanks," Tremayne said. She looked down. "What in the name of the Seraphs was that?"

Coralen ignored the question. "How do I get back to Stonepier?"

"You can walk," Tremayne said. "I've got half a mind to let you start walking now," she added, "except the Prince still needs you. Why, I cannot imagine. Most nobles would stab you through the heart for speaking like that."

Coralen closed his eyes. "Are you finished?"

"Not even close," Tremayne spat, her voice shaking with anger. "In all your self-pity, did you ever bother to think why you're still alive? When you fainted on the battlefield, there were five phyxians waiting to share you for lunch. Do you know how hard it is to kill a bastard phyxian?"

"Actually, I do," Coralen said, twisting his mouth in sneering dismissal. The thought of phyxian flesh falling apart in a haze of blue light made him want to smile.

"Oh, yes." Now it was Trem's turn to sneer. "You killed one. Then you laid down and waited to die. Keramore Thex killed five. All five. I've never seen anything like it. No one takes on five phyxians. It should have cost him his life. It nearly cost him his eye. I bet you didn't even notice the new scar, did you?"

Coralen felt the rain's touch washing the last anger out of his skin and into the mud. Panic flooded into him with the memory of wet grass and blood on his face and a half-remembered sight of clawed draconic feet padding toward him. And something more, the briefest glimpse of a slim figure springing into the fight, moving faster than any elf he'd ever known. For an instant darkness swallowed him again, his eyes screwed shut.

"I didn't know," he murmured. "He didn't say a thing."

"Of course not," Trem laughed, the sound ringing with contempt, bereft of mirth. "He could have left them to kill

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

you, and right now, I think he should have. But that's not the Teir'Dal way. That's not Keramore Thex's way."

Tremayne moved away from the stretcher, shaking her head, her eyes glaring daggers at Coralen even as she slowed her own pace. "I'm going to apologize to the Prince and see if he'll let me keep my job," the officer told the stretcher-bearers. "As for this one," she added with a dismissive point of a single finger, "let him get some sleep. Tomorrow, either he walks or he crawls. Frankly, I don't care which."



# DESERTER



It bloody hurt like all bastard hell, but it would hold his weight.

Wincing as every step sent fresh pain through his half-healed leg, Coralen limped his way across the cloying mud of the campground. A few Teir'Dal looked up from where they sprawled on the wet leaves of the forest floor, but none spared him more than a moment's glance. Most had already retreated to makeshift shelters which were little more than mottled-green oilcloth sheets strung between low-hanging branches. Even though weak daylight tried to penetrate the interlocking tendrils of the canopy above, none among the Teir'Dal would struggle to sleep.

Coralen would never have known the Prince's shelter were it not for the group of elves sat around it. He recognized several. Streck and Tremayne both stared at him with lingering distrust and anger. Another officer, short and bony-faced, watched with interest, as if wondering what the idiot mage would do next. Coralen felt a sudden chill. Perhaps they were all wondering what Keramore would do to *him*.

The rest of the group had their backs to him, sitting cross-legged on the ground facing the shelter. Nothing about the low-slung sheet suggested that the elf who slept beneath it was more or less important than any other. The same could be said of Keramore himself. Perhaps the material of his clothing was of a slightly higher quality than that of his followers, but after days of relentless mud and rain, it mattered little. Coralen swallowed.

Time to be about his business.

"Coralen," Keramore said without turning. "How's the leg?"

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

The genial tone took Coralen aback more than any anger could have. He coughed to hide his shock. "Well enough, my Prince," he managed.

"The healers will have herbs for the pain," Keramore said, still looking away. "I'm glad you've come on over. I was about to send Trem to get you." One glance at Tremayne's face was enough to show Coralen what the young officer thought of that idea.

"My Prince," Coralen began, "I need to--"

Keramore raised his hand. "When the time comes, Coralen, kill dragons. Do that, and you'll never need to apologize as long as you live. You understand?"

Coralen released a deep, shuddering breath. "Yes, my Prince."

Unhurried, Keramore half-twisted to look up. He made an impatient gesture with his fingers. "Sit down, then. We haven't got much time."

Still tentative, struggling to believe that there were truly to be no consequences for his outburst, Coralen lowered himself to the sodden ground next to Streck. The sergeant gave him a filthy look, shifting his body away to give Coralen all the room he needed, plus more. As if several droplets had plotted together in a silent conspiracy, a single huge, ice-cold raindrop landed on the back of Coralen's neck and trickled down his spine. He coughed again, too late to hide the gasp that burst from his lips.

Keramore tilted his head. "You're not getting sick, are you?"

"No, my Prince," Coralen said quickly.

"Good." Keramore gave a thoughtful nod. "My Teir'Dal are loyal, but Trem would lead a mutiny against me if I asked her to carry you another step."

Trem chuckled and a couple of the other officers grinned. Even Streck smiled, though it was akin to a twitch of the grim mouth beneath his broken nose.

*They really love him, Coralen realized. Every one of these warriors actually adores Keramore Thex, even though by the time this war is over, he'll have led most of them to their deaths.*

The Prince leaned forward with a moss-flecked stick in his hand, and for the first time Coralen noticed the symbols and lines carved into the mud. "Recap," Keramore said. "Coralen, we're about five miles from the ridgeline above Lucinia." He gestured to the south. "Less than a thousand yards from here, we run out of forest. There's nothing but open ground between us and the ridge once we clear the trees. We could walk from here to the city walls in a couple of hours without breaking a sweat, if it wasn't for one problem." He stopped, and gave Coralen an expectant look.

Tilting his head back, Coralen peered through a rare gap in the canopy at the watery daylight of the sky. "You've seen dragons up there?"

"Wyverns," Streck rumbled. "Just one or two at a time, and staying high, but regular enough that we'd be spotted within a few hundred yards of leaving cover."

"Which means two things," Keramore said. "We won't get near Lucinia in daylight without being spotted. And the siege of Lucinia is about to begin, if it hasn't already." He tapped the stick on the ground. "This is what we're going to do about it. We're going to rest here for a few more hours. I'm going to sharpen my sword and my daggers, and I suggest you all do the same." He half-smiled at Coralen. "I don't know quite what the equivalent for you would be."

"I'll think of something," Coralen promised, smiling.

"As soon as night falls, we head out." Keramore paused. His eyes drifted away from the group and looked out beyond the tents to the south.

"No lights, no noise." His voice lowered, as if speaking to himself. Coralen leaned forward to hear, and saw that the others did the same. "We're Teir'Dal. The night is our ally. It won't be like Tahrin or Port Valinor. This time, we'll have surprise. This time, we'll have revenge."

"Revenge," Streck muttered, nodding. Others echoed the word, smiles springing to their faces.

They were all truly, hopelessly insane.

Coralen tried to picture the scene. The walls of Lucinia,

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

the draconic army spread before them. The army that had already destroyed Tahrin, the elves' greatest city, in a single night of fighting. A handful of Teir'Dal charging into the fray with joy in their hearts.

They would be slaughtered.

But then again, what a wonderful array of targets there would be. What better place to show off his magic than with an audience on the walls and a prince watching his every move? A tingle ran up his spine as he thought back to Port Valinor, to the village, to the draconic scum dead and dying before his outstretched hands.

His fear disappeared, creating a void within. The sensation of the cold wet grass against his clothes, his weariness, his resentment all faded away. With a roar, the void filled with confidence and anger and the urgent desire to kill.

What better place to show the world what Coralen Larkos was capable of?

Throwing back his head, he laughed. The looks on their faces spoke of surprise and confusion. He watched Streck edge another few inches further away, saw Trem's eyes widen with shock. Only Keramore kept his face passive, but the slightest nod betrayed his approval.

They were all insane, Coralen knew. It was quite a shock to realize he was too.



Silence hung like a damp drape over the forest. No birdsong or animal's footfall disturbed their rest, no cough or heavy breathing, just the steady dripping of rain on leaves. Coralen lay on the ground, staring up at the texture of the blanket hanging over him, eyes half-heartedly tracking the patterns of the weave. He could have been alone in the depths of the woods, cosseted in gentle silence, but sleep would not come. He let his mind run through the arsenal he would bring to the fight.

Compulsion, to slow and disorient, maybe even to control.



Lightning, to sear flesh and rend bone with shattering blasts of pure, lethal energy.

Ice, to delay and to sap strength, perhaps to crush an opponent beneath the weight of super-chilled water.

Fire, to envelop an enemy in flaming, flesh-searing agony.

Coralen plucked idly at a thin tendril of loose fabric. Let the Teir`Dal healers worry about friendly casualties. Healing had never been his strong suit, but it would hardly have made a difference anyway. For every life he might save, he could send a hundred enemies to shrieking oblivion. The thought did not displease him.

Waiting, on the other hand, displeased him immensely. Still an hour or more to nightfall. He forced down the nervous bubbles in his gut, and pulled out the loose thread with a sharp tug.

Somewhere deep within the trees, the wavering cry of a marsh bird rose and faded. Without sound, dozens of figures rose from the forest floor, sliding weapons free of sheaths and padding silently forward. Coralen shook his head. He did not know if Keramore had taught the Teir`Dal, or they him. Either way, each warrior moved with their leader's animal grace, stalking through the trees. He climbed to his own feet, setting the blanket rustling among the branches and snapping a twig beneath his boot. It sounded like thunder compared to the wraiths shifting among the shadows.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Startled, he turned to find himself looking into intense blue eyes.

"The sentries have spotted someone approaching," Keramore murmured. "Follow me. Stick close."

Struggling to keep pace, Coralen followed the Prince through eight hundred yards of tangled undergrowth. Pain from his wounded leg shot through him with every step. Vicious barbed branches reached out like kobold fingers to pluck at his clothing, snagging the material and tearing at his cloak. Keramore seemed to flow like water between the hazards, his own clothes never being as much as touched.

Beyond the trees ahead, the ground opened up into one

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

long expanse of knee-high grass that rose slowly toward the distant granite-topped mass of a ridgeline, stark against the gray-white of unbroken cloud.

Keramore dropped to a crouch next to the kneeling Tremayne. "How many?"

"Four, sir," Trem said. A strung longbow rested across her thigh. Her fingers tapped against the arrow held in one hand. "They look like regular army." Her slim arm shot out, the arrow quivering briefly before pointing motionless at the grasslands. "There!"

"I see it," Keramore growled.

Coralen peered out through the trees, blinking away tears of pain from his throbbing leg. At first, he saw nothing but the undulating movement of grass in the breeze, but then his eyes picked out a flash of color, maroon against the endless green. An elf, running at full pace. Others behind him, maybe four hundred yards away? He glanced over at Trem and saw that the outstretched arrow pointed much higher than the four figures. A shadow flickered across the low cloud.

"Wyvern," Coralen breathed as all moisture evaporated from his throat and his innards coiled like snakes.

Keramore nodded. "It will see them any second. Why haven't they gone to ground?"

The wyvern was longer than he'd expected, Coralen noted. Its torso was thin and spindly, yet its length was matched or even exceeded by the span of its bat-like wings. The spear tip shape of its head swung pendulously at the end of a neck that surely could not hold such a weight until, as if hearing the Prince's words, the neck suddenly pointed at its target.

With a triumphant shriek, the wyvern lowered one wing tip and plummeted to earth. Even at this distance, Coralen's elf ears heard the whistle of the wings cleaving through the thick, moist air.

The rearmost maroon-coated elf turned and dropped to one knee, bringing up a bow and releasing an arrow.

"Too early," Keramore groaned.

Coralen didn't see where the arrow went, but the wyvern

never wavered in its dive. Fumbling, the elf tried to draw a second arrow, but too late. A sharp crack resounded across the open ground as the wyvern flared its wings at the last second, swooping at low level across the grass and then hurtling back into a climb. The luckless elf writhed in its talons. The draconic creature's skull ducked once, rising again with blood streaming from between its fangs. Then the claws flexed open, letting the now-headless body tumble end over end and bounce once across the grass before coming to a halt.

The remaining three elves ran on, not looking back.

Next to Keramore, Trem notched an arrow. The Prince placed a hand on her arm. "Too far," he cautioned. "You'd just give away our position." He spat on the ground, then looked up. "Coralen, is there anything you can do?"

"Me?" The wyvern banked, hanging silhouetted against the sky. Damn, it was big. Coralen shook his head. "Lightning would kill it, but would give us away. Same with Fire." Pirouetting in mid-air with surprising grace, the wyvern turned back towards them, head swinging from side to side again. "It's too far for Compulsion. Too fast for Ice."

The three running soldiers were less than two hundred yards now, close enough to make out the wild-eyed terror on their faces.

"Coralen," Keramore repeated in a low voice. "We need you."

Trem muttered something and notched an arrow. This time the Prince didn't stop her. The wyvern's hunting nose went rigid again and that same victorious bark filled the sky. Lightning, Fire, Compulsion, Ice. That left one option.

Raising his hand, Coralen called on Affliction.

The ground here was too healthy for a perfect draw of power, but there was always death and corruption lurking just beneath the surface. Coralen felt the power surge into him, then cast his mind out toward the distant wyvern as it plunged into another murderous dive. The sights and sounds of the world around him faded into the background. Even the terrible pain in his leg subsided to a memory. He ignored the questing eyes, the rock-like skull and the serpentine neck, and focused all his attention on the wings.

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

There, at the root of the wing, where the muscles and tendons of the shoulder enveloped sinew and bone in an iron grip. That would do.

The wyvern closed the gap on the soldiers. Coralen met it with everything he had.

Possibly the wyvern might have seen the faint greenish tinge of the trembling air that shimmered from the tree line to its left side. More likely it saw nothing, and felt nothing as tendrils of decay seeped into its flesh, five hundred years of decomposition compressed into the blink of an eye. It barely had time to squeal in disbelief as the rotten flesh of its wing's root frayed away and disappeared in a stinking cloud of putrescence.

It spun once before meeting the onrushing ground neck-first.

The three fleeing soldiers stopped and turned at the resounding snapping sound, shaking their heads in disbelief at the huddled bulk twitching in the grass behind them.

Keramore turned to Trem. "Take two dozen warriors and drag that pile of worm meat under the trees. Quickly, before another one comes. That poor bastard it caught, too. And send those three survivors to me."

With a nod and an awed look at Coralen, Tremayne disappeared, calling out orders in a low voice. Keramore turned to Coralen, one scarred eyebrow raised. "Impressive," he murmured. He opened his mouth to add something else. Then, seeming to think better of it, he turned and made his way back toward the camp.

*Impressive*, the voice in Coralen's head echoed.

Coralen Larkos looked into the dead eyes of the wyvern, and smiled as they dragged it away.



# THE FRONT LINE



“Lucinia is doomed, Sire,” the maroon-coated officer blustered. “And if you don’t flee now, you’ll be doomed too.”

The odor of panic and defeat rose off the soldier in waves, so tangible Coralen felt like he could have touched it. If it bothered any of the Teir`Dal, they hid it well. All he sensed in them was contempt. “Regular army,” one of the black-clad warriors sneered, before loudly clearing his throat and spitting a thick goblet of phlegm on the ground. “Couldn’t fight their way out of a dwarf’s beard.”

Keramore didn’t blink at the regular officer’s words. “Let’s stick to facts, shall we, Lieutenant Barkmire?” He nodded toward the two other maroon-clad soldiers standing at attention, shivering. “And try to remember you’re an officer, even if you have abandoned your post.”

The officer’s face darkened, anger bringing color to his cheeks and the points of his ears. “Sire, we thought it wiser to take the news of Lucinia’s peril to the—”

He fell silent as Keramore raised a hand.

“Cowardly bastard,” Streck muttered in Coralen’s ear, his broken-nose twitching with a sneer. “Never send a regular soldier to do a Teir`Dal’s job.” Coralen murmured something he hoped sounded like agreement, but remembering the wyvern, he couldn’t be too harsh on these elves. Part of him, a large part of him, wished *he* were fleeing in the other direction.

Keramore’s eyes flickered toward Streck, but otherwise he ignored the sergeant and kept his attention on Barkmire. “How many?”

“Thousands, Sire,” the officer said. “Tens of thousands. The whole plain in front of the walls was black with ’em, as far

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

as Rankin's Tor. I never saw so many kobolds all at once. We must have dropped a couple of thousand of 'em with arrows before lunchtime, but they just kept coming. Drakes too. And wyverns like crows in the sky."

Keramore made a sharp gesture with his hand. "What about dragons?"

"No, Sire," Barkmire said. "I don't reckon as I'd be here if they had any."

"Agreed," Keramore said. The Teir'Dal might have tried to hide their collective sigh of relief, but it still sounded like steam escaping from a cooking pot. Keramore seemed utterly calm. "How did you get here? You make it sound like the city was surrounded."

"Aye, it is," the officer said. "We waited until they were pulling back after a failed attack. Twenty of us made a break for it." He swallowed, eyes flickering toward the open ground beyond the forest's concealment. "Well, you saw how many of us made it this far."

"Leaving a hole in the defenses for them to swarm through," Streck snarled, "you yellow bastard."

"Sire, I must protest," Barkmire said. "A sergeant should not be allowed to speak to an officer like that."

"True," Keramore said, with an admonishing look at Streck. He turned back to Barkmire, and laying his hand gently on the officer's chest, ripped away the badges of rank with a sudden violent yank. "There," he said. "Now you're a private soldier, and he can say whatever he likes to you. Be thankful I don't have the time to waste on a proper response to your dereliction of duty."

Barkmire's mouth hung open. Coralen ran his gaze over the watching Teir'Dal. None seemed exactly happy over the officer's demotion, but an air of quiet satisfaction united them. Every face shared the same look of contempt.

"Quicker, now," Keramore said. "What was the state of the defenses when you ran away?"

Barkmire stuttered, then composed himself. He looked close to tears. "We were holding," he began, then paused.

"They were holding," he corrected himself, "but the arrow stocks were running low. We had plenty of mages when the fighting started, or thought we did. They all died early on. It's like the wyverns went for them first."

Coralen felt the color drain from his face. He turned away, coughing at the trickle of vomit seeping into his mouth. Trem gave him a wink.

Keramore ran through a dozen more questions about the dispositions of the enemy, then dismissed the three maroon-clad soldiers with a contemptuous wave. "Give them some provisions and send them north," he told Trem. "Maybe they'll make it, maybe they won't. Either way, we'll be well rid of them."

Trem grinned. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather give them weapons and make them come with us, sir? You never know, they might redeem themselves." Her grin took on a wicked edge. "At the least, their presence might improve the odds of the rest of us surviving."

Keramore laughed, bitterness making the sound hollow. "Would you trust one of them to watch your back?"

Trem shook her head. "True. All right, sir, I'll get them moving before Sergeant Streck snaps and finishes what the wyverns started. I've rarely seen him so angry."

"Can you blame him?" Keramore looked at the three regular soldiers, and something close to hatred burned in his eyes. "Get rid of them and then fall in your warriors. It will be dark enough to move in twenty minutes and they're not going to delay the battle just for us."

"Yes, sir," Trem said, and turned to leave. She paused, and reached into her backpack. "Here, Coralen," she said, "I almost forgot. I brought you this." She pulled out a folded mass of black material and tossed it to him. Coralen caught it but almost let it spill to the wet ground, surprised by the weight. "You might need it," Trem added, and disappeared into the gathering gloom.

Coralen ran his fingers over the heavy, tough leather. "Is this armor?" He turned it over in his hands, feeling the straps hanging loose.

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

"Never worn it before?" Keramore smiled. "Don't worry, it's far less complicated than it looks. Put your arms out." With deft hands, Keramore slammed the armor onto Coralen's torso and locked it into place.

Coralen winced as the Prince pulled the straps tight, one after the other. Keramore noticed the expression. "Are you ready for this?"

"I guess I'll have to be," Coralen said, watching the last watery glow of the hidden sun fading behind the clouds. "Do you really think two thousand elves are going to make a difference if the enemy is as many as he says?"

"It's not the full army," Keramore said. He rapped his knuckles on Coralen's armor. The sound rang through the murk, reassuring in its strength. "I saw the full draconic army at Tahrin, and this isn't it. If it were, Lucinia would already have fallen. My guess is the main force is licking its wounds at Tahrin and they've sent a smaller force to see if they can't grab hold of Lucinia before we can reinforce."

Coralen waited a few seconds. "You didn't answer my question."

"Coralen," Keramore said with a long-suffering sigh, "I don't have two thousand elves. I have two thousand Teir`Dal. You should know that by now. You're one of them, after all."

Coralen laughed. "I don't think Trem or Sergeant Streck would agree."

Keramore gave him a serious look, the last of the daylight adding rose-hued warmth to the cold blue of his eyes. "Don't you? What you did to the phyxians back at the farm got them thinking. You should have died from your wounds there, but you were tough enough not only to survive, but to insult me to my face. That takes guts. They can see how much pain that leg is causing you, but you haven't complained once. That takes guts, too. It's what a Teir`Dal would do. And you made a wyvern's wing fall off." Keramore put his hand on Coralen's arm. "You made a wyvern's wing fall off," he repeated with a smile. "If that doesn't make you a Teir`Dal, I don't know what will."



"I don't have the uniform," Coralen protested. He pointed at his dark-brown clothes. So stained with blood and filth now, he realized, that they had become very dark, almost the black of his new armor.

Keramore laughed. "Never mind the uniform," he said. "You think that's why they call us Teir`Dal, because of the uniform? No." He poked one powerful finger into Coralen's sleeveless leather breastplate. "The real uniform is in here. They call us Teir`Dal because no matter how dark the task is, how dark the future looks, we get it done. Because no matter how dark things get for us, they're about to get a lot darker for our enemies."

All around them, Coralen sensed the movement of two thousand warriors preparing for battle. Could he really be one of them?

"You don't look convinced," Keramore said. "Even after that great speech?"

"It was a great speech," Coralen agreed. "Thank you. I'll try to believe it."

"It's all true," Keramore said, teeth bared in the gloom. "Time to move. Stick with me when it all begins. For fifteen years, Sergeant Streck is the only elf I've trusted to guard my back. It's about time he had some help."

"We're ready, sir," Trem said, emerging from the shadows with Streck on her heels. Both Teir`Dal nodded at Coralen as the big sergeant took his position between Keramore and the Teir`Dal's mage.

Keramore grinned, blue eyes flashing in the final glow of the dying day. "See you on the ridge."



## ALLURE OF THE CHARGE



Nothing stirred above the still-twitching carcass of the drake. They'd caught the beast off-guard, a sentry made negligent by the certainty that its enemies were trapped and cowed, made over-confident by the might of the draconic forces. Surprised, it had still managed a lunge that would have killed a slower elf than Keramore. Instead, the Prince had danced aside and plunged his sword between scale-armored ribs, before four more blades pierced its length and pinioned it against the rocky ground.

The thick cloud base hampered even elven eyes, but there was no movement, no sound of flapping to suggest they'd lost surprise.

"Reckon we've got away with it," Streck murmured, seeming to read Coralen's thoughts. The sergeant grunted as he pulled his own broad-headed spear free with a wet rasp. "Bastards don't take us seriously." He spat on the rocks and began wiping the blade with a cloth, grimacing as ichor clung to the steel. "We'll all have to clean our weapons in the morning."

"The morning, sergeant?" A nearby Teir`Dal raised an amused eyebrow. "I thought this was one of those suicide missions the boss likes so much."

Streck gave her a sour look. "It's only a suicide mission for you, Rella. The rest of us are going to make it to the city while the drakes waste their time eating you."

Coralen smiled, until the rancid metallic tang of draconic blood filled his nostrils. He gagged, trying not to spill his stomach contents and almost failing.

Streck gave him a wise nod. "You get used to it, mage."

I never did decide if they smell better open or closed." He paused. "You're wishing you'd said no, back in the tent at Stonepier, aren't you?"

A faint rustle of leather on stone made Coralen turn in time to see Keramore emerge from the shadows. The Prince's face showed no more nerves than if out for a stroll in the Faydark.

"Left flank killed another drake sentry," Keramore said in a low voice. "Stupid thing was sleeping. The main force is over the ridge, just out of arrow shot of the city walls."

"At least the city hasn't fallen," Coralen said.

Keramore nodded. "We'll skirt the south edge of Rankin's Tor and head for the main gate. With luck, the defenders will be smart enough to figure out what's happening and open the gate to let us in." He looked around. Beyond Coralen and Streck, there were probably forty elves in earshot, and Coralen knew that the Prince had already been along the line to speak with his lieutenants.

Somewhere out there, Trem and the others would be briefing their own soldiers.

Keramore motioned them closer. "You've all heard this before," he said, raising his voice to just above a whisper, "and you all know why we're here. Stick close to me. We only have a mile to cover. Keep moving, put your target down and hit the next. Don't sell your lives on the cheap. We're here to reinforce the city, not to fight them in the open."

Coralen sensed the shifting unease in the elves around him, a collective tightening of hands on spears and bows.

Keramore patted his shoulder. "Time to go," he said. Motioning with his hand, the Prince began picking his way up the slope, Teir`Dal falling into battle formation either side of him, archers to the flanks as they'd rehearsed. Teeth gritted, Coralen limped after him. The ridge crest seemed to shimmer with a dull orange glow. A breeze stirred the cloud just enough to let a streak of moonlight through, revealing the long line of warriors silently ascending to the crest on either side of their position.

They reached the ridgeline and dropped to their bellies,

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

slithering over the rocks to avoid silhouetting themselves against the sky. Coralen felt the sharp stone even through his hardened leather jerkin. A chill ran down his spine. If he could feel rocks, what good would the armor do him against a drake's talons or a kobold's spear? Then he looked down into the dell below, blinking against the sudden glare of torches on the city walls, and almost laughed at the thought that any armor could save him.

He'd seen draconic creatures before, killed them, but nothing like this. The kobold battalion at Port Valinor paled by comparison. His eyes swept the ground below, and a dispassionate part of his mind began counting the number of clusters of dark shapes, each a company of one hundred plus kobolds. Terror overwhelmed that effort once he passed thirty, and he'd barely counted beyond the outer edge of the horde. Mist, half of it natural phenomenon and half of it draconic breath, clung to the low ground, enveloping the sleeping beasts. The glow of the watch fires imbued it with a hellish red.

Streck slid to a halt and rose to a half-crouch. The sergeant touched his thumb to his spearhead, his face registering no pain as the steel drew a thin line of blood. With warriors like Streck alongside them, they had a chance.

*No, not a chance,* Coralen thought, seeing the larger huddled shapes of drakes and wyverns and phyxians dotted among the kobold horde. *Not really.*

He should have said no.

"Once this starts," Keramore whispered to Streck, "try to keep your warriors together. We'll fight straight through." He peered into the darkness, and pointed toward a low mound of half-formed shapes standing stark against the backdrop of the lights. "See those rocks?"

Streck nodded. Behind him, the rest of the Teir'Dal rose to their knees.

"That's Rankin's Tor," Keramore said. "If it all goes wrong we'll regroup there and await support." He didn't say last stand, but Coralen took one look at the sergeant's face and knew that Streck was thinking the same thing.

"Yes, sir," Streck said, his voice empty of emotion.

"Don't go easy on the fire and lightning, Coralen," Keramore added. "If it isn't an elf, fry it."

It was time.

"Archers!" Keramore hissed, and the command echoed down the line, scarcely louder than the murmur of the breeze. The creak of several hundred bowstrings assaulted the silence. Keramore raised his hand. Coralen's pulse thudded so loud in his ears that he was amazed the enemy couldn't hear it, or the sudden whistling wind that followed.

Coralen grinned. His fear melted away as the thrill of impending violence ran like caged lightning through his veins. That wasn't the wind. As Keramore's hand dropped, close to a thousand arrows sprang into the sky.

The ear-crushing roar of draconic creatures in agony tore the night's calm asunder. Coralen was already running, close to Keramore's shoulder. He bounded down the last rocks, Streck just behind him. The warm, bitter stench of the fog enveloped him.

A second volley whistled overhead as the first kobold bodies materialized from the murk, already dead, their tiny reptilian forms skewered on arrows. Their living brethren didn't tarry long, though. Chittering with maniacal glee, six of them ghosted free of the mist and spread out to meet Keramore's charge.

Sword in one hand, short dagger in the other, the Prince leapt forward to meet them. Deflecting a spear with the dagger, he opened the first kobold's throat in a shower of ichor, then drove the sword tip into the sternum of a second. Streck joined him, crushing the skull of a third with the haft of his spear. A fourth closed quickly toward the sergeant's back, unseen. Coralen raised his hands and called forth lightning, sending twin tendrils of blue arcing energy to wrap around the throat of the creature, frying its eyes out from the inside. With a contemptuous flick of one finger, he punched a third tendril through the torso of another before turning to look for more victims.

Keramore was already moving, leaving the sixth kobold

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

standing in his wake, at least until the reality of its neat decapitation sank in and the corpse dropped to the rocky floor.

Fierce heat stung Coralen's eyes. He blinked away tears, but couldn't blink away the image of two elves dying, burned to nothing in an instant by liquid flame from above. He ducked, but the wyvern was already gone, hunting for its next target.

The fog cleared for a moment, long enough to see an elf pinned to the ground by the serpentine coiled form of a drake. As Coralen watched, the creature gutted the Teir'Dal with a flick of a talon, lowering its head to feast on glistening innards. Its gluttony was fatal. Screaming his rage, Streck leapt onto its back and drove his spear down through its spine, rolling away with his bloody weapon in his grip.

Coralen hurdled the dying drake's still-thrashing tail and followed. Ahead, a wall of writhing, snarling flesh rose from the shadows as several companies of kobolds formed into a line, waiting for them. Keramore charged on. A maelstrom of noise assailed Coralen's ears as several hundred more arrows plunged into the massed ranks ahead of them, and the kobolds melted away in time for Keramore to pass through the huge rents in their line. The Prince paused only long enough to disembowel a wounded kobold with a backhanded swing before they were through and charging on toward the gates. The twisted mass of Rankin's Tor rose up, towering above them on their left flank.

Run, aim, kill. Coralen's heart sang with the simple joy of killing, the song of rage drowning out the murmuring fear that should have overwhelmed him. His brain barely had time to register the dark shadow of a wyvern passing overhead before his hands lifted to send a ball of semi-solid flame into its midsection. The creature exploded from within, its digestive gases superheated in an instant. Fragments of scale and organ splattered among the rocks. He lost count of the kobolds he killed with lightning. Nothing existed but death, and he was its most valued servant.

Then Keramore halted, and Coralen's glee evaporated in an instant, replaced by the agonizing pain in his tortured leg and the overwhelming certainty of his own imminent demise.



## HORROR OF THE RETREAT



The kobolds had rallied.

How they had done it in the face of surprise and their horrendous losses, Coralen could not have said. They had paid deeply for their overconfidence and their failure to set adequate sentries. Now they had recovered. The torches on the walls and the smoldering flames of a hundred immolated corpses revealed the extent of the slaughter, with hundreds and perhaps thousands of kobolds and their draconic allies lying huddled and motionless on the battlefield.

None of it mattered. They had rallied, and the path to the gate stood barred by ten thousand or more kobolds in line, four deep. Drakes peppered their ranks, hissing commands. Wyverns wheeled overhead as the force advanced.

With the initiative long-gone, the Teir`Dal too began to suffer. Dozens of slender, black-clad forms lay among the draconic slaughtered. As Coralen watched, four Teir`Dal charged at the oncoming horde, their blades flashing death until sheer numbers overwhelmed them and the kobolds marched on over their butchered forms.

"Coralen," Keramore yelled.

Stepping forward, forcing down his fear, Coralen drew in power from the still warm corpses around him and melded it into a single cascade of fire that streamed from his fingertips to embrace the front rank of kobolds. The hiss of evaporating bodily fluids mixed with the screams of the dying. The urgent stench of charred flesh filled the air.

*You are Coralen Larkos, the voice in his mind reveled. Kill them all!*

Sudden hysterical glee rippled through him. Coralen threw

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

back his head to laugh, and saw the wyvern plummeting towards him. Hurling himself to the side, he landed awkwardly among broken stones as the ground he had stood on vanished in a torrent of fiery molten rain. Sharp pain lanced through his skull. His face felt damp in the cold night air.

"Back," Keramore shouted. "Fall back to the tor!" He pulled Coralen to his feet and half-dragged, half-shoved him towards the looming mass of rock.

Sensing victory, the kobolds roared and surged forward, ignoring the gaps created in their ranks by the faltering cascade of elven arrows. A wounded Teir`Dal, too slow to escape, screamed horribly as his foes ripped him to pieces with blade and claw.

Stumbling through a gap between two large pillars of rock, Coralen collapsed to the ground and vomited. His head spun, and there was something wrong with his eyes. Through vision holed with dark patches, he saw a leering kobold shove his head through the gap behind him and briefly smile. Keramore drove his dagger into its eye socket and sent it stumbling back, the hilt still protruding from its skull. "Teir`Dal," Keramore roared. "To me, to me! Rally to the tor!"

Darkness closed in, and Coralen knew he was losing consciousness.

"Is he okay?" He didn't recognize the voice. It sounded like an echo from the depths of a mineshaft.

"He could be dazed, or his skull may be cracked," a deeper voice responded. "If he dies in the next few minutes, we'll know."

"He may die anyway," a third voice said, "if we can't keep those little scaly bastards out."

*Open your eyes,* Coralen told himself. Nothing happened.

"At least the rock spires are keeping the wyverns at bay," the first voice said. "Detail half the archers to watch the skies. Trem, give me a status update."

"We've rallied about seven hundred. We're holding them back but they are bleeding us dry. Another hour at most, and they will force their way in."



*Die now or die later*, the voice told him. *Might as well make a fight of it.*

Coralen opened his eyes, and as if he had emerged from water, the deafening sounds of battle poured in to his ears.

"He's awake," Streck said. "How many fingers am I holding up?" The sergeant raised his hand. Three fingers. The stump of a fourth glistened, the finger savagely ripped away.

"I'm fine," Coralen said, trying to rise.

"You should rest-" Trem began.

"If he does, we die," Keramore snapped. "Right now he's about our only hope." The Prince took hold of Coralen's arm and yanked him up.

With a grateful smile, Coralen rested his weight on Keramore's shoulder. "Show me," he murmured.

With Streck holding his other arm, they walked him up the slope to where a group of archers were sending arrow after arrow into the hordes below. One look was enough to convince Coralen that it was hopeless. There must have been seven thousand or more of the enemy still crowding the base of Rankin's Tor, trying to break through the thin elf lines. Beyond them, an unbroken carpet of mangled bodies seemed to stretch almost to the city gates.

Simply summoning power was almost too much, and only the presence of the two Teir'Dal stopped him falling. Tiny kobolds scrambled up the rocks below, chittering with glee. How dare they seek to touch him with their pathetic, sub-race claws? He took his roiling anger, melded it with his contempt for the enemy, and punched through the barrier of his own weakness.

He walked the lightning along the line of the enemy, but he chose not to aim for the kobolds. Grinning, he targeted instead the rocks at their feet. With each strike, a rock pile or boulder exploded. Fragments of high-velocity debris sliced through bone and scale and flesh with equal ease. Here, shrapnel flayed a dozen kobolds to raw meat. There, a phyxian thrashed on the floor, all four of its limbs gone. A wyvern, caught by the same bolt, fluttered to the ground, trailing acrid smoke.

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

Coralen reeled. Blood ran into his eyes from the cut on his head, and he tried to blink it away. Only the strong hands of the two Teir`Dal caught him upright. Hundreds had died by his magic, yet thousands remained. He saw the concerned look in Keramore's eyes, and nodded. He was spent, and they both knew it.

With a frustrated cry, he drew in everything he had left. The shaft of lightning that descended from above barely broke the darkness with its feebleness. A single kobold shrieked as it melted under the energy beam, its neighbors unmoved. A second shaft glittered and washed off the back of a drake, leaving the creature unharmed, the energy serving no purpose other than to illuminate briefly the gates of the city.

Gates that stood open.

With a colossal battle cry, the massed phalanx of the garrison of Lucinia drove into the rear of the draconic army. Their ranks and organization completely forgotten in their haste to overrun Rankin's Tor, most of the kobolds never even had the chance to turn before the force was on them, long pikes driving forward to skewer enemies in their hundreds.

With a triumphant roar, Keramore let go of Coralen and jumped down into the fray, sword flashing, the faithful Streck behind him. The knot of archers abandoned their bows and followed with drawn short swords. Rankin's Tor came alive with Teir`Dal, their black-clad forms sliding gracefully through the darkness as they went forward, singing with rage and delight, to avenge their dead.

"How nice," Coralen murmured. And realized he was alone, but for the onrushing stone that welcomed him to its embrace.



# THE EYE OF DEATH



“Well, I’m glad you’re alive,” Keramore said.

“Yeah,” Streck added sheepishly. “Sorry I let you bang your head again, sir.”

Coralen winced as the healer dabbed his foul-smelling herbal concoction on the cut on his scalp. One of the cuts, anyway.

“You’ll be fine, sir,” the healer said. “The trick was waking up. Once you did that, the rest is straightforward.”

Keramore smiled and returned a salute as the healer departed, mingling with one of the small groups of mixed black and maroon-clad soldiers that roamed the field, seeking friendly casualties and finishing off wounded kobolds. “If we don’t get out of this sunshine soon, they’ll have to come up with a new name for us. How do you feel?”

“Like I could sleep for a month,” Coralen said. He lay back on the stretcher and looked up at the sky, blinking. The clouds had cleared with the dawn, and the sky was even emptier than the battlefield. It was going to be a beautiful day.

“I don’t know about a month,” Keramore said, laughing and nodding towards the open gates eight hundred yards away, “but the Governor of Lucinia assures me he will find you a comfortable bed in the city. He even mustered an honor guard for your arrival through the gates.” He motioned toward two lines of smartly uniformed soldiers, standing at attention. “I’ve been turning away volunteers to carry your stretcher. I think you’ll be happy with the ones I accepted.”

“Coralen,” Trem said with a friendly nod. Taking her position with three of her grinning warriors, she leaned down to pick up the stretcher. “On the count of three. One, two...”

“Dragon!”

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

The Teir`Dal hit the ground at the same instant as a huge wave of heat and pressure rolled over them. Something blotted out the morning sun, and then a cloud of roiling black smoke finished the job. The screams of dozens of elves in agony filled the air.

Someone was lying across him, and Coralen realized it was Keramore. For an instant he felt horror and panic, sure that the Prince was dead. Then Keramore sprang to his feet, drawing his sword, and Coralen realized the Teir`Dal's leader had thrown himself over him to protect him from the dragon's attack.

A dragon.

The ground shook as it landed fifty feet from them, huge clawed feet settling among the dark red charcoal that thirty seconds earlier had been the hundred soldiers of the honor guard. Twice the height of an elf at every corner, it settled on its haunches, a mass of mottled gray and azure scales.

Coralen had never seen a dragon. He'd heard of them, of course, even spoken to a few mages who claimed to have fought them. He'd known they were big.

Just not this...huge.

"It seems the Dragon Council took this task too lightly," the dragon said, its voice the bass rumble of an imminent storm. Ochre eyes burned within the armored recesses of its skull, watching each of them in turn. "Ithiosar will be displeased that this half-breed rabble failed. Still, there are yet ways to rescue the day."

"Stay here," Keramore murmured. The three stretcher-bearers stayed back in a protective semi-circle around the stretcher. Swords drawn, the Prince, Streck and Tremayne fanned out, eyes on the creature.

The dragon chuckled. "Such stupidity," it said, yawning to reveal massive, gnarled teeth. "I should expect nothing less from a Thex. I have heard of you, Keramore Thex, and your pathetic Teir`Dal. You were lucky to escape Tahrin. It will please you to know that once Faydwer is ours, we will not keep Amaril long waiting."

"You'll be long dead by then," Trem cried, her voice wavering.

"You, I do not know," the dragon said, eyes flicking contemptuously to the young officer. "Nor the big fool. But you..." With a shock, Coralen realized the creature's eyes were on him.

"Help me up," he muttered to the three stretcher-bearers.

"I can smell the power in you, mage," the dragon said. "A pity you are already hurt. You would be a worthy foe. Some among my kin claim that to eat a mage is to devour his power, too. I have never believed them. Still," the creature added, its massive pockmarked tongue sliding out to lick at its scarred lips, "I am willing to try. What is your name, mage?"

Coralen shook his head as he climbed to his feet, motioning to the stretcher-bearers to retreat to the rocks. "You first, beast."

"Beast?" The dragon laughed, a sound straight from the darkest dreams of a tortured afterlife. "You do have some fight in you, then." It took a deep breath. "I am Darathar!"

The roar reverberated from the city walls, its echo merging with cries of terror from the city folk teeming on its walls, looking on in horror.

"Know my name and weep," the dragon added in a low hiss.

Coralen saw the stretcher-bearers edging back towards the dubious protection of Rankin's Tor. He did not have to fight the urge to join them. He knew he didn't have the strength to make it even half that distance.

"Your turn," the dragon said. "I hate eating anything I cannot name."

Coralen coughed. "My name is..."

*Not like that*, the voice in his mind told him.

He should have been concerned, that a voice in his head could talk with such distinct identity. He should have been terrified that the huge, lethal mass in front of him had set its sights on him, personally, to be its next victim. He should have...

No. His only emotion was...anticipation?

He summoned power, laced it through his words, and took a deep breath of his own.

"I am Coralen Larkos!"

## The Mage of the Teir`Dal

His voice filled the air, deafening to his own ears. One of the stretcher-bearers cried out in terror. The city walls seemed to shake, the townspeople covering their ears and falling to their knees. Streck winced and Trem turned, her mouth hanging open with the blood draining from her face. Only Keramore and Darathar seemed unmoved. Keramore didn't as much as twitch.

The dragon smiled. "I was right about your power," it said, "but how much has that taken out of you?"

Coralen didn't respond. He kept his face straight and his mouth closed, while his legs threatened to collapse from under him. Utter exhaustion sucked every shred of energy from him and left him feeling hollow, his mouth as dry as the flame-seared bones of the honor guard.

"Time to die," Darathar sneered, and padded forward.

"Teir`Dal!" With their shared battle cry hanging in the air, the three warriors sprang forward to meet the dragon.

Swinging his arm in a massive overhead arc, Streck hurled his spear at the dragon's eye. With astonishing nimbleness for such a huge creature, it sidestepped to its left towards Tremayne, and the spear shattered on the armor of one massive shoulder.

Lunging forward, Trem drove the point of her sword at the gap between the plates of shoulder and neck, seeking to penetrate the flesh of the throat. Darathar shuffled back, then flicked out one cattle-sized paw to send the elf flying with an audible crack before spinning so that the tip of its tail caught Streck in the midriff.

Trem landed in the rocks like a stringless marionette, neck bent double, eyes already glassing over in death. Sinking to the earth, Streck coughed blood once and lay still.

"Just you and me now, Thex," the dragon giggled, the sound horrifyingly incongruous from that giant maw.

"Coralen," Keramore yelled, "if you're going to do something-" he threw himself to the side and rolled to avoid Darathar's lunge, "do it now!"

Coralen sank to one knee. There was nothing left in him but the tiniest mocking whisper of power. Fire was out. He

doubted he could even singe Darathar's hide. Lightning wouldn't do any better. Affliction might slow it, maybe even kill it in time, but not quick enough to save Keramore.

And certainly not quick enough to save himself.

"Coralen!" Sparks flew as Keramore's sword glanced off the dragon's knee joint and nicked the soft flesh beneath, but Darathar only laughed again at the trickle of blood that oozed free. Another swipe of sword-length talons came within inches of eviscerating the Prince. It was toying with them now, and they all knew it.

Coralen dropped to both knees, and saw the dragon watching him from the corner of one gleaming eye. He wanted to laugh. All his power, and the best he could hope for was to provide a moment's distraction while the dragon took its time over killing them.

A...distraction?

Calm enveloped him, familiar and inviting, and this time he let the laughter come.

"Something amuses?" The dragon stepped away from a wild Keramore swing and stared at him.

"Look at me," Coralen said, rising to his feet.

Darathar blinked. "I am looking at you," it said with amusement. "And soon I will—"

"Look at me," Coralen repeated.

The dragon snarled. "What is this?"

"Look at me," Coralen said again. "Look at my face. Look in my eyes."

The dragon twitched. Out of the corner of his eye, Coralen saw Keramore circling towards the creature's flank. He kept his own eyes focused on Darathar's.

Wrapping Compulsion around every word he spoke.

"Look at me," he repeated.

"Stop saying that," Darathar growled, but the beast's huge bloodshot eyes stayed affixed on Coralen's. Its colossal body stood still, tens of thousands of pounds of armored chest rising and falling with its breathing, claws kneading at the earth. Coralen could see the tension in the tree-thick muscles of its

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

thighs. It did not spring. It simply crouched, eyes watching his every move.

Walking slowly forward, Coralen closed the distance between them, making sure not to break eye contact to look at Keramore. He sensed the Prince had closed to within feet of the beast, but dared not check. The dragon shook its head, trying to shake the Compulsion, and Coralen felt the connection wavering. So close now. He could feel the dragon's moist, fetid breath on his face, its nostrils close enough to touch. "Look at me!" he roared, feeling the Compulsion slipping...

...fading to nothing...

With a roar, Darathar opened his mouth wide, and Coralen saw the glow of flame within the depths of the creature's belly, ready to engulf him in final agony. And Keramore lunged.

The Prince's sword drove deep into the dragon's throat between the third and fourth armored plates of its neck.

With a shrill cry that descended into a gurgle, Darathar wrenched his neck away. Keramore's sword broke with a ringing snap, sending the Prince tumbling to the gore-soaked floor. Darathar broke free of the blade and dropped his snout, blood showering from the gouge in his throat, until he was eye to eye with Coralen once more.

"I am Coralen Larkos!" The thin reedy wail of his voice was lost in the tumult of rushing blood in his ears, but there was still enough of a spark left for what he had to do. Darathar's eyes opened wide in sudden realization, far too late. Stretching out a finger that almost touched the beast's eyeball, Coralen put every last shred of power he could muster, every ounce of energy he could draw into his battered body, into a single, killing bolt of lightning.

A pencil thin blue stream of shimmering electricity passed through the pupil of the dragon and into the brain beyond.

The dragon twitched once, and slumped to the floor. A faint wisp of smoke rose from the unseeing eye, and was lost in the morning breeze.

Coralen sat on the ground and rested his back on the rough warmth of the dragon's snout. It seemed the right thing to do.



"This may sound like an odd question," Keramore said, emerging from around the flank of the dragon's motionless bulk, one arm soaked to the shoulder with blood, "but what just happened?"

"I killed the dragon," Coralen said. His words sounded laughable in his ears, and yet the dead bulk of the thing did not lie. "How is he doing?" He pointed at Streck, who hobbled at Keramore's side, his own sizeable weight resting heavily on the Prince's shoulder.

"I think I broke a rib," Streck said.

"I think he broke all of them," Keramore corrected, lowering the sergeant gently to the ground. A thin rivulet of blood ran down the side of the Prince's cheek, carving a path through layers of mud and soot. "What do you mean, you killed the dragon? I thought it would be more...spectacular."

"Sorry," Coralen said. "I'll try to do better next time."

"If it's all the same to you, sir," Streck coughed, lying back, "I'll sit the next one out."

A crowd had begun to form, Teir`Dal and soldiers streaming toward them from across the expanse of the battlefield. A healer dropped down next to Coralen. "Go to the sergeant," Coralen said. "I'm fine. I just need rest."

He closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of carrion birds gathering over the field, and the muted, awed whispers of elves. Overlaying all the other noises, he heard the sound of rhythmic chanting drifting over the battlefield from the crowds on the walls of Lucinia.

"They're calling your name, my Prince," he whispered. The thought did not seem as offensive as it once had. But something about the words seemed odd.

*This is just the beginning,* the voice in his head murmured.

Keramore palmed Trem's dead eyes closed and rose to his feet from beside her body. "Not my name, Coralen," the Prince said, walking to him and offering his hand. Closer voices joined in now, Teir`Dal, regular army, healers. All their eyes were on him.

*You are Coralen Larkos.*

## The Mage of the Teir'Dal

With Keramore Thex holding him upright, Coralen walked around the mountainous corpse of the dragon he had killed. Raising one fist above his head, he took a deep, shuddering breath as a cheer erupted from thousands of throats. Then he closed his eyes, and let the sound of their voices wash over him.

“CORALEN! CORALEN! CORALEN!”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

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

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

Lassen is married to a wonderful, supportive American beauty, and is the father of two staggeringly amazing children. *Wrathful Skies* is his debut published novel, the first in a trilogy that forms part of an open-ended series, set during the dark depths of the Second World War, when the end truly justified the means and no weapon was beyond consideration, no matter how sinister.

Keep up to date with what he is doing on his office website, [www.robertlassen.com](http://www.robertlassen.com).